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Hearing is the Deepest Contact: Psychedelic Stax's Divine Blue Light

Mike Sonksen · Monday, March 27th, 2023

“Hearing is the last energy to go before the body disappears,” declares surrealist poet [Will Alexander](#) while in conversation with MC Hymnal on the January 20, 2023 Psychedelic Stax episode. “Hearing is the deepest contact point of the 5 senses,” Alexander avers. [Alexander heralds music as medicine](#) as conveyance as a healing force. This motif is a central theme in Alexander’s now book *Divine Blue Light (For John Coltrane)* and for the [Psychedelic Stax](#) radio show, now in its 9th year.

Psychedelic Stax is the dublab radio show hosted by Terry Robinson aka Hymnal and Mixmaster Wolf on the third Friday of every month. Initially launched in 2014, these two have been close friends since they met in 1990. This essay celebrates Psychedelic Stax, Will Alexander and the medicine of music.



MC Hymnal and Mixmaster Wolf of Psychedelic Stax

Alexander told me via email a few days before he recorded the dublab interview that: “Listening to Trane gave me an instantaneous connection with realms that were unknown to me within the borders of the conscious mind,” Alexander says. “I was being spontaneously educated via realms which proved to be poetic praxis.” The educational and empowering qualities of Coltrane and other like minded musicians like Eric Dolphy are what Alexander calls “renewable resources.” In other words the transformative and transcendent power of sound. Alexander’s celebration of Coltrane honors the infinite inspiration he received from the great saxophonist.

Born in Los Angeles in 1948, Will Alexander has authored over 30 books for various independent presses like City Lights and New Directions. Considered one of the premier surrealist poets alive, his last book *Refractive Africa* was shortlisted for the Pulitzer and won the California Book Award in Poetry in 2022.

The January 20th episode of Psychedelic Stax spotlights Alexander with him reading an excerpt of his Coltrane poem along with broadcasting three of his favorite Coltrane songs and a set of nearly 90 minutes of spiritual jazz curated by Hymnal before the interview and Alexander's poem recitation. To have Alexander on Psychedelic Stax is apropos because MC Hymnal aka Terry Robinson is a surrealist poet himself and along with his co-host Mixmaster Wolf, he is an astute musicologist.

Sonic Notation

"I read your work like I listen to music," declared Kamau Daaood to Will Alexander at Beyond Baroque in Venice on January 21st. The day after Alexander was on Psychedelic Stax, he was in conversation with the great Leimert Park poet Kamau Daaood in Venice. Besides being an award-winning poet, Daaood is a famed record collector who owned his own record store for many years in Leimert. Alexander and Daaood reminisced about their long poetic careers, their deep friendship and their mutual love of music. They've been friends for 60 years since meeting at Horace Mann Middle School in South Los Angeles in the early 1960s.

Their conversation is instructional here because their relationship is kindred to the connection that Hymnal and Mixmaster Wolf share. The Alexander-Daaood event culminated with the two great poets reading their respective Coltrane poems in a braided method trading lines. It was a spontaneous poetic jam session that may never happen again. Hearing Alexander and Daaood together on stage made me think about the 30 plus years of friendship between Hymnal and Mixmaster Wolf. Besides all four of them being born in Los Angeles, Hymnal and Wolf also met as teenagers and like Alexander and Daaood, they were in the music scene together from jump street.

The hosts have not only been friends for 33 years, they collaborated in a hip hop crew, Darkleaf that jammed in 1990s spaces like the Good Life Cafe, Afterlife and Project Blowed. "These psychedelic swirling dervishes were punk shock and rhyming alchemy," declares artist Mear One that "came with the most bizarre entertaining experience. Lyrics that just slapped you upside the head, pushing your ability to keep up while bringing you back to earth for a quick check up before launching into a new dimension."

Darkleaf came up at the same time as groups like Pharcyde, Jurassic 5 and Freestyle Fellowship, but they were the most eclectic and avant-garde of the bunch. Mear One remembers seeing them perform in 1992 at King King in Hollywood when the whole group got into a fist swinging brawl yet somehow managed to finish the show screaming obscenities.

"They dropped truth bombs while exploring the psyche unafraid of its outcome," Mear recalls. "Bravery beyond limits in a lyrical sense. What made these artists different wasn't how f'ed up they could get, but they had critical minds with something to say. They were some smart dudes who rejected the brand vibe and instead told it as it was. Real art doesn't expect a paycheck, it offers a middle finger. In the spirit of H.R. of Bad Brains meets Frank Zappa in a rap battle, Darkleaf had to come into existence when they did. They went deep inside to confront what others

feared. Real Art.”

The spirit of Darkleaf can be heard in both Psychedelic Stax and every Saturday night at Funky Sole at El Cid on Sunset Boulevard in Silverlake where Wolf and Hymnal mix records on the patio. They have spent hundreds of hours together on stage, shopping for rare records and on cross country road trips to music festivals.

Beyond his three decades of DJing and producing music, Mixmaster Wolf has been the lead vocalist of the funk band, [Breakestra](#) for 25 years. One of my favorite songs about Los Angeles ever is the Breakestra cut, ‘[Hit the Floor](#),’ in which Wolf runs down California freeways and boulevards in his charismatic sing-rap register. The founder of Breakestra, multi-instrumentalist, DJ and producer Miles Tackett exclaims, “Mixmaster Wolf has been a great friend, DJ inspiration, and collaborator for a good part of my musical life. The pied piper of the lowdown stank with a heart of gold.”

Hymnal is a founding member of Darkleaf and has also recorded and toured with Cut Chemist since the mid 90s. Cut Chemist and Hymnal’s 2006 collaborative song, “What’s the Altitude,” has over 111 million views on YouTube. Hymnal has inspired a whole generation of MCs like Open Mike Eagle and Rhys Langston. “For me,” Langston states, “Terry Robinson aka Hymnal vibrantly represents the many intersections of the LA underground: of psychedelic lyricism amid ‘the cool’ in swinging rhythms; of fringe literature within and without experimental hip hop; in his own aloof frequency and as an unseen cog in the West Coast scene that birthed the many styles of today.”

This is the deep experience Hymnal and Wolf bring. Every episode is engineered with hand-picked musical selections. “Wolf and Terry and their show Psychedelic Stax is so good,” composer, producer, DJ and multi-instrumentalist Dan Ubick states, “because you can hear the love and excitement they have for the music they play on every episode. Those two have known each other for so long too so you get humor and brotherly love as well.”

I Got a Thing, You Got a Thing, Everybody Got a Thing

Rooted in the history of sample culture, Hymnal and Wolf have a long list of influences from DeLaSoul, Eddie Hazel, Redd Foxx, Flip Wilson, Richard Pryor, George Clinton, Isaac Hayes, Casey Kasem, Don Cornelius, Wolfman Jack, Sly Stone, Pink Floyd, Curtis Mayfield and Creedence Clearwater Revival. Above all the show is about choice music cuts, but there is also a witty repartee that shows their camaraderie and knowledge. “Let’s fly the mothership,” Wolf states. Mixmaster Wolf is a funk expert and his favorite Funkadelic song is “I Got a Thing, You Got a Thing, Everybody Got a Thing” from 1970.

Though these two are well schooled in musical history, they do not cater to the elite. “We try to express our lives in the moment,” Hymnal states, “with an ear to the novice.” Joy and the therapeutic power of music is the focus. Each show has a specific theme reflecting what’s happening that month. The Will Alexander episode was called “Soul Trane,” October’s show was “Funktober,” and their last two Valentine’s Day editions were dubbed, “It’s a Love Thing,” named after the iconic Whispers song.

Hymnal calls Wolf “an improvisational genius.” Wolf interned at KDAY 1580 AM under the legendary Russ Parr in the 1980s while he was in high school, so Wolf’s charisma directly descends from a lineage of local radio royalty. There’s a joyful banter between Wolf and Hymnal as they interact with the funk, soul and psychedelic rock they grew up with. They are excavating

their own past while reconnecting with their roots of growing up in 1980s Los Angeles and the days when they both made mixtapes featuring Al B. Sure for their high school girlfriends.

Hymnal is both co-host and sound engineer. He uses recording software to splice it all together with meticulous precision. They balance each other out and each two hour show is a sophisticated musical segment that could even be its own standalone concept album. Hymnal calls their chemistry “a feeling beyond language in a space outside of time.” They mash up musical genres and most of what they play is pre 1985. Similar to Sly Stone, they combine rock, funk, hip hop and soul to break down barriers and bring people together.

Music runs deep in both Wolf and Hymnal’s families. Wolf is the son of Daryl Munyungo Jackson, a percussionist that has played with Miles Davis, Stevie Wonder, Sting, Herbie Hancock, Kenny Loggins, Four Tops, the Supremes and the Temptations among many others and Wolf’s grandfather was also a DJ. Hymnal’s father was known as DJ Robin Red Vest in Independence, Missouri where he played music in speakeasies in the early 1960s before he made his way to California. Both Wolf and Hymnal inherited records from their fathers and some of the vinyl they play dates back to their dad’s collections.



MC Hymnal and Mixmaster Wolf of Psychedelic Stax

Some months Hymnal and Wolf are joined by DJs like Octavio Camacho and Adam Hayden. “Spontaneous and electric musical magic mingled with soulful vibes and ineffable love,” is how Hayden characterizes each session. To bring it back to Will Alexander, the poet told Hymnal on the “Soul Trane” episode that his process is “an ongoing repartee with the cosmos.” Wolf and Hymnal share Alexander’s enthusiasm for this timeless cosmic conversation, the three of them know that hearing is the deepest contact point of the five senses. Listen in for a ride on the mothership.

The playlist for the January 2023 show is below.

Psychedelic Stax Playlist

January 20, 2023

Bobbye Hall “Ovinu Malkaynu”
 Davey Graham “The Fakir”
 Alice Coltrane “Paramahansa Lake”
 Gabor Szabo “Ravi”
 Paul Horn “Tabla Solo in Teental”
 Alan Lorber Orchestra “Djellaba”
 Joe Harriott/John Mayer Double Quintet “Multani”
 Alla Rakha & Buddy Rich “Khanda Kafi”
 John McLaughlin “Peace One”
 Ford Lile “Track of the Scarab”

John Coltrane “My Favorite Things”
 John Coltrane “India”
 John Coltrane “Ole”

Will Alexander reading an excerpt of his poem “Divine Blue Light”

Interview with Hymnal and Will Alexander

Will Alexander’s Five Favorite John Coltrane selections

1. *My Favorite Things* (different versions across his oeuvre starting from the Atlantic recording, to his late Impulse recording Live In Seattle)
2. *A Love Supreme*
3. *India* on Impulse Records
4. *Ole*
5. *The Father, Son/Holy Ghost*

Original poem by Mike Sonksen based on Psychedelic Stax

The Right Song on the Right Night

Broadcasting from the Funky Sole patio
 Terry Hymnal & Mixmaster Wolf mix
 vinyl records under a warm June moon
 You better shake that thing turn it loose

Soul unlimited it must be witchcraft
some still have their masks on
but the gloves are off follow instructions
the clean up woman is hip to the trip
the wrong place at the right time
the right song on the right night
Wolf got a bag of 45s that'll save
your life I can never get enough
Psychedelic Stax is the recipe
I learned my lesson last night

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