

The Wuhan Soundtrack- Louis Armstrong

But for real, for real, the real soundtrack here is the language I don't speak filling the air and swirling around me. I hear it like background music everywhere I go. Shit, it's background music even when people are speaking it in my face, even then I'm listening not listening. Even when it's intended for me. So I've turned to technology and music to change things up a bit; and each song wired into my head gives me a different way to read the world.

I am walking down a street in Wuhan China and Louis Armstrong singing "Sleepy Time Down South" comes into rotation on my I-Pod. This morning it was Kendrick Lamar and Justin Timberlake. Another day J-Cole "Villuminati" fuck everybody and Keith Jarrett's "Endless". Every walk has a soundtrack to go with it. It's my music. I love it and take it with me.

It's also raining and I don't have an umbrella. My headphones and knit hat snug on my head seem to block out the cold and insulate me from the world outside just like the music. I am wrapped up in them and move in and out of sound and sight with my feet feeling the weight of the ground underneath.

Bass beats, the slightly techno-track, or the pitch of Louis' horn pump directly into my head. My ears are so close to my eyes it naturally floods the mind and maybe that explains why when I listen to good music it changes my vision of the world.

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Louis is the perfect soloist and makes the individual rise out of the crowd and become a focal point. His horn rises and falls and I hone in on the checkered pattern of a woman's dress, her shoes, the stilt walk. The men sometimes with shoulders hunched that appear to be hiding something in their chest. The back of the young man with A We Can't Breathe signpost on the full length of his black denim long coat. The print's so big it looks like a loudspeaker. Looks like he wants the world to see his message but not him. A mother leaning down into her child face cloaked in the bright yellow of a rain jacket with her red lipstick contrasting as though the colors themselves are whispering some silent instruction.

I like hip-hop cause if the bass line is funky enough everyone seems to come together synchronized in one moment. Bass is like earth holding it down and can make the walks of the ten thousand seem to be the same pace. I suddenly notice people moving at the same rate. Two young men walking forward together steady rhythm-the triangle above their footsteps appearing then disappearing. Again, and again a sea of legs takes the concrete and marbled paths before me with an evening ease headed towards or away from the subway station. A group of cars stand in line after coming down the hill and wait with their engines gently humming to jump out into traffic. Each music has its perspective, secret, and message. They all lure you in, mix with the other music and become a bigger music with more instruments. My head, Oh. my life.

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I'm in the city of Wuhan, China in the South of China not South of America, on the internal line between the top and bottom of the country, on a strange Mason Dixon Line in a country that did not enslave blacks and had no official black codes. Louis swings to almost blues with a sorrow I know, and I realize the South here is not the South there. The horn sometimes screams the terrible polished and rounded off into shine. It's our predicament as we move through the recording. It is our sophisticated sophisticate. Piped into Wuhan it says something about Wuhan and the distance between the blues and America. No doubt China has its sorrows, but they are a different ornament. I do not know them like I know Louis and that is one of the many points he makes this evening as I walk towards the more darkness gathering in the air and forget my name. Damn.

Louis is the shit. We are the shit.

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Late one evening, I hear the sound of music I know as China. It creeps into my window on the ninth floor with a sound that somehow conjures the sound image I would like to cut and paste, mix and match to this city. I almost instinctively know the spot it is coming from. I wander down the hill towards the main road pulled by the gravity. Again, night has almost completely arrived. An older man is playing the two-stringed erhu and I can sense the agony of just two strings on a street corner in a modern city that has gone busy. Most of the city residents walk by without noticing, like I often do the jazz musicians at home. I mean, sometimes I stop, but it is home and there are duties pulling against me that draw me to work, to home, or to a place where I can just sit down for a second. Now, I am the foreigner like the French speakers in America who almost always give my son a few bucks when he plays his drums in the Nation's Capital. I oblige a few Yuan. Go into my pocket and pull them out. They are crumpled. He looks and gives me a back-home heads up acknowledgment.

The two-strings seems so complete. I dream that night that I am just two-stringed but can say everything. People think I solo, but it is not solo-the intervals and changes, the vibrations travel the expanse of all the possibilities in my culture. You have to listen intently to what I say, because I am a complete simplicity.

I stand alone on a mountain where no one can see me. Nobody dances, everything dances. All movement becomes dance.

Everything in the dream is whittled down to its simple form. Small clouds above me and down in the valley beneath the world that hears my music incorporating the funk into its living.

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My i-pod is the old classic and less than full. I have over 137 gigabytes free. Usually, I listen to

mostly the same music, and, I confess, Louis is not one of the regulars. Though I do return to him always as I do to the poetry of Pablo Neruda and Amiri Baraka. Louis' presence in the library mirrors that of the old classics on my shelf. He's as good as the mandatory English and American Lit classes every black scholar in language must take to get their certificate to think and write about anything else. He is a doorway and a gate keeper for the great American music of jazz.

Louis now, from the city of Wuhan, makes me wonder what the world would be like if he and the texts of jazz were required reading for American poets and scholars, especially African Americans ones who now seem to be saying something tinged with the same blues Louis perfected. If we did so, would it change the shape and trajectory of the literature we are producing now? God help those who have not listened, studied, or stand in awe of his mastery.

I ask the question but can still understand the difference. Timberlake slipped in with "Strawberry Bubblegum" and I got caught up with him on my play list. It sounds like an old Michael Jackson cut at times. I'll blame my children, they all up on my i-tunes. I'll blame them for letting this prototype make it into the mix. I just downloaded everything on the home computer. But I also hear up in him an undeniable complement. Some of what I know. Some of what I'm missing.

I've just let all the songs play since I am away from home and miss what I am accustomed to. I am learning to listen to what I have already listened to in new ways. My Wuhan soundtrack keeps me company in this city of river, lakes, water water, and islands in the middle of the middle country, right between the North and South. A juncture city like Atlanta or what Nashville used to be. First there was the Yangtze River here, like a freeway. It's been a transportation hub since ancient times. Now the trains, though the barges still float in the river. Here the waterways, an ancient crossroads, meet the new tracks spreading out like a web across the country. The patterns making music that is ancient and modern at the same time.

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Years ago, jazz pianist Rodney Kendrick told me to "Learn to love it baby."

I had met him on the humble at a dorm at the New School for Social Research on the Western tip of Union Square. I was Jamaican, or Jafaiking then with as many jobs, big and small, as I could handle. One of them was sitting in for Old Man Bill, the doorman at our dorm. Our college housing was an odd contraption of six-bedroom units cut out of two floors in an otherwise residential building, which made the college and our New York City experience even more exciting and different.

I chose a school for undergrad that was in New York City, and best fit my definition of the edge of the world. New York, New York Union Square, street vendors, and coffee shops. Old Man Bill was one of those characters who belonged in the city but stood outside of the traditional academic routine, and he taught me a lot. Free Black Space Bill was probably rich, but always

dressed in the same clothes looking like they would fall off of him. The package was made complete with the sight of his unshaven face, the sound of his gruff voice and the warmth coming from his pot belly charm. He smelled like the red pack of Pall Malls he smoked almost incessantly. He would trek in from New Jersey on the weekend and work from Friday evening to late on Sunday, which explained why I often found him sleeping in the middle of a shift.

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I was one of the only African Americans at our small school of about three hundred, and by one of the only I mean one of less than ten. I guess somewhere somebody considers those good diversity numbers. I missed the Free Black Space and acknowledgement from the thick black predominance of many places in the Washington metropolitan area I came from. There's nothing like a side glance from somebody black to affirm some offense that would make for a video or so news special on racism. Someone see the same thing you did and look you in the eyes to let you know, and they doing the most black folks can do in the moment. My hat goes off to those living on the other side of the diversity line and end up writing books about it. I can understand the isolation, partially because of my years at the New School. No doubt, everyone was kind enough on the surface that it was bearable, but there were differences and sometimes slights and downright attacks not worth debating or even fighting. Bill, the doorman, and some folks may find that cliché was my beacon and light in those moments. He was old enough to be my father. Besides, there were only two or three black faculty at the University. Old Man Bill gave me some of that old down-home hooking me up like the old school cats do the young. He put me on to work and would give me a few bucks for giving him short breaks during his three-day shifts. He also hippped me to little jobs with people who needed their dogs walked while they were out of town. Sometimes, I would even pick up a stack of newspapers for him that he would then sell back to the residents for double or triple the cost. He was a hustler of the highest order and groomed me into a mini one.

So, when Rodney Kendrick, jazz pianist and composer of *Last Chance for Common Sense* walks up to the door, I figure he is a regular dude. I mean he is, but he ain't. I mean he is legacy in the university of jazz cuz he knows the people and the music, and plays the music. Like those Free Black Space masters, he's a walking dictionary of terms, a library of recordings, and annal of the handed down conversations that form the sweet spots in black culture and history.

We talk normal talk. He tells me he plays jazz. I soak him up. We shoot the shit for a about a half an hour until Old Man comes back, and then decide to become friends for a day.

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It is Earth Day in New York, 1989 or 1990, and we realize we don't know what that means, so decide to walk up to Central Park and see what it is about. We grab two forty ounces at a small shop above the square and talk and walk, talk and walk.

Rodney is master of the hip and his speech is like music. Shit, he's a jazz musician. If you meet him, you understand why they are legendary. If you listen to his music and know him, you will connect the Thelonious measure of his piano to the way he uses words. Check his piano out on Abbey Lincoln's "Devil's Got Your Tongue".

Even if he wasn't making sense you could understand you would still enjoy it, and that makes you feel vulnerable and on the edge of life. Even when you can't understand what he is saying, you understand the tones and the quick shifts in intonation. It's music; and that day we rolled and hung like the music itself. On the edge headed towards Central Park, he tells me he played for Parliament Funkadelic, teaches me about jazz, who to listen to, and explains trumpeter, Roy Hargrove, who is studying at Parson's at the time, is the shit to be reckoned with cuz he blow something like Clifford Brown. I listen to him intently, glow with the forty-ounce feeling a bit, soak it all in, and ask as many questions as I can.

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At the time, all I really know of jazz is my parent's small collection though it did include some Miles, Stan Getz, Billie Holiday, and others. I also have to add to that, my mother's voice. She's a singer, and almost every time a standard would come on, she would sing along with wisdom intonation. Some of the songs I had heard, but couldn't imagine the words. The experience made clear that I had to study her history and the music simply to figure out who she was. Her voice became a living symbol of the path of jazz and the coded message.

By the time I had gone to college, I had listened to every record in our house what seemed like a hundred time. We must have had about three-hundred, but she only had one album by Charlie Parker. She always said she found him a bit strange, except for his one album with strings. Even then, I tried to listen to that one, but I couldn't appreciate it, couldn't follow the geometry of the music. The solo distracted me from the swing, and the twist and turns seemed too complicated. The music just didn't seem to fit together. I just wasn't sure what I was listening too.

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I lose track of time, and so often have a difficult time with narrative. I can't really remember the first time I saw someone do Taiji or even heard of it. Shit, I can't even remember when I first decided to study it, but if I muse towards memory-it had to be my intoxication with the utter simplicity and beauty of the form. If you've seen it, it is a lesson in mastery making the simple look easy. So again, there might have been some measure of natural seduction and I thought it was easy. I am not the first to be tricked. There is a deception in it that is like what we find in nature.

For nature is everything complex wrapped up in utter simplicity interconnected and whole. We imagine it to be without thought and apply thought as we jack it up and bend it towards our use. We can't help it. We are helplessly human in that way and prone to discovery and invention-and

going forward into the abyss preoccupied with the wanderings of our own mind. We believe in God to somehow explain the gap between it's obvious brilliance and our own limited understanding. We suggest revelation to suggest that knowing comes from some foray into its complexity with words, concepts, and our human creations as proof of accomplishment. We want to believe with strong conviction that there is something else besides simplicity.

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On the second week after I have arrived in Wuhan I get up early on Sunday Morning and go down to the tiny park in front of Building #9 at Central China Normal University looking for the Taiji people. There I find three men who all looked close to sixty immersed in the waters of a Taiji. They spend close to thirty minutes doing what I assumed to be the one-hundred and eight movement long form in Chen style. Though I have seen people practice and watch videos, I have never experienced three people so proficient practicing together. Each had a different stature. The one in the middle was rather tall and above six feet, another dressed in a traditional Chinese suite was rather stocky and slim, while the third was the shortest and almost plump. What made the moment so beautiful and enlightening was if you managed to focus on all three at the same time, you could see a range of interpretation in the movements though they were all doing the same thing. It was a good day and the subtleties to be articulated within the simplicity of a refined form seemed quite evident.

I had come in late and watched intently with a few onlookers until they finished. As the session ended the men broke into smiles. It was one of what seemed to be the last warm days in Wuhan in the fall season. We all clapped.

The men who remained stoned face throughout the form with concentration broke into smiles and moved on over to some benches and began to sip water, laugh, and talk.

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One could view Taiji as one views jazz culture in America. Masters in many ways still live among us the way those who practice the art of Taiji exist in plain view in Chinese society. The simplicity of jazz is like Taiji and a two-stringed instrument. The lone horn is a similar image, symbol, and representation of a deep cultural legacy that is human raised up between the earth and sky. The band is the American ancient conversation between my ancestors in the field playing the composition and constantly adjusting it to the heat, pitch, and weather of the day. Most of America, regardless of their knowledge of black culture know and recognize the horn, the blues, and the perfected art. It is so well known and integrated into the fabric of our lives Disney can sample jazz into a children's cartoon and we all find it acceptable.

But the horn and the music are forged in a field with people picking cotton and suffering loss that the country has never really remembered or perhaps forgotten. In that way, most don't really understand. In many ways it is beyond understanding. One can enjoy and respect from a distance,

but if one is to enter that world completely, they must study and be taught. All things perfected are at the least part mystery, and jazz maybe the best example of such in African American culture. This last aspect defies the fundamentals of the negro's place in American society. We were enslaved, came up out of that, and subsequently needed to be taught by our former master's. Most of the country imagines there are few things a Negro can teach them.

But if one is to truly understand the profundity of jazz as cultural seed and preservation one must pledge the path of the horn with discipline and refine the first thin original spark of an internal fire into constant steady flame. The country wants to know the ideas and imagines that the blood of our existence is not what is being sung. They imagine our innovation is something else besides the root. After all our negation can be conjured as an almost superhuman power. One can imagine that even though it is wrong in the end the power to enslave has transformed a group of Africans into something else. One can imagine that they have destroyed what they cannot destroy.

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People think they know, but then know they don't know how we do it. In jazz we transcend through our own undeniable communal agency. There Louis is comical at times, smiling and cheesing. but listen to his horn. There's blood and blues in it that make it profound balance between the heaven and hell of our journey here.

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A horn played properly-the right creative act- holds the secret of the indestructible.

In my house we have a picture of Louis Armstrong that is 2X2 and for many years it sat above my son's bed. He too is a musician, and during a move, he declared he didn't want Louis in his room anymore. I asked him why. He said, "He didn't trust the smile."

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My son's not the only one to question Louis smile, and the uproar that followed his interview with Larry Lubenow in September of 1957 as the nation witnessed the Little Rock Nines battle against segregation caused a huge uproar precisely because that smile was governed by contracts, culture, and management of a public image that would prevent backlash.

But the smile was only the surface. Louis' music was another code and if it had words, might have led to uproars too. Only mass oppression could make a smile like Louis' so important and emblematic. if jazz musicians or hip-hop musicians had sought to submit their music in word dorm through the same apparatus black writers do, vast portions of our musical legacy would



have been edited out. Hence the need to study jazz and learn the sometimes difficult to understand code.

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I usually get caught up in the technology of my i-pod. It empowers me. I don't have to listen to what I don't want to listen to. I got the old joint, so I rub my finger across the tiny wheel and choose something different each time a song comes on that I don't want to hear.

Of course, a horn from a car or shouts from a passerby may pierce the dome of sound plugged into my ears, but for the most part I go where I want to go.

Wuhan has changed that a bit. I walk through the streets and often stumble upon the odd and unusual, the new and foreign spectacle. I get stuck contemplating something I am not used to, and my music spins without my direction.

And that's how I find the interview

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Along with "Sleepy Time Down South," I found a Louis Armstrong Paris Interview on the I-Pod.

I heard his voice in the Starbucks the other day, and he was signing, "What a Wonderful World." God, I love Louis, but that song is like riddles, and seems to conjure his smile. I prefer and idolize the man playing. Granted, if it were not for Wuhan and my i-pod comfort, I wouldn't have listened so intently. I grow alert as he talks. Wondering what Louis has to say?

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The interview begins with a series of licks from Louie who plays alone. In the past, the short phrase had been my focus.

It still amazes me though I have heard it at least a hundred times. The intonation, the phrasing, the interval of his pause strikes me as sheer genius. I am by no means a jazz master, but I've listened to my share of the music. Louis' small riffs strike me as fresh, new, and original even though it is many decades old. It is a shining example of his mastery and clarifies what the masters knew still remains just outside the reach of the many, even those who play today.

And then he talks.

The interview takes place at six o'clock in the morning after he has been playing all night long

and begins with a discussion of language. He is in Paris and played with a group of musicians who did not speak English. The interviewer asks him about the language barrier and Louis replies, "It's one thing about good jazz, you don't have to worry about what they talking cuz when they pick up those instruments we all speak the same language."

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His statement is profound, but mysterious. The crux of jazz is that in many ways it was a new language created by African Americans. We have done the same with spoken words, but the idea doesn't fly well. It is prone to debate many black scholars have engaged in.

Yet, with jazz, the statement is not about debate. It seems a simple reality stickered to Louis' presence in the world. His horn has already said the most important things. The compositions and structure of the music are somehow connected to the discussion.

He then goes on to answer questions that seem more appropriate for a linguist or at least a poor English major like me. He is asked to define terms like bop, cool, and cat like he is a Free Black Space Dictionary. The interview is mostly about language. I had forgotten or rather never paid attention to it in that way. If you listen from this vantage it is as academic conversation as the one that Louis makes with the band and his horn every time he plays.

It is our secret in plain view.

His statements are as profound in their clarity as the pitch of Louis' horn. You can hear where he tiptoes and uses the slightest degree of force, and corrects the interviewer who is merely chatting with a performer; and you can see the performance in it even as he stretches and bend the confines of what we know as the negro's place. He winds through the arena of music, personal narrative, and celebrity status, but his engagement is intellectual and masterful and limited as compared to expanded by language.

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In the beginning of the Tao Teh Ching, the ancient Chinese book of wisdom, it offers a perspective:

*The Tao that can be spoken of is not the original Tao.*

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Louis grows up in the streets poor and learns the music from the hands and mouths of the people who look like him. He studies the shape of the sky itself. He imagines a connection we can't imagine. It is integrated intellectual and emotional like our true experience. It is refined and polished in his music, which is why many of us recognize it.

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Truth is, if one is an African American speaking English, a wordless music might be the easiest way to the transcendental. A wordless music may be capable of masking its confrontation with existing codes, in the same Taiji or the Angolan martial arts of capoeira hides its deadly capacity in what appears to be an all simple dance. Words as Louis' in the interview might confuse or even bring wrath. If anything, the interview, especially in the context of Louis' comments in 1947 so Louis' navigation of the American transcendent when speaking. Despite freedom speech, such navigation is a requirement for most of us.

But what does it say about the transcendent. If anything, it gives us a sense of its limit. A Negro who does not transcend is a dangerous Negro. He is revolutionary and capable of anything. For transcendence eliminates the threat at the heart of white acknowledgement of slavery and our mistreatment. Much of our talk about the transcendent in the realm of the words, in the end does not give rise to anything like jazz. A scan of the often most powerful African American intellectuals is often testament to the capacity of Western Civilization to refine itself and evolve through integration of a black element. What appears to be transcendental seems often meticulously constructed like Louis' speech.

So, it is with words, which is another reason jazz is so important to study. One must contemplate how the music relates to words.

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*And they sit there talking about the tortured genius of Charlie Parker. Bird would've played not a note of music if he just walked up to East Sixty-seventh Street and killed the first ten white people he saw. Not a note!*

*Clay Speaking in Amiri Baraka/Leroi Jones' Dutchman*

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The forefathers of the country transcended oppression with guns, land seizure, and throwing tea into the sea; the negro must transcend through a refined internalization of the weak position. It is the cloak we must to wear in the land of the codes. A deceptive simplicity that suggests we are perfect and also harmless, unobtrusive. It is the strange form of transcendence assigned us by the empire. Our condition and consciousness have been refined by something within the empire, the empire has had great difficulty acknowledging. Indeed, if the empire could imagine how far outside we were, it might be harder to imagine themselves as an empire. If the empire truly brokered in the transcendental it would have known better what was behind Louis' smile.

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So be it. So blow your horn.

Which is why the empire's education challenges our perfection of intellect. For our intellect outside the codes, must refine and perfect what is beyond opposition. It must reconcile with what was originally regulated to abstraction by the empire's code and negated by force of code and law.

Jazz does this.

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Words within the empire are coded and regulated in such a way to continue the empire's existence. If they do not, they can be negated via the rudiments of grammar or the simple explanation that one does not know the language-that one is somehow inferior in their ability to articulate. Music, on the other hand rises, when perfected to utter simplicity and seems to transcend the intellectual. Poetry does this too, but that is another essay and another matter. And the other thing about music with African American's is, the empire banned the drums, but was incapable of managing the Africa's own empire of musical codes. In many ways, the complexity was beyond them. In some ways our musical tradition packaged in what seemed like simple songs, functioned like the mastery of Taiji. In this regard, the simplicity is literally the protection. The complexity is managed internally within the system. Alas, the seed of who we are in all its complexity survives.

It is a characteristic of civilization that one cannot learn the utter simplicity without intellect. It is our lot. We must find the simple via the perfection of thought; or perhaps better stated, the placement of thought within the proper context. A jazz solo expresses this perfection rather perfectly. There thought and the individual does not exist alone or primarily as individual. The conversation demands in real time between the other players and audience. That too is another essay, but the point should be clear. Jazz is a viable way of seeing and engaging the world. It is music and more than that.

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Not long ago, the father of a friend who for many years was a studio jazz musician explained to me how he had spent seven years practicing for seven hours a day seven days a week perfecting his craft. The lesson was profound in its simplicity.

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It's mostly older Chinese folks that study Taiji in the park, though there are exceptions to this rule.

You see them early in the morning in large groups moving gracefully under the weather.

They practice as they get older, returning to what has been known amongst them all their lives. There are health benefits. It is something fun to do. It helps with balance. It occupies the mind in ways that demand the use of skills society may not demand from them as much.

It keeps them more alive.

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I told Rodney that day, I had tried to listen to Parker a couple of times, but couldn't seem to get it. I asked Rodney what should I do, He said, "Learn to love it Baby. You gotta learn to love it!"

Louis, Abbey, a little bit of Parker, Steve Coleman, Ornette Coleman, David Murray, Mingus and crew became an alternate reading list for me. If there is something academic about my pursuit of craft in poetry, the true aesthetic first came through a study of jazz. Like all things black, it is rooted in a Free Black Space and outside of Academia. My mother is really the master of the tradition in that regards and made sure that I spent ample time listening to woman jazz singers. Shirley Horne is her favorite. She don't really care for Betty Carter that much cuz she considers her too Avant Garde. The Avant Garde is more my speed. She hipped me to Dinah Washington, Billy Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Carmen McCrae.

The great mother of them all was Abbey Lincoln, and shortly after the birth of my first two children when my wife and I crossed an imaginary line separating their infancy and the toddler years, my mother insisted on us all going to see Abbey Lincoln as our first night away from the kids. The concert was at the Smithsonian and when the lights came on and Abbey took the stage, Rodney Kendrick was the pianist. Afterwards we approached. He remembered me and our Earth Day outing and took us all back stage to meet Abbey. She was majestic, theatrical, a bit moody, and so much jazz and genius.

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My memory often escapes me; but then like an old friend I haven't seen in some time, returns. It turns out I do remember when I first started studying Taiji. It was with my mother.

It was close to ten years ago and as she confronted arthritis and a series of other diseases we found Master Chang in Bowie, Maryland who specializes in teaching older people.

As it turns out, some of the movements and ideas were too difficult for her; and I continued my study alone.

I am not sure what all of that means; but she is the bridge between the music and me.