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Morgan Craft And The New Avant-Garde / By 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 and 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 car-sickness, 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, many of which contain flocks of grazing sheep. 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. Being almost completely hidden by a wall of 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 all 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 named 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 none-the-less. He then takes me on a quick tour of the compound. I hadn't noticed how high and up and removed from the town we were until we went out onto the veranda. The view is breathtaking, with a veritable panorama for miles. 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 then 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, etc. 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; bios on Jean Genet, Tina Modotti, Sun Ra, Marcel Duchamp, Fela Kuti; novels by Virginia Woolf, Samuel R. Delany, Leo Tolstoy, Cormac McCarthy; autobiographies from Tori Amos, Twyla Tharp, Keith Richards; Machiavelli, Baudrillard, Cage, Burroughs, Gracian, Braxton, Ono, Artaud, Emerson, RZA, Aurelius, etc. Maybe it was the long trip, the heady atmosphere, or the wine, but suddenly I'm feeling quite fatigued. A plush couch in the corner is just the right fit. Craft is behind the turntables deftly following up the dub with a mélange of music including the Cocteau Twins, Arvo Part, Cecil Taylor, Prince, Jesu, Brian Eno, Fleetwood Mac, Suicide, Slayer, even Taylor Swift. In person, Craft is quite pleasant, if a bit excitable. His conversation is animated and forceful, sometimes plowing over niceties on his way to a deeper point. He most definitely is opinionated but not annoyingly so. I suddenly realize I haven't eaten anything since I left Rome and the wafting aromas are making it hard to concentrate. I remind my host that I'm scheduled to be here another full day and perhaps we might do better tomorrow, bright and early.

Well, at least I might do better. Craft agrees with a knowing smile. Now about that pasta...

The who, the what and the why / on new statements.

Who is Morgan Craft, and why have I come all this way to interview him? As a preface, let me say that something is happening in the world of music, a shift is slowly creeping into our discussions. It seems we've finally reached the stage in the game where we've begun to ask the important questions. For starters, what happened to music, and secondly, where is music going? 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 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 affect culture with portraits of reality that were challenging and progressive, but weren't being given the time in the mainstream press.

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' seminal 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 equally between the new generation of musicians content on rehashing 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 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, Me'shell N'degeocello, 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 of the label, *Rough Americana*, the duo of Craft and Mutamassik. All should have been well and good, but then came the rent in the fabric. 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, international 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 interviews that surface and circulate online, each one an elaboration and evolution of the previous, and, taken as a whole, illustrate no less than a new kind of musician. Initially, I felt a bit apprehensive, even uncomfortable at the prospect of meeting him. His written work hints at an aggressive, confrontational type of personality, perhaps better suited for the boxing ring rather than the stage. “I’m very aware of the sheer volume of words we come into contact with when we go online,” Craft elaborates. “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 Craft is not a writer, he assures me, 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, seeing that it wriggles free of any easy definitions we might saddle 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. In all honesty, it’s meant as a hook, or familiar ground from which to launch. I have no intention of representing anything that is fixed or fits neatly under any heading. It is an attitude or approach that has as its central tenet the responsibility of progress.”

The improviser and the location of new vistas.

The main theme 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 huge 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 an eight bar solo in the middle of ‘How High the Moon’.

There is no way to properly talk about the evolution of his 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 is a theme that Craft has elaborated elsewhere, but if I may briefly paraphrase how he sees it contributing to a new music I'd say it thusly; the sound barrier is the arbitrary line in western music called the chromatic scale. To move beyond this line as a musician means having access to the infinite sonic realm when constructing music, as opposed to only the mathematical constriction of twelve tones. What this means is not at all what you might expect from improvisation. His music refuses to sit still and give the easy answers. The sheer density of the tracks, demolish any notion that you are listening to a solo music. There are moments of real abstraction, where un-tethered, un-definable, sounds mass and dissipate without ever losing their sense of story. These pieces are certainly not sound-for-sounds-sake, they are communiqués from deep space, or inner space, and somehow manage to evoke a definite emotional landscape. But wait, listen to what follows; a concise, listenable (for those who prefer their music with a discernable rhythm and melody), three minute pop construction, or, if you will, song, complete with drums, bass, verse, chorus and bridge. Once again I'm struck by the fullness of the sound. On every release of his there is a tag line that reads, 'All sounds made by, on, or through solo electric guitar', but it's difficult to reconcile that with the variety of textures he deploys. 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.

There have been many changes these last twenty-five years in the way music is made. Not least of which is the almost total acceptance and shift into the digital domain where the recording studio is concerned. This is a logical move from a financial standpoint, and artistically there are many benefits to be had as well. But the distinctive and defining change underpinning digital editing software is in the overwhelming emphasis on a visual relationship to sound. Chances are good that the musicians and producers now spend more time looking at and micro-editing a wave form than playing instruments and using their ears. That, coupled with the ease one can now punch in corrections, edit out mistakes, loop any or all instruments, auto-tune vocals, add virtual effects, alter arrangements, and much more, have created a completely new experience in the studio. I believe the significance of this should not be underestimated. While I'm sure it's tempting, as a musician, to just loop a bar and drop it onto the track grid in the designated spot, I wonder if the missing tension and concentration, let alone skill, needed to actually perform parts in real time does not adversely affect the music.

By contrast, Craft's music 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 sonic 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. "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," Craft begins. "Since the sample has become a legitimate musical approach and certain sample based electronic music the mainstream, we've seen the playing field expand exponentially, to include anyone who can afford the gear, irrespective of innate musical proclivity. But more importantly, what a program like Pro Tools is great at is removing the need for a body, by reducing the sonic information to movable blocks, not unlike a high tech Lego set, which can then be manipulated with an index finger and mouse. I don't use computers to generate any of my sounds and I never see a wave form when I'm making a track. Everything is done with inexpensive and basic guitar pedals. Music is not a plaything, it 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 to being able to emotionally communicate through sound. 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. It seems that God has protected this domain by insuring that if music is to live, evolve, flourish, and inspire, the musician must be willing and able to pass through the natural stages required of a vessel of the spirit. And the only way I know of doing that is through years of study and practice."

This year sees the release of Craft's eighth studio album, (six in the last three years alone), 'A Cycle of Seven'. There has been much made of the music industry upheavals in recent years, and it truly is a different beast altogether. For all intents and purposes music is now free, or at least the audio aspects are, and as a listener and fan I can't deny that I find these changes quite exciting and inspiring. Having access to virtually unlimited music, at any time, could also prove revolutionary for the next wave of musicians. But obviously, there are many who lament the loss of an income stream with the demise of packaged music. Whatever side you stand on concerning the debate, what can't be denied is the growing relevancy of the live show. Even with Youtube making it possible to see artists do their thing, it is still an isolated and alienated experience. What cannot be captured and put on a screen is the energy of live bodies in a room. It is here that we find that element of danger and excitement that is missing from virtually all other art forms. Essentially, what the new musician now has is a blank canvas with regard to performances. It is here that the chances will be taken, boundaries broken, simply for the fact that it cannot be contained by new media.

So if I may pull back yet another layer concerning our Mr. Craft let it be in talking about his intuition that the live arena is about to be exploded. 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 of 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 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, 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 the context these performances 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 s/he sees 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 playing a beautiful concert of music if that's what the situation calls for."

Music and the next frontier, what does the future hold?

Indeed these are dynamic times. There have always been those flashpoints in history where everything seemed to change overnight, even if in actuality it had been building slowly but surely for years. It could be said that a certain consciousness is in the air, one that superficially is concerned with politics, but emotionally may be more deeply rooted. Who are we? Where are we going? What are we here for? Hyper capitalism is speeding toward either self-immolation or forced closure by a rising up of the masses. Those of us thinking beyond nihilism have got to be looking ahead of the curve, by attempting to fashion new models that are not based on dying principles. And while it will take 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.

The task Morgan Craft has set for himself is not an easy one. He has openly spoken of his desire to re-define the musician. And if that weren't hubris enough, he is confident that emotionalized sound, i.e., music, will help change the world. However naïve one might call him now, isn't it just this belief in miracles that has been the catalyst for all great achievements? I, for one, would like to see more of this kind of optimism, across a broader range of concerns. 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. 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?

“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 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 nothing to fear.”

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