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ROSCOE MITCHELL'S TIMELESS VISION | DAVID HARRINGTON'S BOUNDLESS AMBITION | BANG ON A CAN'S LASTING IMPACT

The poet Ursula Rucker and drummer Tyshawn Sorey during a performance of Generate Music at World Cafe Live in Philadelphia.

Photo: Gregory Rogers

Let Conscience Ring

An ambitious commissioning and presenting project generated not just music, but also empathy and searching questions.

BY Shaun Brady

LAST JUNE, AT PHILADELPHIA'S World Cafe Live, a popular performance venue where drinks and food are served at communal tables, Ursula Rucker revisited the most painful memory of her life. The poet and performer delivered from the stage her account of her eldest brother being shot and killed on Christmas Eve 1985 in Warminster, a suburb just an hour away, by a Jewish pharmacist who, she declared, "felt threatened by my beautiful Black brother."

It was a story she'd reckoned with before. In her "The Return to Innocence

David Krakauer

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Lost," on The Roots' 1999 album *Things Fall Apart,* Rucker abstracted her brother, who struggled with addiction, into the character "First Son" for a fatalistic lament over the way that cycles of abuse and addiction can become self-fulfilling prophecies. "It is my belief that from the moment of conception, a human's life can be pre-determined," she wrote in the liner notes to that Roots album, and then offered a glimmer of hope not evident in the text she recited on the track: "Some can fight pre-determination."

Her new poem, "Let us gather and all go together," arrived midway through the premiere performance at World Cafe Live (and the following night, at Roulette in Brooklyn, NY) of Generate Music, an ambitious commissioning project created by PRISM Quartet, involving a diverse group of composers, musicians, and poets. Rucker's piece formed an emotional core of each evening. Shifting the focus from her brother's tragic story to its ongoing effect on her life, she now framed the shooting as a fork in her road, a moment when she was forced to choose between anger and forgiveness.

"I got to a makeshift place of forgiving," she wailed, as David Krakauer unfurled short, haunted clarinet trills and the PRISM saxophones traced mournful lines around one another while bassist Reuben Rogers bowed low, creaking groans. The musicians surrounding her seemed as if howling in sympathy. "That kind of unforgiving type hate / would have surely destroyed me," Rucker continued, "or had me destroy me."

Generate Music live at Roulette Intermedium in Brooklyn, NY.

CONCEIVED AS AN EXPLORATION of the historic, cultural, and creative ties between Black and Jewish Americans, Generate Music yielded original pieces from its nine commissioned composers, each interpreting a dauntingly complex subject through a lens of personal experience. The project was inspired, during a PRISM tour in Croatia in 2018, by a visit to an exhibition exploring the history of *Entartete Musik* —"degenerate music," which is the label the Nazis applied to work that misaligned with their racist and antisemitic ideology. That concept was embodied in the image of "Jonny," a caricature of a Black saxophonist wearing a Star of David on his lapel, which was prominently displayed at the exhibition.

For PRISM co-founder and director Matthew Levy, such grotesque iconography stirred contrasting memories of his own history, growing up Jewish in the majority-Black Philadelphia neighborhood of Germantown. "The image of 'Jonny' conflated Black and Jewish identity and culture and debased them," Levy said from the Germantown home in which he was raised and to which he has returned to live. "Not to paint an overly utopian picture, but I formed some of the most foundational relationships of my life with my neighbors by understanding and absorbing the culture around me. Seeing this image made me reflect on how beautiful that was, and it resonated so deeply at this time, when antisemitism and racism are skyrocketing." The recent

Photos: Peter Gannushkin

Artwork: Courtesy PRISM Quartet

"The image of 'Jonny' conflated Black and Jewish identity and culture and debased them."—Matthew Levy, in response to the 1938 Nazi propaganda poster above, which inspired PRISM's project, Generate Music.

rise of white nationalism in the US and a proliferation of anti-Black and antisemitic propaganda online made that 1938 poster seem, to him, horrifyingly contemporary.

To combat legacies of racist and antisemitic tropes and to honor the spirit of his upbringing, as well as celebrate the PRISM Quartet's 40th anniversary, Levy conceived of creating new music by Black and Jewish composers in opposition to the notion of so-called "degenerate music." His title, "Generate Music," seemed an obvious choice. In developing the project, PRISM partnered with Helen Haynes—who served as chief cultural officer under former Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter and was a director of exhibitions and programs at the African American Museum in Philadelphia—to curate and help assemble the ensemble Levy rightly calls "a supergroup." The ensemble augments augments PRISM's saxophonists—Levy on tenor, Timothy McAllister on soprano, Zachary Shemon on alto, and Taimur Sullivan on baritone—with six instrumentalists and Rucker.

During a panel discussion at Philadelphia's Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History in May, Haynes reflected on the idea of "music as change agent," pointing in particular to Billie Holiday's harrowing 1939 recording of "Strange Fruit"—a song about the lynching of Black Americans written and composed by Abel Meeropol, who concealed his Jewish identity with the pseudonym Lewis Allan. "Our heritages have woven in and out of each other over the last few hundred years in this country," Haynes said. "That song helped to change the awareness of what was going on against the Black body." It, as well as the new Generate Music works, she said, result from the "interaction of Black and Jewish musicians, writers and artists to express our experience in this country, both politically and socially."

BLACK AND JEWISH communities in the US have often worked together for common causes, as they did fruitfully in the Civil Rights and Labor movements. Also, Black and Jewish identities have long been inseparable in the minds of those who denigrate them as "others"—they sometimes form a single image, as with Black "Jonny" and his Star of David. As clarinetist Krakauer pointed out at Temple University during another panel discussion, groups such as the KKK "talk about Jews and Blacks in the same breath."

Yet the struggles of Blacks and Jews have not always been fought in solidarity. In a 1967 piece for *The New York Times* published under the headline "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," the Black writer, poet, and activist James Baldwin asserted that because African Americans in Harlem dealt directly with Jewish landlords and shopkeepers, their experience of and resentment towards racist treatment from whites focused largely on the Jewish community. More than a half-century later, the same newspaper published Michael Eric Dyson's "Blacks and Jews, Again," recounting the history of Jewish racism and Black antisemitism in the wake of controversial remarks by rapper Kanye West and basketball star Kyrie Irving. Both pieces were included in a reading list shared among the participants in Generate Music, a resource that fueled discussions as the project took shape. Levy allowed that those conversations were at times tense and divisive, but that ultimately the interactions became fruitful through "dialogue and empathy."

During one Generate Music panel, violinist and composer Diane Monroe talked about the strife between the two communities in terms of both public tumult and personal disagreement, as she detailed the frictive second movement of her commissioned piece, "Ironies." She recalled her formative years as a Black woman in Philadelphia's folk and classical music communities, forging lifelong friendships with Jewish colleagues while engaging in often-heated debates. "Some were terrible, but we did it and we're still friends." Seated

PRISM Quartet: Timothy McAllister, Zachary Shemon, Taimur Sullivan, and Matthew Levy.

next to Monroe on that panel, trumpeter, vocalist, and composer Susan Watts was blunter, butting her two fists together to illustrate the idea behind her composition "Convergence," the first part of which is "representative of the screaming match that has gone on between African Americans and Jews in our histories together," she said. In her program note to her piece, she explained: "To the Jew and to the African American, there are important songs and sentiments that define each culture's tropes. At times, both cultures may have difficulty hearing each other. My composition works toward bridging that gap with musical reciprocity."

Both Monroe's and Watts' compositions take divided shapes that trace narratives from conflict to understanding. Monroe, who as a child attended both a Baptist church and a Jewish synagogue with her grandparents, layered these two traditions together in "Ironies." Here, Watts intoned melodies inspired by cantorial song accompanied by Krakauer's klezmer-inspired clarinet passages, all subsumed within drummer Tyshawn Sorey's vigorous grooves. The PRISM saxophonists played snatches of the hymn "Sweet Hour of Prayer" and the Spiritual "Let Us Break Bread Together," while Monroe's violin traced the theme of another Spiritual, "Didn't It Rain," best known from Mahalia Jackson's rendition. These two musical strains—from Jewish and Black liturgical repertoires—sometimes flowed harmoniously into one another and at other moments grew fragmented; yet eventually the music achieved a funky unity.

In Watts' piece, the convergence alluded to by its title arrived when she sang "Lift Every Voice and Sing," often referred to as "the Black national anthem," in Yiddish—translation as a form of empathy. Watts, who represents the fourth generation of a klezmer dynasty dating back to 19th-century Ukraine, depicted conflict through urgent, staccato unison blasts from the ensemble to create a tense, unnerving foundation. These suddenly ceased as Watts raised her trumpet for a stirring *doina*, a traditional improvised lament played over a drone, which was here provided by Rogers' arco bass.

COMPOSER YOTAM HABER—who was born in Holland and raised in Nigeria, the Ivory Coast, and Israel before moving to Milwaukee, Wisconsin—experienced a very different dynamic between Black and Jewish communities when he arrived in the United States. "I was very dismayed and disappointed," he said at a panel discussion, "to learn that the brotherhood that I thought that one could just fall into as a Jew is not always there."

Haber began writing "commotio cordis" in response to those experiences, musing on the similarities and differences in the ways that the Black and Jewish communities interpret the word "Zion" (which, interestingly, was also the subject of pianist Myra Melford's collaboration with poet Erica Hunt for Generate Music). He sensed a kinship in the fact that, for both communities, Zion "means going to a place of peace, a place of home." However, Haber's focus and the shape of his piece changed on October 7, 2023. He was in Jerusalem with his wife and children on the morning of the Hamas attacks in Israel, and the early days of the devastating war in Gaza that followed. He had intended to spend the remainder of the year teaching there as a Fulbright Fellow. Instead, he rushed his family home to Kansas City, Missouri, and wondered whether to even continue composing in the face of such staggering violence.

Thus, the "commotio cordis" Haber landed upon is, he said, "a work of dissolution and disentanglement," reflective of his disjointed experiences while working on it. In performance, its first half, penned prior to the attacks, made stunning use of the PRISM saxophonists' ability to blend their sounds to create shimmering, borealis-like hues over David Gilmore's pulsing guitar as Rucker read from the hymn "The Old Ship of Zion." Sorey interrupted with a staggering, lurching rhythm to open the second half. Now, the saxes grew discordant and piercing, the clarinet keening, hinting at uncertainty and even alarm.

David Krakauer's "The Unknown Common Ancestor," reflected his early embrace of jazz. Inspired by the jazz legacy of PRISM's home city (and the site of the premiere), Krakauer dedicated the piece to John Coltrane and Dizzy Gillespie, as well as the lesser-known Jewish bebop drummer Stan Levey, all of whom spent formative years in Philadelphia. During a late May discussion at Temple University, he recalled a "crisis of conscience" in his

Photo: Peter Gannushkin

"To the Jew and to the African American, there are important songs and sentiments that define each culture's tropes. At times, both cultures may have difficulty hearing each other." —Susan Watts

early 20s when he realized that he was unable to escape his towering influences to find an original voice in a music shaped by mostly Black innovators. That changed when he discovered klezmer music. "Suddenly I saw the connections: the cry of a cantor is the cry of James Brown. It's the cry of Sidney Bechet's soprano saxophone, or of John Coltrane or Coleman Hawkins, my great heroes to this day. Getting deeper into my cultural heritage was how I could find my way into playing creative music." Krakauer's work has long delighted in melding influences in irreverent fashion, whether blurring the lines between klezmer, jazz, and folk idioms as a member of the Klezmatics, or mixing klezmer with funk and hip-hop in Abraham Inc., alongside Canadian rapper/producer Socalled and James Brown/P-Funk trombonist Fred Wesley (the latter also wrote a commissioned piece for Generate Music).

While these fusions strive for seamless combinations, with "The Unknown Common Ancestor," Krakauer delighted in letting the seams show. His piece began with the composer's fluttering, swooping clarinet lines set against the PRISM saxophones' deconstructed funk patterns. Soon, Sorey and Rogers shocked the ensemble into the strident rhythms of klezmer. That shifted quickly enough into a swaggering groove, from which David Gilmore's blistering, distorted guitar solo erupted. The piece continued to shift back and forth as if a switch kept getting thrown, until, as in Monroe's piece, the accumulating ensemble swelled to a raucous and unified funk climax.

ON GENERATE MUSIC'S program, the untroubled spirit of Krakauer's composition was an outlier. Though often joyous, most of these pieces were laced with unsettled or elegiac feelings. "Music is more powerful when played for a memorial service," Monroe had said during the Weitzman Museum panel. To end each evening, during Fred Wesley's "Requiem for AJ," a rollicking ode in memory of his friend who died young in an automobile accident, Rucker recited an original text. Here, she extended his memorial to also pay homage to James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman, the three young men—one Black, two Jewish—famously murdered by the Klan while working as civil rights activists in Mississippi during the Freedom Summer of 1964.

"Do you...?" Rucker implored, again and again, beginning a stream of pointed questions meant as challenges, but culminating in a simple "Do you care?" Those three words, emphasized to the point that they seemed to grate her throat, seemed intended to ring in the listeners' ears long after the concert ended, an after-image of conscience seared into our hearts.

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Left to right: David Krakauer, Diane Monroe, Susan Watts, and David Gilmore.

Photo: Gregory Rogers