

A Conversation with Taj Mahal by Frank Goodman (6/2003, Puremusic.com)

With almost forty years in the music business and near that many records that bear his name, few American artists have contributed to the blues lexicon at the level of the man called Taj Mahal.

He is both spelunker and astronaut in the musical world, and there is little he has not done or tried. Movies, children's music, Grammy winning records, character voiceovers, and a legacy of recordings that encompass and combine a staggering variety of cultures in ingenious ways. His global vision and grasp of history have spawned projects that combine the blues with (or trace either its roots or influence in) Caribbean music, Indian music, African music, Hawaiian music, soul music, pop music, and more. (Can electronic music or conducting some intergalactic blues orchestra be far behind?) He has plenty of life and living left in him, and will no doubt continue to go places that defy the pigeonholing mentality of the music business and its highly trained consumers.

He's had more labels than most artists have made records, over a dozen. His relentless musical peregrinations have sometimes been a source of fluctuating popularity, but his artistic berth has steadily deepened and widened over the decades, and provide a fascinating foundation for the accolades that continue to pile up. Even now his star seems to be again on the rise. We're looking forward to reading his autobiography (*Taj Mahal: Autobiography of a Bluesman*, with Stephen Foehr, Sanctuary 2002) because there is too little available about him on the Internet, and way too much to cover in a telephone conversation...

But the conversation we were privileged to have indeed revealed a magnetic and magnanimous person with great vitality for his mission. He was extremely extemporaneous, like few artists we've encountered. He's very fast on his feet and knows his mind on any subject you put in front of him. Until you pose another topic or question, he's liable to continue his exploration of the last. He's a very gracious man, deeply earthy on the one hand and obviously extremely refined on the other. He was not at all imposing, but he was very inspiring.

We enjoy the hell out of the new record, *Hanapepe Dream*, made with the band of merry men known as The Hula Blues. The reggae version of "Black Jack Davy" blows my mind every time it comes on, as does his ukulele stroke on Mississippi John Hurt's "My Creole Belle," the man is a wonder. He's offering much more than mere groove and melody here, but sister music is his joyful and powerful vehicle.

We're grateful for the opportunity to speak with Taj Mahal, and we know you'll enjoy the conversation with this very compelling artist.

[The interview began with hotel miscommunications...Taj was waiting for my call, and I kept calling every five or ten minutes for about an hour, and the operator would tell me the line was still busy. We never did figure out how it all happened that way, but both of us had remained in a suitable mood.]

Taj Mahal: Anyway, here I am.

Puremusic: That's beautiful. Thanks for calling back. It's very nice of you.

TM: Yeah, man. Well, no, it was important for me. I got up early and did some shopping in the street, did what I had to do, and was prepared just to hang so we can do this. Anyway, let's go for it.

PM: That's nice. How's life, and how's it going?

TM: Well, life, I mean, it's the same life we've had for thousands of years here. Maybe the digital makes people think that something's different, but personally, I'm an analog guy. But I like to use analog with the digital.

PM: Yeah. Are you also literally recording analog?

TM: A lot of times, yeah. Most of the times I'm recording analog.

PM: That's getting hard to find in Nashville.

TM: Come on.

PM: My friends who had good analog studios now are going out of business because everybody's convinced that, well, "if it's not 5.1, if it's not Nuendo or it's not Protools, hey, I can't go there."

TM: Really?

PM: It's a shame.

TM: Yeah. But see, that's like everything else. It's always like, "Okay, now we don't need horses." Then all of a sudden, "Wait a minute..."

[laughter]

PM: That's a funny analogy.

TM: Well, yeah, but you know what? They did that. They started doing away with all the horses. Think of all the bloodlines in those horses that people spent generations and centuries developing, but somebody thought that this steel machine was going to take

over forever. I mean, it's another one of those big civilization things. These guys always think they know better than what the history of humankind on earth is about.

[laughter]

TM: I'm sorry, but once you start thinking you're the guy, you're in trouble. Anyway, what you got to talk about?

PM: So I grew up playing country blues, and I admire, always did, how your music has connected the dots between the blues and every other form of music, it would seem.

TM: Uh-huh.

PM: Is it the fact that they're African derived that led you to all these other musics?

TM: Well, that was the knowledge I had before I played the music. See, I was really graced with parents who came from two different cultures. My father's people were from down in the Caribbean, in St. Kitts and Nevis. And my grandfather on my father's side immigrated to the United States over a hundred years ago, from down there, with a totally different background, identified more as a part of the commonwealth. And he also had a different kind of head as an individual. On the other side, my mother's father and my mother's family were from South Carolina. And they were landed people, through several generations of hard work, and progressive enough that my mother was the first person in her family to go to college. And at that time, there were people who did this, starting back in the late 1800s, but this is not common knowledge. They didn't separate themselves so far from the main stream of what was happening nor did they fall so far into the main stream that they were not connected to culture.

So, the cultural angle that Africans brought many gifts with them into the western world was something that I was raised on before I got down to finding these specific things that I personally was interested in, that I felt through the music. The music brings a lot of information. It's a lot less nowadays—not that the music doesn't have it in it, it's just that commercial music has taken over, where people just play the music from this particular area of the world, or this part of the country, or this group of individuals, or these groups of individuals together. I mean, all of these different things happened over the years.

The South and the Caribbean were a connection for me. My first hearing of, say, live acoustic blues started when I was a little kid and used to go to New York City with my father. And we would go to Harlem, and they had all these street players, people who played tambourines and sang on the street, played guitars and sang, played harmonicas, accordions, just sang on the street. A live person playing the music. So I'd never had the distance of hearing the music only through the recorded side of it, I heard it more as a living thing. Again, it was always in a backdrop that I realized that this is the modern form, in this particular society and in this particular culture and country, of what Africans do after they've been through the process of slavery and colonialism.

PM: I see.

TM: This has always been something for me, long before the other stuff was there. Then on the other side of that is to listen to professors at universities claim that black people have never done anything. We don't have any written languages. Look at us running around with spears and bones, and a bone in our nose. "Look at them, they're eating watermelon and playing banjos," and just on and on and on and on and on and on. And at the time, as a youngster growing up who was given at least the type of tools to be able to combat this, I never personally felt stung by those accusations, because I knew better.

PM: Right.

TM: But the point is, knowing better has a tendency for some people to take them to a sort of a bourgeois distance from their own culture, and as well from American culture. I didn't want that. I thought that what was interesting is to arrive, with all the good things that you can from every experience that you can get, intact.

And one of the ways to do that was to show how the music is all connected. Although Spanish music develops amongst a bunch of people from the Iberian Peninsula, Spanish music goes all over the world. It goes back and forth between many Caribbean islands. You know, Cuba, Santa Domingo, Puerto Rico. Central and South America, Mexico. It goes back and forth between there. I mean, you know its signature. And if you add the African component to that, you know the signature of the African component. So we have been mixed with a lot of different things, the indigenous people to countries that we were brought to, along with whatever Europeans that mixed into our bloodline.

And so there are a lot of things going on that you can hear through the music, you can hear through your bloodline, you can feel through the history of your people. And I just think that Americans have a tendency to be very monolithic about the way they look at everything, including themselves. And they have no idea what's going on down deep—in what I call the deep Americana. There's so much beautiful music here, there are beautiful art forms, there are beautiful styles that people have that need to be brought out to the surface. I think that for a long time Americans have only looked to Europe or outside of themselves. I mean, I'm not talking just about the musics that go back to Africa or India or Spain. I'm just saying in general, Americans look to Europe for culture and credibility when there's so much going on here in this country that has actually become credible to people in the rest of the world, and all you have to do is travel—not that everybody gets to do that. But if you don't get to travel, then you can travel, certainly, to the music. And that's one of the things that I give back, is to give people an opportunity to really see that, hey, the parts fit, so it must work.

PM: That's fascinating. Yeah, and I never thought, really, until you just detailed it there, how the stamp of Spanish music is all over Latin American music of various cultures.

TM: Oh, yeah, all over the world. You can go somewhere—give you an idea: We're in Norway, and we have a day off in Bergen, Norway. Bergen used to be a part of something called, I think, the Hansa, which was a series of cities and merchants in and around the North Sea, including Germany and places in Scandinavia that were all a part of this big merchant situation. Anyway, years and years and years ago Bergen was a German city in Norway. But the scene was, we had a day off and we were going fishing. We went way out onto the North Sea, where we fished and got some cod and had a wonderful day. So at one point when we were stopped there, before we started back in, the guy aboard the boat pushes in this CD. And all of a sudden out comes this incredible salsa music. And we look at each other like, yeah, this is great. And then he apologizes and says, "I'm sorry. The only CD I have is salsa." And we say, "Oh, this is great music!" He says, "I'm learning how to salsa dance." He says, "Other than folk dancing, I've never done any dance like this before, but it's really exciting!" We are fishing with a fisherman in the North Sea, in a place where this big thing socially to do is to learn how to salsa dance. I mean, people don't understand how huge the Buena Vista Social Club was and is in Europe. I mean, it's huge! *Huge!* As big as it is here in the United States, you're talking about a big movement, but you also have a damper because people still have this thing, "We really like this, but what about the embargo." Well, the rest of the world doesn't think about *embargo*.

PM: Because they don't *have* an embargo. [laughs]

TM: It's all about, "Oh, this feels so good." I mean, the Buena Vista Social Club performances were sold out all over Europe all the time. We were on the road when they were, I think it was two summers ago when they were over there. And we kept on weaving across one another and meeting each other at breakfast time and being able to talk, and to communicate and see what's happening, and caught their shows several times. Unbelievable, just unbelievable! But everybody's dancing. There's nothing political to worry about. I mean, really, there isn't here, either, but a lot of people do. Even though they know that it's happening, and it did happen, I think it went down under a different type of regime. If it was the present-day regime, I don't think that they could have really gotten the clearance to be able to do those things. In fact, recently, as I understand it, Ry Cooder has had to move himself out, remove himself from Cuba, because our government feels that he's kind of consorting with the enemy.

PM: Yikes.

TM: The other thing that most people don't know is like, okay, Cuban music or Latin music, the Afro-Cuban stuff started with Africans being taken into the Latin countries. And then the music went back to Africa, and it has been going back and forth for years. And the musicians have been going back and forth for years to reaffirm themselves with what they came from, between Nigeria, Congo and Ghana, and Mali and Senegal, and all those. I mean, the traditions have moved back and forth for years. But this is not information that they play here. I mean, it doesn't have Brittany Spears with a belly and a navel ring.

PM: Right.

TM: People might have to *think*. They might have to feel something, they might have to ponder some other kind of idea, so they don't really put that kind of stuff out. Yeah, but it's okay. I mean, I'm not worried about that. I just know that through the music it allows us to really have insights into the soul of other people.

PM: Yeah, and through artists like yourself—or like Bill Frisell, who we just covered—I think some of our readers, and us too, are starting to get into these bands and musicians from Mali, and other places, and we've just got to spread the information around.

TM: Right, right. Well, the connection is there. I mean, you might not know who your Irish relatives are, but they do exist and you're connected because of your bloodline. They're not going to go away because you don't know them.

PM: [laughs] Yeah.

TM: I mean, the need to know that two and two are four doesn't disappear because a person can't read. I don't know why people don't somehow stand back and see it. It's not because I'm right, it's what's right. It's what's true.

PM: Speaking of Buena Vista and Galbán and stuff like that, it's interesting, since your careers could be said to have begun literally together, to note the parallels between your work and Ry's, that you both have kind of a global view of things.

TM: Well, I don't know when and where Ry started. I know that my global view began long before I came to Los Angeles, and in fact, what I'm doing now musically, and what I've been doing musically, is something I thought about as a very small child, because I was really extremely concerned about the world and what it looked like people were headed toward. They were just unaware. And I didn't understand what was creating this unawareness, but I realized—well, I don't want to get into that. That's another lecture. But I mean, I just know that people were very unaware. And it made me very sad as a youngster that an idea could be right in the midst of everybody, but people would just walk over it. But if that idea got placed in a certain kind of context, it would all of a sudden appear as a brand new idea. Not only that, the people who saw the idea would think that they thought it up themselves.

PM: Of course.

TM: Which, at that time, I used to think it was terrible. But once you start reading people like Confucius and Lao Tzu, they said, "Hey, don't worry about whether the people think they did it themselves, be extremely happy that they got the idea. That's the most important part." Because bringing new ideas to people, that's the hardest part to try to really get across.

PM: I love your new record, *Hanapepe Dream*. It really swings hard. It's a killer band. And you're in fantastic voice.

TM: Oh, well, I'm having fun doing stuff. And those are a bunch of great guys to play with. And it's an adventure, going into that whole scene out there. It isn't like I went in and found the ukulele player, and then I found the guitar player. I just got involved with a group of people who play music, and are extremely musical in a way that I recognize, and we have a lot of things in common. There are certain kinds of island mentality that these guys have that we share, certain things we have in common. We share an interest in the blues in a direct manner, also the blues as a spice, the blues as a format, ragtime, jazz, boogie-woogie, Spanish music, Portuguese music, all of it. It all falls together, in another kind of cosmic stew that includes the whole South Sea, and Polynesian, Melanesian thing, the Melanesian Polynesian point of view, or paradigm.

PM: It really defies the little boxes that everybody else is so busy drawing up all the time.

TM: Yeah, but they can draw up all the little boxes they want. It's because of that little box mentality that people like Napster and Nutella and Kaaza, and Grokster and all those people did what they did, because everybody just was not ready to move to the next level. I'm sure that at one time when somebody said that one day you're going to be walking out of here with a piece of vinyl that will have six or seven records on one side and seven or eight on the other side, people went like, "Ah, you're crazy. The only way you can make it is with beeswax and out of this kind of acetate that breaks. This is it."

PM: Right.

TM: I mean, hey, like the president of—I forget which network, CBS, or one of these big networks, he has a thing that he keeps across from his desk that he looks at, and I think it's from somewhere around 1927. It's a piece in the newspaper that says, "New television tube invented, no practical use can be found for what it could be used for." And that's what they were thinking at that time. Nobody could think of any practical use for this, so... Well, they invented it. Well, yeah, that's what you thought then. Now what do you think? It just takes people time to really get a hold of ideas. And sure, you can get to them on the quick head, but they're not going to remember tomorrow what you did today. So we're trying to get some stuff that sticks in there and stays a lot longer.

PM: Got it. I lack the history, what's the story behind the song "King Edward's Throne"?

TM: King Edward—well, Prince Edward was the heir to the throne. He became the King of England, but he fell in love with a Philadelphia socialite who was divorced. And by the rules of the crown, or the rules of the church, a prince could not marry a woman who'd been, I guess, "violated" by another man.

PM: Indeed.

TM: Oh, my God, being married and divorced might be the worst thing to happen? But anyway, hey, they got their rules, whatever. I can certainly sneer at them if I want to, but... Nonetheless, it was so popular that he quit being the King in order to be with her. So that's why it was "love, love alone, caused King Edward to leave his throne."

See, Caribbean people have the kind of musical culture that took topics of the day like that and made little ditties out of them. Like at carnival every year, if something happens politically, I mean, everybody knows it's going to be fodder for carnival, because you can't do the same thing every year. You never can do what you did last year the next year. It comes up new every year. This is another thing: Americans, they're the only people I know who can live right next to an elephant, and until somebody says, "Wow, look at that elephant," they're saying, "Oh, I never saw it before. I never heard of it."

PM: I never heard of it.

TM: Yeah. [laughs] But the point is that you have the islands, and you have all these people down to Mexico, Central and South America, where the style of the music is a commentary style. And you didn't say something offensive in front of people, but you had to come up with a sly way to be able to talk about it in front of the crown or whoever was in power. And they would get it, but they wouldn't be incensed by it, I mean they wouldn't be thrown off. So those kinds of things people talked about, making these great calypso tunes, "The terror was soft before, but now he's prepared for war," you know? And there's just all of this incredible poetry and double, and even triple and quadruple entendre. This stuff is unbelievable.

And periodically, it comes in—Belafonte brought quite a bit in. Other artists have brought the feeling in. But I think probably because Americans go down and vacation there, and don't go down and live there, they don't really carry that back with them. They may bring back something to remind them of the trip. But when you live there all the time, you make your music down there. You make music this way, and sunshine and the sea, you're working in this, you work in that. But "King Edward's Throne" is like for me down in there. Because Hawaii connected big time with the Caribbean. I mean, I think this is one of the things that they were looking for in identity beyond recoiling from the mainland—or "the continent" as they call it these days. They were able to be themselves, and then also, through the music, connect with these people halfway around the globe.

PM: I wonder if it could be said that some of that commentary music mentality exists in hip-hop, exists in rap. I'll tell you, it's too hard to find now, but it may be there.

TM: Oh, yeah. Well, right now, I mean, there's basically—like the young guy says—like it used to be in the old days. What was the name of his band? It was from up in San Francisco. I think they were called Dialect. And the guy said, essentially, when he was

growing up, the bands that were doing the big stuff were like Chuck D and Public Enemy, and Rakim and them cats, Eric B. & Rakim. And then KRS-One was up front in terms of the conscious level of what was going on.

But once there was the M.C. Hammer phenomenon, he just basically handed the baton over to the suits—whether he likes it or not, that’s what he did, I mean, by mismanaging their stuff. The suits knew they wanted to get into it because it was a lot of money. But that’s my take on it. I mean, Hammer was safe enough for them to come in through him, so they did. And then everybody started diluting the whole rap, and then it wasn’t hardcore like it was before. So you got less of a commentary type of thing than it used to be.

But, see, in the deep Caribbean or that whole Caribbean basin, and as with lots of Afro based cultures down there, there is that trickster, that sly person who can just come through and turn this stuff around on you. That’s something that’s a part of the culture.

PM: As regards the spiritual side of life, do you have a certain approach or personal inclinations?

TM: I’m open. I’ve always been. Although my mother was raised Baptist and I had a tremendous amount of gospel music in the house, my father was not connected to organized religion in any kind of way, except when my mother went to church and sang, that’s when we went to church, to hear her sing. As kids growing up, we were allowed to go to any kind of church we wanted to, so I have a very open feeling toward that type of spirituality. In terms of organized religion, I don’t think it’s a bad idea. But I’ll find my own way there. I find something in all of the spiritual pursuits and religious pursuits that works for me, so I’m open.

PM: You bought up Lao Tzu and Confucius, so I wondered...

TM: Oh, yeah. Oh, I could keep going, man. I mean, I was lucky enough when the 60s came along, a lot of this information was out there, and I wasn’t the only person that was looking at this stuff. And I happened to be where there was information coming in. A lot of people didn’t get that information. They just got, “Oh, this is a bunch of hippies.” They didn’t really think about what they were reading, or wonder “Why did they go where they went, and what did they think?” They didn’t see what they were trying to do as people. So, yeah.

PM: Are there many musical compadres in your life that have been there since the early days and still remain?

TM: Yeah, some people from back in Springfield where I played. I mean, I’ve lost a few of those. My guitar teacher, who was probably about six months older than I am, when I first heard guitar playing close up by somebody who was a contemporary of mine—I lost him, oh, about a year ago. And the Nichols family, who lived up the block, who I used to

hang out with, I run into them all the time here in New York. Well, Billy Nichols is here, and he was the one who wrote that B. T. Express song called “Do It Until You’re Satisfied, Do It.”

PM: Oh, what a great song!

TM: Yeah, well that was my partner that I walked to school with every morning. His family, they always said they were from Clarksville, Mississippi, but they were really from Stovall, Mississippi, from out there where Muddy Waters was working, right out there by the Stovall Plantation.

PM: Wow.

TM: But I didn’t know this until we did this book a few years ago. And then they talked to Billy Nichols. But his brother, Ernest, and Junior and them, Junior Nichols and them, those cats was like—they played the real Mississippi blues. And it was just the music from down South to us. It wasn’t musically especially like *The Mississippi blues*, as played by Nehemiah Skip James from Bentonia, Mississippi, and the D-minor tuning. It was nothing like that. It was just like, “These cats play the blues. Hey, man, how you tuning that guitar?” “Oh, I tunes it at C-natural.” “Oh, okay.” That music, it was so intense for me to feel it. It was the real deal. It’s like something going on that really attracts you. So those are about it. Then Garland Netwiz was another guy that played around, I played a little bit of music with around in those days. Sheldon Leff—Garland was a guitar player, Sheldon Leff was a keyboard player. He’s still around. I think his cousin Kenneth is around. In fact, both of them were excellent keyboard players. Various doo-wap groups who’ve moved on through the years to become something else, those guys are around.

PM: But you still retain ties to some of the earliest music guys in your life.

TM: Yeah, well, some of them are not here in this visible form, so...

PM: Yeah.

TM: But they’re still alive in my mind, and the sound that they pass forth to me is there, and I’m always hearing something. We’re really fortunate we did record a lot of stuff. I mean, us as a culture. And there’s a lot of stuff that never was released that, my God, you go like, “Who made the decision not to have this out here?” But fortunately, if you know what you’re looking for, these days you can really enjoy making the kinds of collections of music that you want, and you don’t have to suffer the one or two great songs and then the rest of it’s filler on a twenty-dollar CD.

PM: Some of your first landmark recordings for Columbia just got reissued, right?

TM: Yeah. Over the last six or seven years they have been. And more and more, I think people are just now coming around to it after all this time—because the stuff has been out. I mean, it's been at least a couple years since we re-released all that. And I did a lot of work on restructuring the covers like they were supposed to be. You get an opportunity to see what the record company did as opposed to what my original idea was for the cover to look like. And then, let's see, Stanley Crouch and Keb Mo both do some writeups in the re-released stuff on Sony. And then there's stuff that's re-released on Warner Brothers. And they're always pumping stuff around. There are a few of these not-so-good-companies, and I won't mention their names, that just manage to get a hold of some stuff and put it out around the world. And I think there's a pickup on it every now and then. It keeps peaking whenever something happens, and everybody all of a sudden goes, "Oh, yeah, wow, Taj Mahal," it gets bumped up again. But yeah, that stuff is out. It is. And it's very good. I'm glad. And it's actually been out on CD for a while, but I didn't realize that a lot of people didn't know it.

PM: Yeah. And a website really helps bring all that info together.

TM: Yeah, it sure does.

[Be sure to check out Taj's site at www.taj-mo-roots.com]

PM: Going back over your—God, your incredible discography reawakened my Taj Mahal interest. And I'm tracking down records I never knew about, and ordered your autobiography. What kind of experience did you find that to be, putting your long and colorful story in print?

TM: Well, a lot of it was to put the whole thing out there—the black eyes, the thumbs growing out of the side of your neck, the crooked right leg—and just be done with it. Because the point is, you try to put some perfect picture of the perfect guy out there, the next book is going to be somebody who's going to just fill it up with all of the things that you didn't put in yours. People are real. They do good on some parts of their lives, they don't do good on other parts of their lives. Or they're inconsistent. I mean, most of us are stumbling along until we finally get a light, and then maybe something that we're doing keeps us lit up in our heads, and something that we're doing don't keep us lit up in our heads.

So I let everybody have their voice, everybody that was connected to me. They had their own voices in there, so they're going to have to live with what they said at that moment, too, down the road. I figure that it just is what people think. What I realized is that everybody had a different point of view.

PM: It's like your approach to music, it's inclusive.

TM: Uh-huh, yeah, wide open.

PM: On your website, I really thought the top-ten lists were fun. It kind of cuts to the heart of the matter. And I noticed a couple of my favorite writers in there, Walter Mosely and Annie Proulx.

TM: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Good writers.

PM: Walter Mosely, I wondered, hey, he's an L.A. guy. He's basically a contemporary, more or less. Have you run into him personally?

TM: I haven't run into him personally, but I spoke to him once. He was on the White House lawn for Book Day or this National Book Week with the First Lady, Laura Bush.

PM: Wild.

TM: And they were on some C-Span thing, and they had a phone number. I never was able to ever get through to one of those lines, but I couldn't believe it, I actually got through and spoke to him. I identified myself, and we talked—because there was a character in one of his books named Mouse.

PM: Oh, yeah Mouse—he's the best.

TM: And the way Don Cheadle played Mouse in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, I thought that was a really great character. I had liked Mouse when I read about Mouse. And then the way he actually played out in the movie was really exciting for me. And then the deal was that I asked him was Mouse ever coming back. And he said, "Well, Mouse is never going to be resurrected as we know him, like all of a sudden he was out of the theme and then we're going to bring him back. But Mouse is going to come back in the form of a flashback." And so he did, in this other book that I read of recent—Walter Mosely's book that I read. So yeah, anything that comes out by him, I devour it. I mean, it's out, I got to have it.

PM: Yeah.

TM: I got to read it. I don't care if it's in hardback, I'm not a man to worry about it. I'm not waiting around. I'm going to read it because it's really exciting what this guy's writing.

PM: He's the best. I hope they try a couple more movies, because *Devil in a Blue Dress*, that was pretty good, but really the best part of it was Mouse.

TM: Yeah. Mouse is incredible. And then there's another guy, a British novelist, originally from St. Kitts or his parents were—where did I see that? Something I was just reading, they had an article about him. He sounded really good. Wait, here, I think I've got it.

PM: Is he on a Mosely kind of tip or—

TM: I think it's some of that, yes, but something different, because his thing is the Caribbean immigrants into the U.K. I haven't read any of his stuff yet, but I've read about him, and everybody is really excited about his work. His name is Caryl Phillips. He has a new book out, I think it's his seventh book. There's a website, www.carylphillips.com, you can find out more about him.

PM: I appreciate that. That's an amazing thing about the Internet, you can find out about anything. You hear about a writer and you can go to the guy's website.

TM: Uh-huh.

PM: Do you have any thoughts about how the net could influence our music scene?

TM: Oh yeah, I'm sure that's going to be great. That's one of the other stories that's in this—I think it's this week's Time Magazine. They're talking about what everybody's scared of with the Internet. Yeah, it's talking about it pretty intensely.

PM: It's the latest bugaboo.

TM: Well, not really. What it is, it's the same old same old. They were going to ignore it all, because they're the guys. They're the good ol' boy network, so they were going to ignore something that came right up in front of them. Well, I read yesterday, what they've done is they've Henry Morganed the guy who started Napster, now he's a consultant to some new company. Was it, I don't know, Roxio?

PM: Yeah, I just got an email about that.

TM: Yeah, come on, they couldn't fight the pirates down in the Caribbean, so what did they do? They took Henry Morgan, and they knighted him. I mean, this isn't new. The first thing they're going to say is, "No, because we're in control." They were in denial. But what they couldn't be in denial about was that every year it kept dropping five percent. The reason it's dropping is because they were cheating the people. One, two, three max good songs on a CD, and how much does it cost?

PM: Yeah.

TM: I just say, how many times does a kid have to see Behind the Music to realize that his favorite group is being ripped off by the suits. So what are kids are going to think? "Hey, you're ripping them off. We see how you ripped them off. You're ripping us off. You're charging us twenty dollars for a product that costs you thirty-five cents to make."

PM: "So we're going to rip you off."

TM: That's correct. But the point is that the music should be out there. They don't have enough live venues anymore. There's the big control. I mean, SFX, all these big—what's that, Clear Channel?

PM: Clear Channel, yeah.

TM: I mean, these guys—the pyramid stacks up and moves over to Universal, and then it goes up to Seagram's and similar conglomerates. So they own the radio stations, they own all of this stuff like this. Hey, you know, and they just got greedy. Not just now, but they've always been real greedy about it. They don't want to share. They're complaining about, "We're losing revenue." Well, they never worried about that when they gave Marvin Gaye a three percent part of the music that he brought to them—or six percent to musicians like myself, when we had to fight and when somebody said eight or ten percent they was acting as if we were really asking for the world. What about fifty/fifty? I mean, even Michael Jackson, I don't care how big a king of pop he is, he don't get fifty/fifty.

PM: No.

TM: No. He gets 25%. And that's it. That's crazy. Ford Motor Company couldn't afford to have ten cars and only one of them going to come through. And why, with the practices that are happening within the music industry, doesn't the government get involved? They got their nose stuck up everything else. I mean, this is crazy. These are American citizens and the legal system of the United States is being used to enslave them. And this is not just about black people. This is about all the people who are making music. I think, essentially, at the bottom of it, they think it happens to you for free, so therefore they should take it for free.

PM: It's interesting on the corporate and more yuppie side that Steve Jobs of Apple finally made it available for people who were afraid to download tunes for free to buy them for ninety-nine cents.

TM: Right, exactly.

PM: And did you see where in 16 days he did two million dollars?

TM: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah, because I mean, people went like, "Oh, well, gee, maybe this is not such a bad idea after all. Ninety-nine cents and I get what I want? Sure, I don't mind that."

PM: "And then I don't got to think that I'm ripping somebody off."

TM: Right, or worry about that. And then there's the other people who don't care. I mean, right now, they'll do that. I'm sure they'd pay—at ninety-nine cents, you probably would get a lot more people aboard. That way you get twelve songs for twelve bucks, instead of twelve songs and three you like and the other nine songs you don't like, or

don't care about, because you're buying the artist. And the record company doesn't understand—I mean, they're pimping the artist. That's what those kids are buying. And they're not going to pay once they see on VH-1 how they're being ripped off, and the kind of absolute audacity these guys are trying to work under.

PM: Download-ability kind of puts it in the consumer's power.

TM: Right, right.

PM: It's just like, "Okay, if you're going to put out CDs with two good songs, I'm just going to buy those two songs."

TM: That's right. "It costs me two bucks, and I'm happy. And I can make as many of them as I want them." And that's fine. I think that's great.

PM: So you've recorded with Caribbean musicians, African musicians, Indian musicians, Hawaiian musicians.

TM: Uh-huh.

PM: It's unbelievable. Are there any other global grooves in your sights?

TM: Oh, there are. There are tons, man. The music is never done. I mean, some people, they would have been happy just to get to the Caribbean groove, and that would have been their thing for the rest of their life. But I figure that while we're moving, let's keep moving, because at some point it's going to be like, okay, I've been there and done that, but boy am I glad that I did that. Now I can look back and say I didn't wait for nobody to give me a high five and say, "Well, all right, you can go now." I just went. At some point I may stop wanting to play music for a bunch of years and just kind of chill out. I mean, I've done this really pretty solidly 40 years.

PM: Right.

TM: There's other things to do in this life, and I got to stop trying to live in between the raindrops.

PM: Along with scoring movies, I read that you also acted some.

TM: Oh, yeah, quite a bit. Starting out with a pilot called *The Sheriff*, with Gilbert Roland, years ago, went to *Rising Sons*. And then the first big piece that really did stay around was *Sounder*.

PM: Right.

TM: And then from there, *Man Who Broke a Thousand Chains*. And *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored*.

PM: Would you do more of that?

TM: Correct roles, yes—I mean, I’m really particular about it. This business has the ability where you can do a really good thing for a long time, and all you have to do is mess up once, and that’s the one thing that they’ll bring the cameras in and stamp indelibly into everybody’s mind.

PM: Ain’t it the truth.

TM: So you have to really come from being correct in the first place. There’s a lot of stuff out there, but my idea is to really do stuff that 50 years from now, 100 years, somebody looks at it and they’ll go, “I wonder who that guy was. That’s pretty interesting.” Or see you totally in the role that you’re in and not feel that you gave something weird to it or you played for less value than it really was.

PM: And microcosms of that idea exist already in your lifetime, where someone can go back to *Taj Mahal*, *Natch’l Blues*, or *Giant Step*, and say, “Damn, those stand the test of time. They’re as good now as they sounded then.”

TM: Oh, yeah, and even better—now that you’ve been through a whole bunch of stuff that may have taken you in some other directions, you hear it and go like, “Wow, this stayed up, man. This stayed.” But that was the whole point, a lot of these guys were playing off the vapors of what the music was about. They didn’t stop to figure out how to actually do some cooking that could smell good down the road.

PM: [laughs]

TM: Well, I mean, people don’t think. It’s like the herd mentality in lots of different ways. “Oh, wow, it’s blues now. Put on some blue jeans and look like a funky guy, and get a Telecaster, Stratocaster, whatever. Get the B.B. King guitar, a 335.” Man, I mean, it’s actually all good, but that’s not all it took. I mean, Little Walter was playing what he wanted to play for himself. That’s become like the language of harp in the world—

PM: Right.

TM: But then there’s a whole other harmonica style. But that’s the big blue—the really hardcore blues harp.

PM: I wish more people took up a chromatic harmonica and started learning that. But that never happens, it’s too hard.

TM: No, yeah, right. Yeah, well, there's some cats that do, they'll play a few numbers. But Walter really, I mean, changed that whole thing.

PM: It's still the spookiest thing.

TM: Yeah, it still is. It still is. It's great music.

PM: Along with film, you did music for theater, music for children, almost everything you can think of to do with music. Has there ever been a documentary about your life?

TM: Well, they're working on some different stuff. A lot of people are approaching that now. All of a sudden it's become some kind of thing where they're going like, "Wow, this guy's been busy." But I mean, it's like, "Okay, guys, you're sleeping. I'm not." I mean, it's like, "You can go ahead and do the obvious, but here it is." So I got to wait around for people, man. I don't really sit there properly with my legs crossed and my hands folded just waiting on them, because I saw that what they do is they'll ignore you. You have to put a log in their way, and they need to trip, and you have to walk over and say, "Do you need some help?"

PM: [laughs]

TM: That's how it works with that. That's the way it is. Whatever, I'm not making an issue of it, because the music proves that I'm not standing around waiting. The work's getting done.

PM: Right. Considering the width and the breadth of what you've already done, are there things you haven't yet attempted you'd like to try?

TM: Well, most things I've attempted—I mean, really, I'm not so much trying this stuff out. I already know it works, because I don't deal on like, "Well, gee, I wonder if an egg would really taste good inside of this mango."

PM: [laughs]

TM: I don't think that way. "Hmm, there's a giraffe over there. Now, if I cross it with a fish..." No, that's not my style. My style is to hear the music come in complete inside my head. It comes to me, and what you hear is what comes to me, not something that I go chasing around to find. I'm not going through the bins and looking for the Africans. It's not like that. It comes to me in complete musical sentences and phrases or fragments thereof.

PM: Well, I do a lot of these interviews. And once in a while you get a guy on the phone who sounds like you think he might be, and that was what I got today. And I sure appreciate your time, Taj.

TM: Well, my pleasure, man.

PM: You're really a hell of a guy, and I can't wait to spread the word about this new record. It's great.

TM: Oh, yeah. Do me a good favor and make sure that you also put in www.musicmaker.org.

PM: Sure. What is that?

TM: That's a very great organization down in North Carolina that handles a lot of beautiful old blues singers and country music people, men and women who are singers in their golden years, and making sure that they get recorded if they never got recorded, and looking out for them. They're on fixed income. We took them out on the road. There's a lot of great stuff happening. And I think if you plugged into that, you would be extremely excited. They're in Hillsborough, North Carolina. Tim and Denise Duffy.

PM: Musicmaker.org. We're on it. [In addition to donations, this non-profit organization is seeking volunteers—they also have an intern program. How they describe their mission is they're “dedicated to helping the true pioneers and forgotten heroes of Southern musical traditions gain recognition and meet their day to day needs.”]

TM: Yeah, please do.

PM: Thanks a lot, Taj.

TM: All right, man.

PM: Take care of yourself.

TM: Yeah, you got it. Bye.

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