

# "Notes Turn Into Angel Wings and Fly Upward"

## A Small Journal Kept During the COVID-19 Crisis, Phase One

William Parker

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Article abstract

William Parker is a bassist, improviser, composer, writer, and educator from New York City. In this journal, he reflects on the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## "Notes Turn into Angel Wings and Fly Upward": A Small Journal Kept During the COVID-19 Crisis, Phase One

**William Parker**

Since 1945, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie,  
and in 1959 Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry, Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor  
beauty was freedom  
and art was supposed to teach us how to live.  
They were supposed to be civilized because they called us savages  
yet  
WWI 40 million died  
WWII 75 million died

All I want to do is  
commune with birds  
the yearning for peace dances in the heart  
and the voices of the trees whisper the words freedom  
for all  
they hum spirituals and give speeches  
such a beautiful face covered by a mask  
because no one wants to get sick  
but alas I see the eyes that measure the universe  
they are violet, green and brown  
behind the curtain is a story  
that unfolds and rushes like a waterfall  
poignantly changing into a sound  
go to the mountain and you will see it is really just made of light

the same as air  
needs itself to breathe again  
up the road  
wood flutes hang from tree branches like leaves  
reaching out to everyone  
I know, you know, they know  
But are you ok? Did you take the test?  
My upstairs neighbor got it, the virus that is  
he goes underground for 14 days  
He is clear. No more virus  
his wife tested negative  
a saxophone maker friend of mine went out of town  
and started eating nine meals a day  
plus cupcakes and beer at each meal  
he was depressed  
he gained 20 pounds  
I know I am depressed  
Are you depressed?  
Everyone is saying be safe  
Be safe while at the same time  
knowing there is no safety from yourself

What is this thing called life?

Coming to the conclusion that there has always been a crisis since the beginning  
it has been mostly overlooked  
they wait until the water is over the heads to announce that there is a flood  
emergency since 70 BC  
make things right  
can we erase both wrongs?  
too many wrongs to count  
never wavering from the opinion  
true love will clean up the mess  
that's why Eric Dolphy played the way he played  
also Jimmy Lyons and Albert Ayler played their way  
played because they knew things had to be forged  
improvisation is the ambassador of the new truth  
the same truth in a new bottle  
Paul Haines the poet says "only the survivors are dead"  
Now my only goal was to play one sound  
A vibration that would make everything right.  
that's the only reason I started playing music in the first place

In February 2020, I was in Paris at Charles de Gaulle airport  
many people were wearing masks but no more than usual.  
When I was in China in 2018, they said the air is not bad, the masks were a fashion statement.  
I am thinking I'm 68 years old and I realize I don't know anything.  
My entire life has been built around feeling and reacting to Evil  
And believing that the science of the unknown was stronger than anything else.  
The unfound answer was stronger than the answer.  
We knew how to make bombs,  
But we didn't know enough not to drop them.  
What I don't understand is  
Why did we make them?  
Never realizing the real power was to never make a bomb at all.

March 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup>, I am in Toronto at a great festival called "Women From Space Festival" organized and run the saxophone player Kayla Milmine and another saxophone player Bea Labikova. The music and feeling was superb. March 9<sup>th</sup>, I begin a short tour with the trombonist Steve Swell, Rob Brown, alto sax, and Michael T.A. Thompson, drums. Baltimore, Maryland on the 10<sup>th</sup>. Rochester, New York on the 12<sup>th</sup>. Northampton, Massachusetts on the 13<sup>th</sup>.

On March 22<sup>nd</sup> New York is shut down. April is a blur. I am studying the Jewish Holocaust and writing music all day. The city is quiet and beautiful like the aftermath of a revolution of flowers. Time is simultaneously moving and suspended in the same moment.

It is May 31<sup>st</sup>. Things have been shut down for 70 days. No live music, no gatherings, all the concerts in Europe cancelled. Depression and physical illness off and on.  
What is it, this virus? Is it the earth giving us a wake-up call?  
Do I have it? Will I get it?

My cousin in the Bronx contracts the virus. He gets all the symptoms: headache, fever, loss of taste. It takes him 10 days to get his test results which come up positive. By then he is feeling

better. He goes into quarantine for 2 weeks. His wife never gets it.

I injure my back carrying heavy groceries. For 14 days I am in pain. Heat. . . Ice. . . Heat. . . Ice. . . Heat. . . Ice. Exercises. Better now. Constant fatigue was circling the sky. So I did something I never do: I slept and put all work on the shelf. Rest, watch movies, chill. Music was banging on my door. I ignored it for the first time in my life. Then something happened: my friend Music totally understood my predicament, reminding me that sleep was also music. Embrace this blessing.

## **June 2020**

I had a dream last night. I was talking to the bassist Richard Davis. We were at Bill Lee's house in Brooklyn. We were just hanging out, then we played and discussed this song "Dear Old Stockholm." Sentimentality and memories hovering all over the place.

We lose Henry Grimes, Giuseppe Logan, Lee Konitz, Wallace Roney, to the virus. Question: did music save them? Answer: yes, they were saved every time they played. Were they playing improvisational music? Did the specter of death care? I won't try to answer that question. At least once a week I keep thinking this is the last go round, that we have exhausted life. Then the sun rises again and again. If things stopped today, we would have to go with it. Albert Ayler had a song called "Again Comes the Rising of the Sun." Tears for all the beautiful moments that surrounded our lives—the music, the gigs, the set up, the talk, and the laughs. The majesty and joy of great Music. The smiles and giggles of the children, everything. Accompanied by the sky—even when you are inside you know it's outside. You feel it in some way. Maybe the sky is improvisation and the COVID-19 virus is a mosquito. July is coming just around the corner. July will wash all these June thoughts away. Trying to keep going on the positive tip as they say.

## **July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

### ***Fourth of a Lie***

I was just sent a link to an article by George E. Lewis about Black composers. Very compelling and informative.

When it comes down to it, I have to go with free improvisation—playing without thinking but not thoughtless. Only feeling and directed towards the spontaneous. Hear a sound, respond. React fast against the slow unpredictability of a waterphone or iron bell. Who knows? This is the excitement for me. Everybody should do what they find exciting and thrilling. Silence and sound erase the thought of virus.

I don't want to think about the virus. I want get into a flow of things—the music and the groove of a beautiful sound. Through all of this, it is hard for me to shake this daily fatigue. The one thing we have that is consistent is music and that is hard to do right now. What is the thing that makes music work and is around despite the coronavirus? It is love, the ultimate improvisation.