LIVING INSIDE THE DREAM: A CONVERSATION WITH JEFF MAJORS

TEXT & INTERVIEW BY PRINCE LANGUAGE

The record you find in your hands, Jeff Majors' For Us All (Yoka Boka), stands as a truly unique and genuine fusion of spiritual jazz with the shimmering, synthesizer-driven sonic palate of 1980s soul music, all deftly woven together by the thread of Majors' virtuosic harp playing. Originally pressed in small numbers by the private label imprint of the Washington, D.C. studio at which it was recorded, Glass Wing, the record was previously available only to the few collectors who had the means to pay the hundreds of dollars which it changed hands for, or the lucky few who came into contact with it via what can only be described as divine provenance.

From the Jan Hammer-esque arpeggio pulses of the opening track, the album announces itself as decidedly of its time, yet possessed of a singularity of sound and purpose, and hypnotic, evocative atmosphere, that evoke Majors' extraordinary journey through the spiritual jazz community of the1970s.

The album can rightly be seen as a more worldly cousin of Alice Coltrane's harp-driven releases of the late 1960s and '70s, as well as the four self-released "ashram" albums of the 1980s and '90s which have recently surfaced in the musical zeitgeist at-large due to the Luaka Bop label's reissue of a compilation of re-mastered selections from the releases. This comparison is not made simply due to their aesthetic and sonic sympathies, and foregrounding of the harp—in fact, Yoka Boka is directly inspired by Majors' three years of intense musical tutelage in the harp under Coltrane in the mid-1970s. And though this influence can explicitly be heard in his playing, as well as the depth and space of the arrangements on the album, Majors was also to determined to make music that was more "relative to the sounds of where we were in the '70s and '80s", as he asserted to me. "Some use the word "commercial," but that's relative." This is an album wherein popular standards such as The Beatles' "Let It Be" and the Gershwins' "Summertime" sit comfortably next to evocations of African village life and spirit, delay-soaked electrified mbira, and drum-machine and synthesizer driven explorations of the same cosmic and spiritual soundscapes that Alice Coltrane, as well as her collaborator Pharoah Sanders, traversed with such gravity and grace. Majors' harp playing possesses a lean, unabashed beauty that guides the album through its many modalities, and also evokes another one of his influences and teachers–Coltrane's fellow Detroit native, legendary harpist Dorothy Ashby.

My good friend Mathieu Schreyer, the Los Angeles DJ and jazz collector, was the one who introduced me to Alice Coltrane's ashram music some years ago now, quite literally opening up a whole new world to myself that would come to have an immeasurable effect on the expansion of my musical consciousness. I would eventually come to play an accidental, though integral role in that music's reissue, and its subsequent ascendance in the public consciousness, when I passed on those four tapes to the Luaka Bop label, spurring their eventual re-release. Shortly after blessing me with the ashram music, Mathieu also sent me copy of For Us All, which immediately captivated my ear, and quickly became another essential part of my daily listening. At the time, neither Mathieu or I had an inkling of the record's connection, and indeed, direct lineage to Alice Coltrane and her musical, spiritual, and educational practice; it is quite literally the fruit of her divine knowledge and teaching, as I would come to find out after speaking with Jeff Majors. So, something felt preordained, or at the very least fortuitous, about our coming together for the enlightening conversation which follows. It is my hope that you enjoy getting to know Jeff Majors, as well as learning about his remarkable journey through life and music, as much as I have.



I wanted to start at the beginning – when were you born?

Oh, you don't want to know that! I'm ancient, man. I've been here before!

Fair enough! So, I would say that the thread that goes through all of your music is that it's all devotional music in some way.

Yes. Very much.

Were you raised religiously?

I had a very philosophical childhood. I was raised, from six to twelve, in a monastery. A Catholic monastery. That left an impression on my thinking, and musically as well, even today.

Was there a musical aspect to the monastery?

I think the thing that struck me from Catholicism was the Gregorian chants. That was fascinating, like being transported out of wherever you were at into another existence, another zone. I had an opportunity to go to Rome and visit the Vatican and some of the very special churches they have down below the Vatican and it was just… ahhh. I understood a lot more. I've not yet done a project around that, but I think I need to revisit that experience.

How did you end up living in that monastery? Were you raised by your parents prior to then?

That was a very strenuous part of my childhood because my mom and dad separated at around that time, and there were several options—sending me off somewhere, a receiving home—but I thank God she chose that. I really do. It was another kind of discipline I was able to gravitate towards, and that discipline helped me, from an overall study perspective, to music. I'm glad she chose that path.

Was it an economic issue?

Being a single parent in the city was not easy. It's not easy right now with anybody. You had to either mature quicker or get lost and become a kind of statistic, and so I'm just glad it came out the other way, instead of the backward ways.

When you left the monastery, did you go back to live with your family?

Yeah, when I was twelve, I was able to go back and live with my mother. My mother was a musician as well. All I had was great music, from great jazz to great gospel.
Did she play an instrument?

She was a trumpet player.

Did you mother play professionally at all?

Back in those days, it was just gigging, jamming, people coming out to the club, having fun. It was a culture more so than business.

So how did you come to the harp?

At the age of fifteen, I had a dream about playing this instrument. Of course, I'd never seen a harp before in my life. I had this dream of playing this instrument, and by playing it, I was warding off a lot of imps that had surrounded me at that particular time. I was playing in the dream the exact same way I play now; I never look up, so I never know what's going on out there. As I was playing, I heard a voice—it was one of the imps—saying, "Oh, we got an angel in here. We're all possessed, so good for him." I started playing and the music notation turned into arrows, and the arrows started warding off the imps.

I shared this dream with a cabinetmaker who owned a little music novelty shop here in Washington, D.C.; I got to know him because I used to go into his novelty shop every day after school, and play on all his instruments. I shared with him the dream in detail, and that was the day when he put me out his door. "Don't come back until I call you", he said. Two months later, he called me back, and he said, "I want you to come down. There's something I want to show you." He said, "That dream you shared with me… I've always been aspiring to build an instrument, but I never knew exactly what I wanted to build, and that dream put me in a vision of wanting to build me a miniature harp." He did that. I still have that harp today. It was made out of guitar strings, guitar pegs, but the shape of the harp was very incredible, very novel. He presented me with the harp and said, "Whatever you wanna do with it, do with it what needs to be done and enjoy yourself."

Initially, when you told him about your dream, was he a little freaked out?

He had a very puzzled look on his face because I was giving him, blow by blow, the details of what happened in the dream. But it was like me telling him his favorite story in the whole wide world—he was glued.

At that time, I just thought he was pissed off at me for coming into the store every day and telling him about this dream I had. He was like, "This kid's gotta get on up outta here." But I didn't know how the universe sets things up for you, how something's already written out for you. I tell people today that I'm still living inside the dream.

Fast-forwarding—I was just coming out of high school and wanted to go to California. I wasn't trying to go to school out in L.A. or any of that stuff - those were the days when everyone was just packing up and going to California. California was the hip place to be. This was the mid-'70s.

I end up there and stayed with a bass player, and he was gigging all over the place, and going to rehearsals. One day he had to go to the rehearsal, and I wasn't invited to come, so he was gonna drop me off somewhere on his way there. He drove me up towards Berkeley and dropped me off at this woman's home. She was the only person he knew who played harp, so he dropped me off and said he'd be back in a couple of hours. He did this without me knowing this was the home of Alice Coltrane.

Wow. So this is in Oakland?

Yeah, in Oakland. I studied with her for three years, and she was a very tactful woman and a very refreshing woman in my life, spiritually, because she approached the instrument from a spiritual perspective, and that was very, very important for me because I had a very philosophical childhood. She impacted my life greatly, spiritually, and then moved on to the fundamentals of learning the instrument. Her first premise was learning the historical value, the metaphysical value of the whole evolution of how this instrument became what it is, and what it meant to so many different people around the world, in all its shapes, forms, and tonalities. And [she covered this] before we even got into the chromatic scale. None of the basic approaches of attacking the instrument were important until I understood, exactly, the purpose of this particular instrument.

Prior to meeting Alice, did you have any musical training before or after when that guy from the shop made you that first harp?

Zero.

You hadn't played any instruments regularly before then?

Nope. I mean, I messed around with my mother's trumpet, but nothing serious. That was all predestined.

So once you came out to California and Oakland, and you studied with Alice, that was your first training?

Yes.

Were you familiar with scales or anything like that beforehand?

Yeah, I mean, I knew the scales and the chromatics. Not all the scales, but—

Was that stuff you figured out on your own or did you have any classes?

No. No classes. I picked it up.

Those three years that you spent with Alice were a time of intense musical study for you, but this was also one of the most spiritually intense times for her as well, when she was receiving many visions and setting up her ashram.

She was very serious. I mean, for the first couple of months, I couldn't touch the instrument, and it was all

about the study of sound, the description of sound and where that sound took you. For a long time, it was just listening to what was going on around you—no radio, no television. None of that was important. What was important was what was going on, what was in your now. It was a very spiritual experience. She really did lay the groundwork for my work. As I kind of look back over my life, it's always been a destiny with me. Some great, great artists and people I've been surrounded with and learned from, or that were my mentors. But Alice - she gets first chair, and Dorothy Ashby - she gets the second chair.

I don't know if you're aware, but, earlier this year, a label called Luaka Bop reissued some of Alice's ashram music. She's kind of in the air again now, perhaps more so than in the past.

We're in a very high-spirited time right now. This music is calling its sons and daughters to be a part of this. This is what you're telling me. As we stand on the shoulders of great spiritual musicians, like Alice and some of the other great jazz musicians, in the time in which we're living… I just hear a new resurgence of a fresh sound that's coming through the students, and the students of the students.

Were you getting involved with any of her spiritual practices, like the chanting and any of that, or were you receiving that more through the music training?

No. I mean, I was very impressionable, so the meditation and the greetings… those things helped cultivate the spirit. Food. All of that made a very, very deep impression on what I do now, and where I'm evolving to.

Had she already established the ashram in Santa Monica at this point?

Where it is now [in Agoura Hills, California, in the Santa Monica Mountains near Los Angeles], no. It was just a small core group gathering at that time. I believe she was very responsible for the spiritual journey that John took with Love Supreme and Pharoah Sanders with "The Creator Has a Master Plan." She was such a quiet giant and a huge spirit, and a very, very kind spirit, and she could be very unassuming for those who might just look upon her exterior.

Can you tell me a little bit more about what she taught you about the spiritual aspect of the harp itself, and her conception of the harp? Its spiritual resonance and capacity, and how she articulated that?

There's a tonality of the entire instrument. It's based on the universal order, and we're all a part of this universal order, which we carry out in tonality, and every person upon the planet has their own tone. That's why each person has their own heart, and each person has their own beat. The evolution of the instrument is based upon very ancient African and Egyptian constructions, and… we can go Western biblically or Eastern biblically on each of the strings, with their own tonality, which denote a person, a family, a tribe, a nation. Basically, all of the strings are based on the modality of language, the modality of Western chromatic strings. Or tonality.

The European construction of a chromatic can be confining because that note only identifies as that note. If in Africa, the core is tuned to the language, the modality of a language, and not the modality of a chromatic scale, and that is the difference in how musicians were able to communicate through their instrument, and everyone knew exactly what the story was and what was being said. The modality of the instrument was talking in language and not in note. She would really uncover that for me and help me understand how, in a Western society, to be able to penetrate my music through a box and out into a circle.

What it seems Alice was breaking down and studying, and what she imparted to you - and also ran through her music and spiritual practice—was seeing the harp specifically as something that embodied that very general idea in a very specific way.

That is correct. It's the entire nervous system of not just man and woman's body, but of the entire universe.

The harp is unique among other instruments because it kind of transcends and bridges these Western, Eastern, African dualities we can come up with.

It does, but I also want to state that it is one of many instruments that expands and covers the universal order. There is no monopoly upon the universal order but the universal order. The drums have their autonomy, the woodwinds have their autonomy, the strings have their autonomy, and these all act as one. I am not a purist in that form of saying the harp is the all in all, but I do know that, from each octave, it covers very critical parts of the physical structure of the body, and that it can be a healing component.

Would you say that you were among her acolytes during that time you spent with her?

I was a young man—a child-man—and she allowed me to be that. I was sixteen, seventeen years old. She did allow for me to be a boy-man at the same time. It wasn't like the grandma days. It wasn't that kind of demand.

She gave you room to see what you gravitated towards, and what gravitated to you.

Yeah.

After those three years with Alice, you came back to D.C.?

Yep. Then came Brother Ah.

How did you first meet him?

That's a wonderful question, and the kind of question he can probably answer better than I can. I'm terrible with that stuff! Anniversary dates, birthdays. But when I first came back, I was playing around the city and hooked up with him.

Did you begin playing together almost immediately after meeting? Was there a strong musical connection?

As soon as we got together, we started working, and the group that he had assembled was a great group of spiritual individuals that were very harmoniously together. It was very, very community driven. Again, a very spiritually-connected kind of music that helped me understand the journey I just left with Alice.

And he had played with Sun Ra and the Arkestra?

Yeah, he did. He was an apostle of Sun Ra, who was a great influence upon Brother Ah and his musical psyche. Alice was a little bit more tangible, a little bit closer to the Earth than Sun Ra in her presentation of music, and then Dorothy Ashby was more tangible and closer to the Earth than Alice.

Did you ever feel a connection to Sun Ra's music and general outlook?

I thought the expressions of color and sounds was good, but Brother Ah brought that himself through his expression of instruments. It kind of all had its own spaces and different pieces of interjecting musically.

How much of an impact do you think playing in Brother Ah's group [Brother Ah And The Sounds Of Awareness] on the Key to Nowhere LP had on your own music?

I think it had a great deal of influence. I mean, I think it was the next stepping-stone of expression for me. What I'm doing now, hopefully, it won't take thirty years for someone to hear it.

Well, as you said, time is—

It does its own thing.

Did you play many live gigs with him and his group?

Oh, yeah. We played live more than we played in the studio. It was very popular and people wanted to hear it.

Do you recall roughly what time that was? Was that the late 70s or was it already the 80s by then?

That was into the '80s. And I think Key to Nowhere was '83?

So that's sort of like the culmination of your time with him?

Yeah. Then, my ears started changing, and I started hearing where I wanted to develop while keeping the instrument in the context of what I knew about it, but

also wanting it to be relative to the sounds of where we were in the '70s and '80s. Some use the word "commercial," but that's relative.

Of course. But you'd say your own ear was gravitating more towards what would be called popularly acceptable?

Yeah. Because I began to understand… how the harp was the mother of all stringed instruments, that she was able to do whatever her daughters were able to do. The guitar, the banjo, the sitar, the dulcimer, the bass. She can emulate all those other sounds. I wanted to explore that.

My first record with Glass Wing and after leaving Brother Ah's group was titled Change Has Come, which was a cassette. The true story behind that was that all I wanted to do was record some music, bring it home, play it in my home, and keep peace in my house. That's all I wanted to do; it wasn't about wanting to sell music and distribution—it wasn't about any of that. When I finished recording the project, Richie [Sales, of Glass Wing Studios & the eponymous private label which eventually released For Us All] walks in the door from the control booth, almost with the same face that the cabinetmaker had at the music store, and he said, "Wow." I said, "We finished?" He said, "Yeah, but wow! People wanna hear this." I said, "Right. Give me my tape, man. I gotta go home. Thank you." He said, "No, I'm serious! People would love to hear this!" I said, "Richard, the over-flattery or… I don't know what the deal is. I'll come back tomorrow and play some more music if you want, but give me my tape. I gotta go." He went in his pocket and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill, said, "I want you to know and never, ever forget that I was the first one to buy your music." That blew me away.

This cassette was never released or anything?

In no major capacity, I mean, aside from in the community. I think I maybe printed three hundred copies at that time.

And sold them to friends and acquaintances?

Right.

Do you still have that?

I don't know where it is.

I love the album in its entirety, but the first song, "Yasmeen," really blew me away when I initially heard it. I assume that's inspired, in some way, by [vocalist] Bheti Yasmeen?

Yes. She ended up being my first wife.

Oh, okay. That's a significant part of the story, I would say! You two were already together and married during the recording of the album?

Correct. Yasmeen was my wife at the time.

That song, musically, is really striking because it does sound very much of the time in terms of the synthesizer textures and that arpeggio in it, but, at the same time, there's a deepness to it and a spiritual feel, especially from your harp playing, and the overall atmosphere of it. Could you give me a sense of your feelings about that track?

A journey. It was a journey that I felt a lot of people would love to be on and want to experience, but that this world didn't offer. If they were able to come and take a ride on this, they could experience that world they truly wanted to be in. There was a beauty factor involved with this particular track, and I felt it had a real sensual, sexy kind of curve to it. It curved; it had hips, it had valleys, it had peaks—it had all those things.

And it does have, I think from that arpeggio especially, a kind of pulse, which I think kind of implies the journey you're talking about. This groove that you kind of ride through the track on. Do you recall the drum machine that was used on it? To me, it sounds like a LinnDrum.

I don't know. I can't even remember.

I just say a LinnDrum because I have one. They were one of the earliest commercially available drum machines from the 80s. They have a pretty distinctive kind of sound—there's maybe only one or two other drum machines from that time that have that kind of sound—and that, too, was one of the things that grabbed me. Immediately, I was like, Oh, I'm pretty sure I know what that is.

That's cool! I'm glad to know that. If I ever need to go back and recreate that, I know who to get the drum from!

Naser Abadey did the drum programming?

Naser Abadey actually played real drums. He was truly a live drummer. He was a little too pure [for electronic drums].

The LinnDrum is probably most famous for being the drum machine that Prince always used as well.

If anyone had that drum, it would've been in Richard's studio.

That's what I was thinking. At the time, they were really expensive; when they came out, I think they were around three grand or something like that. It was a little out of reach for the average musician.

The next track is "Chant," which kind of meshes together with "Yasmeen".

"Chant" was something that, again, was keeping a mantra of a prayer in mind. Between meditation and prayer. That was reflective of my tutelage and my schooling.

Was that influenced at all by your time with Alice?
Yeah. Everything's always been spiritually and socially connected.

I love the use of mbira on that tune. When did you first start playing mbira?

The mbira was actually before the harp. I was playing mbira in the very early 70s

Do you remember in what context? Was it something your mother had around?

No, a friend of mine had one just laying in the corner of the house, and I asked him about it. He said, "You can have that." I picked it up and just figured out the whole tuning perspective. The pentatonic scale came with it, and then I began to understand the history of it. I began to study it and its origin out of Zimbabwe. As you can see, all of my instruments called me, I didn't call them. I didn't wake up one day and say, "I want to play the harp," or, "I want to play the mbira."

Can you speak on the significance of the "Let It Be" cover?

I just loved that song. I loved the message that it gave, I loved the hope that it gave. I think that's a timeless song that will never, ever die. It was a favorite of mine, and I just wanted to do a favorite. Foluke [Bady-Simy] came along and just added a wonderful texture of purity to the song—it wasn't gritty. She brought a real beauty to that song, and that's what made it even more the better.

It was like a standard for you. That falls in line with one of the oldest traditions in jazz, of taking a standard and going off that.

Yeah. And doing your interpretation. Not changing it. You can't mess up classics.

How did you meet Foluke?

Foluke lives here in the community. I knew that she was an incredible vocalist and a beautiful woman, and I couldn't see how those two came together like that, but it worked. And she had a spirit to match; she wasn't hung up on her beauty or her vocals, and that was very humbling. I was blessed to be in her company.

And then "(If I Can) Help Somebody"?

That's a classic in the black church. "If I can help somebody, my living shall not be in vain." That's really a church standard.

When I first heard it, I heard a gospel aspect in it, and it sounded familiar to me. So it actually is an old gospel standard.

Yeah. And the message was something that was very, very connected with me.

Was that something you had grown up hearing? Do you remember the first time you heard it?

My first encounter with the tune was, through a church experience. And the message was just so very striking. It left an impression upon me. Hearing that through my journeys out of the monastery… that whole path… yeah, that was one of the songs that meant a lot to me because I truly believed that, if I was able to help somebody, my living wouldn't be in vain.

The next track is "Summertime," another standard. Was there any special connection to that?

It's just a great song, and I like great songs! I like to connect with great songs. Certain songs, you just leave them alone because you just can't touch them, but some songs let you take a stab at them. And, again, Foluke came along, with Yasmeen, and just made it sassy. A sweet sassy, though, and I felt the combination between the harp and the voice was just a very magical match.

Were you thinking at all about the Miles Davis version? Whenever I think of that tune, I think of his version from the Porgy and Bess album.

The thing that got me with Miles that stuck with me was his Cyndi Lauper track. That's the thing that hit me with Miles. His cover of "Time After Time." Great song. I incorporated that song into the performances—I was doing that along with the other stuff we were talking about.

How about "Nomad"? What are your recollections?

I had a part-time job—or a job for a part of a time—at this government agency, and… actually, I'm skipping around. That's "Room 400." "Nomad" and "Room 400" came almost around the same time—they were both written and birthed around the same time—but "Nomad" was a very personal experience with me, and how I saw people being challenged and taken advantage of, of not having no place to go. Stuck in a place that they couldn't move from. That's what "Nomad" was.

"Room 400" is connected to "Nomad" though because, again, I was working at this job, and the room number of the office was 400. It was crazy! It was an office full of women with a thousand personalities. The personalities in that room were just off the chain. You just didn't think people were born like that. I saw a woman having a stroke in this office. Saw how the personalities of this office were so powerful that it was like a powder keg every single day. Before anybody went into that room, it was a room of peace, but the moment that room filled up… it was crazy. Room 400 was a very interesting spiritual experience for me, to see people go through a lot of changes. But that they would create! We create our own actions. Peace was there, waiting to accept them, but that's not what they wanted to bring in the door. I actually got a couple of the women that worked in the office to do that vocal part up in the intro. "I want to put y'all on mic and I want you to say this." They said, "Well, what's this all about?" I said, "I just wrote a song about the office." They tripped out on that one!



And then "Baby Daughter"?

"Baby Daughter" is a song that… you know, I love children and the innocence of children. How there's no prejudice in children, how they see nothing but what they feel. At that particular time, I was really engulfed in seeing little girls, and seeing them in action with little boys at the park. Things like that. It was the innocence. That's a song that's just total innocence. I felt we all inhibit that innocence if we allow it to play through all the different molds of the classes of rubber that wrap us up.

Adulthood, basically.

Right. Adulthood. Sometimes, I wonder about that word. It's overrated!

The closing track—the title track—is very musically distinct from the rest of the album. It makes sense, but I think it stands apart stylistically.

That was a song that I wrote while visiting Gambia. There's a tribe called the Wolof tribe that spoke a language of the same name. I kept hearing them saying this phrase, "yoka boka." I asked someone, "What does this mean?" He said, "In your country, when somebody does something for you, you say, 'thank you.' But that is very selfish." So I asked, "What do you mean, it's selfish?" He said, "Because here, when someone does something for one, he does it for the whole village." Everything is very holistic. If someone gives a fish to a man, a family is fed, and then a family is strengthened to go help someone else in the circle. It's "we give thanks" instead of "thank you," and "you're welcome" is "yoka boka," which means "for us all." Instead of saying "you're welcome," it's "for us all." As I understood what they were telling me, that helped develop the writing of the lyrics. And then, of course, Foluke came along and brought that authenticity of pureness and innocence in her voice to the song.

So how did you end up getting to know Dorothy Ashby, who you mentioned earlier as one of your teachers alongside Alice?

My introduction to Dorothy Ashby was made when she came to Washington, D.C., and this brother who had a radio show on WPFW—his name was Harvest Williams on WPFW—was telling me about Dorothy Ashby and how she was coming to town, and how he would love to introduce me to her. She fascinated me. Like, Wow—

she's doing all that with a harp? I was really amazed.

So Harvest arranged a meeting in downtown Washington, where I was able to let her hear what I was doing with the music and the instrument.

Was this before Yoka Boka?

This was after because I remember being able to share "Yasmeen" with her and some other stuff that I was doing. Actually, the very next day, I was doing a performance somewhere, and she said she was going to stay over to check out the performance. I was like a kid, a deer in headlights. She came to the performance—it was at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine up in New York.

Do you remember this group, M'Boom? Max Roach had all these great percussionists—it was a group of all these great percussions that Max Roach had put together. After the show was over, I ran up to Dorothy, like, "What do you think? What do I have to do?" Had my notebook out—I was ready to write stuff down. She was like, "I don't have anything to tell you outside of keep doing what you're doing. You're gonna be something really special, and you're gonna do some things that I've never done with the instrument." My jaw dropped to the ground. I was crushed! I was hurt. That's not what I wanted to hear! I was like, I don't wanna hear that! I'm a kid! How do you do what you do? One thing that she did tell me was to keep making records, to never stop making records. She left that impression on me, and to this day, I still keep making records.

Prior to meeting her, you must've been familiar with her music.

Yeah! Harvest Williams introduced me to her music well before I actually met her - we're talking 1980s.

So you'd already been playing for a pretty significant amount of time before you met her.

That's correct. I was able to record with Glass Wing and do stuff with Brother Ah already. I was playing around for a little while.

So, once you met her, she was an inspiration, but she wasn't an influence on your earlier stuff.

Not my earlier stuff. My stuff after that. I studied her, and the few times I was able to meet up with her… just being in somebody's company can leave an impression on you in terms of how you interact with your instrument.

After For Us All, what's your journey been like?

After For Us All, I spent some time in Trinidad. I wanted to marry the steel pans and the harp—I wanted to bring the harp and the pans together. I spent time with three of the most incredible panners in the world. The pan was one of my first ventures outside of For Us All. Then, my next project was New Age Soul, and New Age Soul was a project I did with Dick Gregory. Me and Dick Gregory did the track together. It was called "Jupiter Walk." After New Age Soul, I started on a series called the Sacred series, and the Sacred series was original hymns and instrumentals of some of the great songs from the whole spiritual church circuit. In that series, I was really blessed to work with some incredible, incredible artists. Ali-Ollie Woodson from the Temptations, Chuck Brown, Shirley Murdock, Bettye LaVette, Kelly Price, Jean Carn. I worked with Dexter Wansel—he was my strings arranger for six of the Sacred CDs. He's an incredible, incredible strings arranger. Also within the Sacred series, I recorded with Maya Angelou before she passed. We wrote a song together.

After the Sacred series, there was The Evolution of Jeff Majors, which takes me back to my jazz roots a little bit.

And the Sacred series was a series of albums?

A series of CDs and DVDs. In between that whole Sacred series, I started doing television for TV One, a Comcast family member. I did that for six seasons, for six years. This was, I would say, 2001 to 2008. I did radio. All of this was spiritually-driven or gospel-based—I never got out of my element.

And you mentioned music therapy?

All my travels with Alice, that whole spiritual path, and studying… it helped me understand the power of music, and the science of it as well. Currently—today—I use a form of music therapy for rehabilitation of men and women at correctional institutions.

Is this with people who are currently incarcerated, or is it for people who are transitioning out?

Oh, no, they're incarcerated. I'm on the front line—I go right to them. But these are people who are on the very tail end… it's almost like an assessment process of their incarceration they receive before they're released.

Into a halfway house or something of that nature.

Yeah. It's been very rewarding. I wish there was more follow-up components like this in the other areas because then we'll be able to reissue some good people back into the world.

Are you part of a larger program or is this something you instigated on your own?

This is a real interesting story. This guy, who is a director at one of the federal agencies, came to one of my performances, and he waited till the very end to walk up to me. He asked me, "Can you explain what just happened in here?" I said, "Yeah, why?" "I want to take you some place." Set up an appointment and… he took me down to Lorton, Virginia. There was a correctional institution at that time called Lorton Reformatory. Now, the history of Lorton is that it was a facility where runaway slaves were captured and kept. Right there. Then, it evolved into being one of the largest correctional institutions for the District of Columbia's quote-unquote criminals. He took me down there, and he said, "I am developing some expressive therapy courses and classes for these men and women, and I would love for you to be a part of them. The authenticity you bring to the table… I know this will work." It has been some very, very rewarding few years of me doing this with them and for them. It's good, it's good. Between producing, writing new music, performing, the music therapy classes, and taking care of my ninety-seven-year-old mama, I feel blessed.

In these classes, are you playing for them or are you teaching them hands-on techniques with the instrument?

Interestingly enough, there are no instruments involved. They're not at that point in their life to be able to gravitate to that. The beginning of my chapter is meeting them where they're at. If there's a group of men that's hip-hop babies, I'll take their hip-hop origins and go backward, and when I go backward, then I bring them forward again, and I bring them to where they need to be at the next threshold of this whole new sound. This is a tool that they don't have to pay anything for, and that they can use to correct their spirit. I'm hoping to be able to really expand what I'm doing so that, hopefully, I'll be able to teach other clinicians how to do this. If we don't do it, the government's definitely not going to, especially now.

Hip-hop, for me, was how I learned so much about other music. Like, the way I know about Dorothy Ashby is because she was sampled by Pete Rock. It's a really wonderful lens. Hip-hop makes you hear music in a different way and it can be an amazing tool.

Powerful. Very powerful. And it's all one circle. One huge circle. Hip-hop is a continuation and evolution of our creation. It continues. It's been, again, very rewarding, and it's my prayer that I'm able to share this with other music clinicians. You have to really be in one of my sessions because… when people take music therapy, you're not quite sure what they're thinking. They're thinking in a box more than a circle.

They had no clue about when Louis Armstrong picked up that trumpet and put it to his lips. At that point in time, they had no clue. No clue about when John Coltrane picked up that saxophone. Didn't have a clue. But they became, they pulled that thing up out of them, they pulled that creative genius up out of them. I use that in parallel when I touch bases with these men and women. You've got to meet them where they're at to pull them out of that. It's spiritual, it's psychic, and it's musical. We use music and we use videos, but not one instrument. That's what I've been doing.

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