



# MORGAN CRAFT

story: michael kaplan

**Securing a face to face interview** with Morgan Craft, improviser, guitarist and foremost proponent of “the new black American avant-garde,” is no easy task. The present location of said subject is a bit mysterious. Rumors of a mountain villa in Tuscany, without central heating but with enough technology in the studio to run a small country, float through the datasphere. I couldn’t help thinking of the secret laboratory in all those James Bond movies, cut off from the contaminating society at large, replete with some invention that could either save or destroy our world, depending on the mastermind.

The drive to Rocca AlMileda Studios is not an easy one. Two and a half hours north of Rome and countless switchback mountain roads does a number on you if you happen to be prone to carsickness, which I am. But it’s not without its poetry. The higher up we go, the view deepens and expands to take in miles and miles of classic rolling hill vineyards cascading into the distance. The clouds somehow frame and sit perfectly above the alternately tilled and overgrown fields, across many of which flocks of sheep graze. Finally, with my patience waning and a topsy-turvy stomach, we enter a small, medieval village nestled into the slopes of Mount Civitella.

With a population of 800, Castell’Azzara is a time warp to another way of life. Elderly men with canes sit side by side on benches warming themselves in the sun, eyeing all the new arrivals, while the women sweep out their homes and lean out of windows to hang the laundry. After a brief, broken-Italian exchange with the one and only gas station attendant in town, I locate, with the assistance of an arm and pointing finger, the villa I’m looking for. It’s almost completely hidden by a wall of tall pine trees; one would almost surely miss it in passing. My driver turns up a tiny side road which seems to lead right into a forest, but a few hundred yards on I notice a flight of stairs. I’m informed that this is the place and with a nod he leaves me to contemplate my surroundings. My first impression is of the immense woodlands which threaten to engulf me. Bird screech and song, a complex of tangled vines, a low burbling stream...all lend a feeling of the origins of things great and small. My second impression, or question, is what is a New York improviser doing all the way out here?

The villa itself is massive, three floors, and well removed from the street by an extensive and intimidating flight of stairs. Its foundation is partially cut into the mountain face, like some elemental fortress looming forth out of nature. A giant cypress tree

stands sentry-like at the edge of the back patio. It's here that I'm greeted by the not-so-common-in-Tuscany sight of a six-foot-two black American. This is Morgan Craft.

"I see you found your way," he says wryly, offering a firm handshake. "I was wondering if maybe I should have asked you to be blindfolded on the drive up here." I'm pretty sure he's kidding, but you never know.

And with that he leads me inside onto the main floor, where he lives and works with his wife—producer and DJ Mutamassik—and their seven-year-old son. The heavy throb of vintage King Tubby dub fills the space. Bubbling on the stove is a large pot of extraordinarily fragrant pasta sauce. First things first, I'm offered a glass of local red wine, a bit rustic in flavor but smooth nonetheless. He then takes me on a quick tour of the compound. I hadn't noticed how elevated the house actually was until we went out onto the veranda. The view is breathtaking, with the old-world steeple and town dominating the near ground, while far out in the distance, distinctly highlighted by the setting sun, stand the snow-capped Appenines. Back inside I find out that at least one of the rumors is true, there is no central heating. The centerpiece of the main floor is a large, wood-burning stove equipped with a small oven for cooking, strategically positioned so as to give warmth to the bedrooms as well as the studio.

"Eight months out of the year, living this high up is pretty cold," Craft informs me. "So I have to keep a fire going all day. I cut most of the wood myself with a hand saw. This house was built in the Sixties, and in the winter, with everything shut as tight as we can get it, the drapes are still blowing like there was an open window. It's a full time job just keeping it warm in here."

We proceed down the hall to the studio. The space is large and a bit cluttered, with instruments

covering every available surface. There are drums, guitars, cello, turntables, a mixing console, amps, keyboard, various African percussion pieces, et cetera. No less than three computers are glowing and ready for action. There are books stacked up neatly behind the drum kit; in fact, there are books everywhere: biographies of Jean Genet, Tina Modotti, Sun Ra, Marcel Duchamp, Fela Kuti; novels by Virginia Woolf, Samuel R. Delany, Leo Tolstoy, Cormac McCarthy; autobiographies of Tori Amos, Twyla Tharp, Keith Richards; Machiavelli, Jean Baudrillard, John Cage, William Burroughs, Baltasar Gracian, Anthony Braxton, Yoko Ono, Antonin Artaud, Ralph Waldo Emerson, RZA, Marcus Aurelius...

**Who is Morgan Craft**, and why have I come all this way to interview him? As preface let me say that, in my view, something is happening in the world of music; something evidenced by the urgent and weighty discussions being had and questions being asked. It seems we've reached a point where the stakes feel high. What happened to music, and where is it going from here? Never before has there been so much to listen to and contend with, and yet writers and critics like myself have to stretch our imaginations almost to the breaking point just to make the newest latest artist seem mildly interesting. At best, we compare them to someone else, from a time long since passed, saying it's good to hear real music again. But truly, that isn't satisfactory. I didn't get into journalism to write science fiction and fantasy stories, I got into it because I wanted to experience challenging and progressive sounds firsthand and bring my accounts of the personalities and philosophies behind them to bear on a mainstream press that routinely passes over anything that resists comparison.

And so who is this Morgan Craft? What initially

drew my attention was a short essay of his posing as a letter that I came across in *The Wire*, subsequently quoted and included in George E. Lewis' book *A Power Stronger Than Itself*. In it, Craft lays out his rather militant observation of a missing black American avant-garde, placing the blame for its absence equally at the feet of the new generation of musicians content to rehash old forms and an institutional system seemingly committed to narrowing and isolating black American genius. I agreed with much of his thesis and found it refreshing to read such honest and impassioned criticism. I wanted to know more, so I peeled back another layer.

There is his New York resume: gigs and/or projects with Marc Ribot, Butch Morris, Meshell Ndegeocello, Greg Tate, Christian Marclay, Vernon Reid, Ikue Mori, Johnny Kemp, Nona Hendryx; studio work with Talib Kweli, Daniel Carter and Pete Cosey. He founded the Circle of Light label in 2001, with the release of his first solo album, *Adagio*. 2003 saw the second release from the label, *Rough Americana*, the duo of Craft and Mutamassik. All should have been well and good, but then came the spanner in the works. In 2004, he and the family packed up the studio and moved to the mountain. Craft says, "I knew that I needed to build my foundation both theoretically and actually and that the only way I could do that would be to leave New York. I also felt that if it was a breakthrough I was seeking, some original contribution, then I had to do something different. I think the old method of going to the big city to make it is dry, creatively. I wanted to focus on innovation, not fame or finance, so I had to get out of the environment that increasingly came to represent the latter." This isn't the usual line taken by ambitious, internationally minded artists in any medium, so I kept peeling.

Since 2005, Craft has issued a steady flow of concepts presented in the form of essays and inter-

views that surface and circulate online, each one an elaboration and evolution of the last, and, taken as a whole, illustrate no less than a new kind of musician. Though my interest was piqued and the notion of seeking Craft out for an interview was already gestating in my head, I'll admit I was a bit apprehensive at the prospect of meeting with him. His written work hints at an aggressive, confrontational type of personality, perhaps better suited for the boxing ring rather than the interview table.

"I'm very aware of the sheer volume of words we come into contact with when we go online," Craft states. "So I try to make sure that what I write carries emotional weight. It is through the emotions that we truly communicate, not the intellect. We're at the point now where the things we do and say have to be strong, direct. They have to cut through the continuous frequency of diversion that threatens to snuff out any sense of our own agency."

But, paragraph density and sheer volume of words aside, Craft assures me he is not a writer, but a musician first and foremost, which dovetails nicely into the next layer to be peeled. The music of Morgan Craft could be an article unto itself, as it strenuously resists any rote definitions or comforting categories we might seek to tame it with. He simply calls it the "new black American avant-garde," though to be fair that description casts more shadows than not. Says Craft, "The new black American avant-garde is whatever it needs to be depending on the circumstance. Avant-garde represents the forward thrust into culture, the point of the arrow, not a style or sound. But really, in all honesty, it's meant as a hook, or familiar ground from which to launch."

It's revealing that as a "hook," which most of us would define as a catchy, easily digestible, and broadly appealing portal into the work, Craft would choose such loaded and potentially contentious

words as “black,” “American,” and “avant-garde.” And perhaps that’s the point. Perhaps his chosen hook is accurate precisely because it’s not easily digestible. The phrase “black American avant-garde” almost vibrates with an inherent disquiet or unrest. Thomas Edison once said, “Restlessness is discontent and discontent is the first necessity of progress. Show me a thoroughly satisfied man and I will show you a failure.” Craft seems to have arrived at a similar conclusion, saying, “I have no intention of representing anything that is fixed or fits neatly under any heading. It’s an attitude or approach that has as its central tenet a responsibility for progress.”

**The main theme or spine** running through all of Craft’s life and work is that of improvisation, the foundational philosophy animating virtually all great black art. Yet in Craft’s version we find it modified and intensified to the point where art and life become truly inseparable. Take for example his assurance that “if one were to put their whole person on the line, viewing it exactly as an instrument with which to improvise, then the music would surely follow as easily and naturally as breathing.” It is this line of thinking that has led him to make rather impressive leaps of faith, picking up and moving to Hawaii, Africa and Italy without ever having been there previously. This, as a working philosophy, is a far cry from a thirty-two bar solo in the middle of “How High the Moon.”

There is no way to assess the evolution of Craft’s music without first placing special emphasis on these last seven years in Italy. It was here that he found the two elements most essential to innovative artistic discoveries: time and space.

“I knew that this was my moment to find out what I was made of,” he recounts. “I think for every serious artist there is a point where you have to go your own way and leave behind the known. The

circumstances of us coming here were proof to me that I should take this very seriously, as seriously as my life; that this opportunity was only going to come along once. I kept a schedule where I would work every other day, nine months out of the year, for six straight years. When I say work, I mean as a solo electric guitarist, and every other day I would have a completed track, done in one sitting, completely improvised. I broke down my instrument sonically to the point where I knew that it was infinite. I broke the sound barrier. Then I started building things.”

This “breaking of the sound barrier,” along with “emotionalized sound,” are themes that Craft has elaborated elsewhere, but if I may briefly paraphrase how he sees them contributing to a new music, I’d say it thusly: the sound barrier is the mathematically precise line in Western music called the chromatic scale, consisting of twelve tones. To move beyond this line as a musician is to, ideally, gain access to the infinite realm of sound when constructing music. Sound that is emotionally rendered, he theorizes, will open up new possibilities as to the function of music in society. What this means for the listener is not at all what you might expect from an eschewal of fundamental rules. The pieces are certainly not intellectual exercises in arcane equations, they are communiqués from deep space, or inner space, and somehow manage to evoke a definite emotional landscape. There are moments of real abstraction, where untethered, un-definable bass pressures slip through harmonic dust clouds. Oblique rhythms mass, dissipate, and interact with space stuff without ever losing their sense of story. But wait, listen to what follows; a concise, listenable (for those who prefer their music with a discernible rhythm and melody), three-minute pop construction, or, if you will, song, complete with drums, bass, verse, chorus and bridge.

On every release of his there is a tag line that reads, "All sounds made by, on, or through solo electric guitar. Improvised and recorded live," but it's difficult to reconcile. The variety of textures and sheer inner complexity of the tracks all but demolish the notion that you are listening to a solo music. If I didn't know better I'd swear it was a hip new band, maybe out of Brooklyn or London, surely not a lone guitarist improvising on a mountain. What's also easy to forget, when you find yourself immersed in his ocean of sound, with no discernible signs that you are in fact listening to a guitar, is that at bottom Craft is an incredibly seasoned player, a real musician's musician. His playing can be seen as evolving out of the virtuosic displays of eighties shred guitar he grew up on, where technical mastery was the standard, and musicians were judged by their formidable interaction with the instrument. And while his aesthetic choices couldn't be more unlike Steve Vai, his commitment to physically wrenching a sound from every available part of the guitar warrants a comparison.

**Any talk of a new music** or a new musician necessarily brings to mind the context from which they emerge. Advancements in technology have always contributed to music's evolution, whether we're talking about acoustic instruments adapting to electricity, or today, within the digital realm most musicians call home. This latest shift has delivered us into the midst of what could be the most monumental upheaval in music since the advent of recording technology. To take a crude and general line of analysis we could look at the changes from two vantage points; the creative and the business.

Creatively, the tools of the trade now increasingly lean toward samplers, sequencers, drum machines, editing software and portable studios, as opposed to the catgut, wood, wire and skin of old. And while

all of the former have all been available and in use for decades, only recently have they become affordable to the average consumer. Now, in fact, incredibly powerful musical editing software comes bundled with iPhoto, iMovie, and Internet Explorer, in every new personal computer. Add to that a library of virtual instruments, the now artistically acceptable use of samples, relative ease of use, and the not-so-subtle insinuation that everyone can be an artist, and we find a playing field exponentially exploded and expanded, irrespective of innate musical proclivity. How this affects music, and more specifically the musician, is the question I put to Craft.

"The real challenge facing the musician of today is keeping the positive aspects of technology while staying connected to the essence of what music is," he begins. "Music is invisible, yet requires a definite physicality, and gaining access to its essence is a process that takes a great deal of time and patience. There are no shortcuts in being able to emotionally communicate through sound. To think that we can bypass its elemental properties and push some buttons to create great art is ridiculous as well as damaging. Music is the result of the musician, and is therefore a human expression that requires the body, mind and spirit to be working in harmony with the creative source animating all things.

"I think the most distinctive and defining change underpinning the modern studio setup is in the overwhelming emphasis on a visual relationship to sound," he continues. "Chances are good that most musicians and producers now spend more time looking at and micro-editing a waveform than playing instruments and using their ears. I think it's impossible for that not to affect the music." What he tactfully doesn't say is whether this effect is positive or negative, but in looking at his own process we might deduce a bias.

"I don't use a computer to generate any of my

sounds and I never see a waveform when I'm making a track. It's tempting, as a musician, to chase perfection by looping a bar and dropping it onto the grid, but to me, that isn't what music is about."

At the other end of the new digital spectrum is the business. This year sees the release of Craft's eighth studio album, (six in the last three years alone), *A Cycle of Seven*. His continued belief in the relevance of the full-length album seems to run contrary to the dictates of a floundering industry, what with the single ascending to become popular music's basic unit of measure, and the shuffle mode of the iPod serving as our very own personal DJ.

"I've always been drawn to creating a body of work over a lifetime," he remarks. "As a musician, it's my job to make documents that can go out into the world and communicate with people, hopefully stimulating new dialogues and ideas. The album form is a unique opportunity to stretch out and establish a mood that the listener can enter into, no different than the novel or film, and I find that even more important now, in the age of the quick fix."

The business side of music has undergone a violent and contentious transformation in the past two decades that is far more pervasive than the stylistic shifts and periodic course corrections that have routinely marked its growth. The massive and influential brick-and-mortar distribution channels have gone bankrupt. The powerful, sales-driving, tastemaking radio outlets have been neutered and displaced. Record labels, fiercely protective of their business models and more litigious than forward-thinking, have found their once all-important Faustian "record contract" devalued and their profit wells increasingly dry. As this infrastructure crumbles, musicians have found themselves in a largely uncharted landscape where their digitally distributed sound recordings might as well be free (with each track netting 10 cents per sale on average)—and

with the ease of file sharing, they very often are. In this current state, these recordings are less viable as end products than as advertisements for concerts. Established acts understandably lament this, while younger musicians seem to find a freedom in it. For everyone involved, though, the balance of power has unquestionably shifted toward the live arena. Even with YouTube making it possible to watch artists do their thing from anywhere in the connected world, what cannot be captured in a pixel is the inherent energy of bodies in a room.

This suits Craft just fine, and if the raw video snippets I saw are any indication of what is to come, then things could get quite interesting from here on out. Three concerts by Rough Americana—the duo of Craft and Mutamassik—in Portugal, Sweden, and Amsterdam are well worth mentioning. In Sweden, Craft is seen wandering through the crowd, dragging his guitar like some sort of fresh kill, ranting and screaming something that could be political or just as likely primal scream, not playing a note for at least half an hour. In Portugal, he erects a sort of monument or shrine in the middle of the stage. One observer commented that it looked like voodoo, what with the shredded car tire hanging from a guitar cable and the hotel bathrobe draped around a mic stand. And in Amsterdam, at the notoriously cutting edge venue DNK, following a properly technological and experimental sonic assault of sampler and guitar by a Dutch duo, Craft improvised with the two bottles of Duvel beer he had on hand, calling and responding to Mutamassik's turntable scratches. Oh, and did I mention their son was also onstage, playing with a soccer ball? He was, and during one of the more intimate moments, with Craft setting up a fragile melodic interlude, he quietly hummed along while sitting patiently in a chair near his father.

When pressed as to what context these perform-

ances might fall into, Craft is gravely serious when he assures me that these indeed are concerts, not theatre. Nothing was planned ahead of time, and all are examples of his concept of pure and total improvisation in a live setting, whereby the musician is free to use the entire space and any method he or she judges appropriate to that unique moment. Says Craft, “The improviser must realize and take advantage of the space being given right now in a concert setting. The expectations of an audience prepared to sit and watch a musician standing safely up on a stage must be smashed. The improviser in a live setting is necessarily unpredictable, and depending on how honest s/he is there are infinite options. No one goes to a concert just to use their ears, they are there to use all six senses. The improviser, knowing this, should exercise the full range of expressive possibilities. That being said, it’s not always appropriate to create a spectacle; I’m absolutely open to beautifully controlled and restrained performances of music, if that’s what the situation calls for.”

The task Morgan Craft has set for himself is not an easy one. He has openly spoken of his mission to redefine the musician. It is this new musician, he feels, that will step to the front and change the course of music itself. And if that isn’t hubris, he is confident that this new music will move beyond the narrow limits imposed upon it by entertainers and an audience addicted to diversions; to take a respected seat at the table of those entrusted with the future well-being of our world, currently monopolized by science, medicine, economics, and politics. However naïve one might call him now, isn’t it just this kind of long distance thinking that has been the catalyst for all great achievements? I, for one, would like to see more of his brand of optimism, across a broader range of concerns, or as he says himself, “It is imperative that we dream big

and follow through those dreams with big actions. How we move over this next frontier could truly and definitively decide our fate, and if we fear the responsibility of stepping into the breach and providing alternatives that are positive and life-affirming, we can be sure that those who wish to continue this present madness will gladly keep their posts.”

And while it will take the contributions of all of us in all of our myriad vocations, surely the arts could hold a special key if we’re talking about passing through the door to a more fully realized self. So how can music be the avant-garde and provide us with new energy and insight that will strengthen our faith that the impossible is simply an interim word used for something about to appear? It’s probably best to let Craft have the last say in this regard, and thankfully he doesn’t lack for ambition:

“We don’t know yet what else music is capable of. There is scientific research showing how it affects us on multiple levels, neurologically and physically. There are mystics chanting the sound of the origin of all things on their way to transcendence. Who can say what forces can be set in motion by music? We know it can change the world; every cultural era had its soundtrack. What came first, the chicken or the egg? Did rock and roll free up the minds of the youth, thereby making possible the breakthroughs of the sixties? I know what I believe. I approach my exploration of music with the same sense of mission as an astronaut exploring space, or a doctor trying to find a cure for cancer. I believe that the potential of music and the creative arts to inspire and illuminate the darker corners of science and other rational pursuits will prove instrumental in this new cycle. We’re moving beyond the number as all powerful and music will show us that there is a path to walk upon and nothing to fear.”