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I dedicate this book to vocalist Ingrid Sertso, my life's companion.
She guided me, simply by the way she works with her music,
to go beyond all theories and to let myself be spontaneously
directed by the pure intuition that comes directly from the heart.

Preface

“Any person in today’s music scene knows that rock, classical, folk and jazz are yesterday’s titles. I feel that the music world is getting closer to being a singular expression, one with endless musical stories of mankind.”

Ornette Coleman

In the late 60 my life’s partner, the vocalist Ingrid Sertso, and I had extended conversations with composer/saxophonist Ornette Coleman about the common elements of all the music in the world, in relation to the most personal musical feelings we are all born with.

We decided to start the Creative Music Foundation, a non-profit organization in support of the spirit of music as our most personal expression and as our common universal language. The now legendary Creative Music Studio became the major program of the CM Foundation (www.creativemusic.org).

Ingrid and I had been working with Don Cherry, Ornette’s longstanding trumpet player. We met Don in Paris in 1965. He brought us to New York in 1966 and introduced us to Ornette. It was, of course, the extensive playing experiences with Don that accelerated our journey of broadening and deepening our understanding and feeling of the elements of music. It is a journey that never ends. Before all that I was studying classical piano, composition, musicology and philosophy. But I also had a chance to play jazz: my hometown had a student club, the Cave 54, where every night musicians from five orchestras of US Army and Airforce bases met regularly to jam, including now legendary players like Lex Humphries, Cedar Walton, Don Ellis, and Carlos Ward, who we worked with later for many years. I was the house pianist. It was like jamming in New York, just amazing.

This is also where I met Ingrid, who was working as a vocalist with jazz groups in Germany and France. After we both started working with one of the leading European jazz groups that played festivals opening for Miles Davis, Charlie Mingus, Eric Dolphy and others, I finished my PhD and took a part-time job at a Heidelberg University Institute in my hometown Heidelberg, Germany. I also started a research project under the auspices of Theodor Adorno. But every time I was going to the institute Ingrid asked me, “Where are you going”. I would say, “To work”, and she would reply, “That’s not your work”. I was undecided but she just knew. When we moved to Paris and started working with Don Cherry, it became clear this was more than a full-time job: playing four to five hours pretty much every night, afternoon rehearsals and practicing my instruments did not leave any time for anything else. Music became a full-time journey. Still, in the back of my mind I always felt the desire to express in words what actually cannot be fully expressed that way. We can only point to the unique experiences of our universal connectedness and deepest sense of who we are that only music can give us.

Foreword

For the past few years, I have had the pleasure of working alongside Karl Berger at Creative Music Studio, founded with Ingrid Sertso and Ornette Coleman in 1971. CMS conducts music workshops and performances to inspire music lovers from all backgrounds, their slogan being “Music Without Borders.” This chapter of my life—which has been more focused on helping others discover their own personal music—has profoundly shaped my evolution as an educator, composer, performer and most importantly, as a human being.

I conducted my very first CMS workshop back in October of 2015. I presented Stridulations for the Good Luck Feast, a rhythmic game piece I had developed to help musicians reach a deeper understanding of pulse, phrasing and counterpoint, and which also encourages active listening and collective improvisation. Afterwards, Karl came up to me and told me I was perfect for CMS because of my fundamental approach. He meant my approach to teaching was universal. I couldn’t have asked for a better compliment. Following my portion of the class Karl began his ‘basic practice’ sessions that included his own method of rhythmic training (GaMaLa TaKi), vocal tuning with Ingrid Sertso, and ‘listening to sound disappear,’ a meditative listening practice. He ended the afternoon by conducting the improvisers workshop orchestra, where, in the absence of a written composition, musicians work together and listen to one another to form a cohesive sound.

Watching Karl work with musicians in this way has been a crucial part of my development as an artist and educator. My personal experience working as a drummer with Karl has reinforced my will to express music in-the-moment without getting in the way of others. One particular term he uses that I love is ‘beat-for-beat attention’. This is an ideal way of finding one’s rhythmic path in any situation. For example, when we hear someone playing, not being able to locate the ‘one’ can be frustrating. But if you hear the shape of their phrase, and you can relate to

it, there is no reason why you can't groove along and weave your way through in any time frame. This is part of what I call a musical conversation.

We are rarely taught in music school to pay attention to the conversation. Many students get stuck on where the 'one' is, or what time signature, key or style they should be using. With the Music Mind way, we release our attachment to these concepts in favor of tapping into our more intuitive sensibilities. Once we drop these stylistic ideas, a real human heart emerges to contribute to a much deeper result. Karl is reawakening the communication tools we are actually born with.

Under Karl's direction, the ensemble, no matter how small or large, works collectively as 'one mind'. This is something Medeski Martin & Wood have also been working on since our inception in 1991. We listen ... and we work on creating a collective sound. Ultimately, there really is no leader. This can only be accomplished by empathetic persons, each offering their individual voice with the intention of sounding together as one. We sometimes tap into this collective consciousness in life, whether it be inspired by a crisis, workplace, team sports—anything that sparks our will to create something larger than ourselves. This potential is greater when people are brought together through the celebration of a shared medium, such as sound, that forces us to drop preconceived notions of culture, style or class. The strategies that Karl has set forth with CMS are some of the greatest examples I've come across of guiding individuals to collectively work as one. Is this not what we need in these times of polarization and tribalism?

I hope you enjoy your journey into Karl Berger's Music Mind Experience as much as I have. Onward and upward!

Billy Martin a.k.a. illy B, 2020