

Chris Stroffolino: From *Still Life With Piano Van*

CHAPTER ONE:

POETICS OF FUNK TRUMPET (AND LEONARD COHEN)

Paragraph 01 follows:

SUMMER 2012: I turn on the radio and KPOO is playing *Say It Live And Loud*, a live recording of a James Brown show in Dallas, TX on August 26, 1968. I pick up the trumpet and start blowing. You could call it my own private trumpet karaoke, but it's also practice, and getting my chops up.

02:

The lip is a muscle that atrophies if you don't get into a habit of practicing daily, and I'm trying to get back in that habit because there's a couple gigs coming up, and I'm finally feeling up to it for the first time since the concussion, and minor stroke, I suffered at the beginning of the year.

03:

The propulsive groove keeps me company. I've never tried to play along with 'Cold Sweat' or 'Licking Stick' before, and need to hear them more to get the exact horn lines the band is playing. But, for my purposes now, it doesn't matter; what matters is locking into the pocket, the magical pocket that is established by this rhythm section, and improvising my own lines that fit the groove.

04:

Whether the bassist is Bernard Odum, Fred Thomas, Tim Drummond, Bootsy Collins or the others, this is the kind of music I most aspire to, the kind of music that makes me perspire and is most inspiring. I do not use the word 'inspire'

accidentally; the root of that word is spirit, which one breathes in and out. And trumpet is a breath instrument (wind and brass); a metal extension of the hand held tight against the lips to amplify a buzzing sound. The music unlocks the spirit and lets it flow, even if I was feeling tired and weak just a minute ago.

05:

My instrument is rusty, but if the breath I blow through it is strong, it can house the spirit roused by the music, it can free the ass so the mind may follow, and rescue me from Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk's prison<sup>1</sup> that has made me lose my grounding, my center. I can't do it alone; I need a bassist and/or a drummer at the very least, but for now I do not feel alone because the radio is playing this music; I'm part of it and it's part of me, blowing, breathing.

06:

I had been lying down, but now I'm sitting. The music sweeps me off my feet, but actually onto my feet. I slowly try out standing. I need to stand more and not worry about falling again. I've fallen too many times since the accident, and it's made me afraid of standing and walking on solid ground (to say nothing of dancing). Yet, I can do this, even if I need to lean against a wall or a four-foot-tall bass amplifier.

07:

---

1. 'Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk' is a fictional character created by Parliament / Funkadelic (George Clinton et alia) who 'attempts to end the Funk because he is too cool to dance,' according to the dialogue of many of these musical acts' albums and live shows during the late 1970s and early 80s. Wikipedia provides a good introduction and summary: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P-Funk\\_mythology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P-Funk_mythology).

Yes, I need to stand! I need to take Sly Stone's words to heart: 'Stand! You've been sitting far too long/ there's a permanent crease in your right and wrong!' Yes, I've been sitting far too long; it's been years. Homo Erectus has turned into Homo Sit-At-A-Computerus, or sit-at-a-piano (it's also often better to stand while playing the keyboards). I know that standing, taking a stand, can heal...

08:

I need to be vertical, to stretch my legs, my limbs, to unknot my abdomen muscles, what physical therapists and yoga trainers call one's 'Core.' The health benefits far surpass any prescribed medication, especially for a disabled person. At the very least, it can help me quit smoking. Yet, it's not just therapy. I (re) discover that this is the best way I can contribute to a collective musical experience.

09:

I know my trumpet (a cornet, actually) is adding to the groove, because a housemate has just knocked on my door and wants to listen. Ah, if only she played bass. But she's dancing and clapping and her spirit is being exhaled in the form of phonemes – tentative little shouts but yet adding to the beat. I need to find a way to honor this gift, to translate it into sharing creation with others.

10:

It's impossible to put into words unless you view the words as directions that are supposed to help you figure out how to work an iPhone, for instance, but don't make sense until you figure out how to make it work on your own (or with someone else's help). Then, and only then, can you look at the directions, and they make sense.

11:

Describing it doesn't help in part because as I write this I have to assume the posture of sitting to do so. Writing about dancing is like sitting about standing: an alienated activity. Yet, I write to advertise the gift, to sell this activity (which is more important than selling 'myself' or 'mice elf'), selling it, at the very least to myself, giving myself permission to remember this is the closest to God I've become, good god!

12:

James Brown convinced his parole officer that he was going to sing for the lord when released — and despite the fact that people often refer to him as a 'secular' musician, that's exactly what he did. He worked for the people. There's a reason it's called soul music, but it's also called rhythm and blues, or funk — or even, through sampling, hip hop, if you can dig that.

13:

In most cases it cuts deeper than rock and roll; which is a mutant form of it. It's adult music (that kids of all ages can feel). It's got rules! First, and foremost, honor the groove. If you're a trumpet player, don't play too busy. You don't need to. Use the sound to create space! Less is more. Play rhythmic melodic hooks, lines, riffs that can cut through the melody. Play one note over and over again with different rhythms; play octaves, fifths, fourths or seconds. Melodic complexity could be interesting, but is not essential.

14:

As JB put it, the trumpet is a drum. In 'Night Train,' for instance, short staccato notes help buttress a driving beat, help amplify the bass, point to (and provide counterpoint for) the drums, adding to polyrhythms conventional rock and roll is

more queasy about. They can also be a 'response' to the 'call' of the voice or other instruments.

15:

Long sustained notes work great on ballads (as in many Stax/Volt tracks like 'That's How Strong My Love Is'). Smooth, yet warm and forceful. A simple two-piece tandem, a trumpet and a saxophone (preferably a tenor rather than an alto), can do the trick, but adding a trombone and bass saxophone can help, playing in unison or harmonic intervals. 'Brassy' often means aggressive, and to some ears apparently such sounds are grating, but many others have found in this sound the perfect coming together of a 'European' musical and African musical sensibility: a distinctly American music (like jazz) at its finest; it's the main reason to be patriotic to this country's culture.

16:

Yes, such music breaks many of Goebbel's Nazi Music Regulations (from his mandate against 'negroid excesses in tempo' to melodies that are 'too Jewish and gloomy' that corrupt the 'noble strains of wind instruments' as Wagner understood them). Today, soul music is theoretically acceptable, but often consigned to the status of 'oldies' or 'classics.' It's history, as if that means it's finished.

17:

These days, the dominant culture industry pushes a music that smoothes out the edges. As Kodwo Eshun puts it, 'Traditionally, the music of the future is always beatless. Holst's *Planet Suite* (2001: *A Space Odyssey*), Eno's *Apollo*, and Vangelis' *Blade Runner* – sonically – are as futuristic as the Titanic, nothing but updated examples of an 18th century sublime... By frustrating the funk and impeding the groove,

clever music amputates the distributed mind, locks you back in the prisonhouse of your head. Far from being futuristic, cerebral music therefore retards you by reimposing a pre-industrial sensory hierarchy that shut your sense in a Cartesian positivism... in which the mind is bizarrely superior to the body.' (*More Brilliant Than the Sun*, 22, 67). In short, it's a sneaky way to bring in Nazi Music Regulations without the uniforms and blatant government imposition.

18:

I not only have to stand to play the funk, I have to stand up for the funk soul brother, as if it's our inalienable rights, the freedom that requires discipline and submergence of isolated ego in collective creation. Of course, since I'm just practicing along with the radio right now, I can take up more space and play too busy. When working alone, I've often held the belief that, aesthetically speaking, you have to blow the vault up first in order to stack the bills — better than erring on the side of timidity. As long as I keep my ear on the prize, the groove, I can fumble around for different notes that will later be shaped into a recognizable 'theme.' Let Maceo Parker on saxophone improvise a lead part (a so-called 'solo'), and I can either hold down a repetitive riff, or make variations on it, like a second soloist weaving in and out of the sonic background behind the 'front and center' sax.

19:

I love jazz at least as much as R&B, but would not presume to call myself a jazz trumpeter, and have little aspirations to be one. I am in awe of them, but an R&B/Soul trumpeter is not necessarily a lesser role to play, even if their names are less known and spotlighted in this hierarchical, individualistic

image-based society. This is the musical role I've always needed to play to create a well-rounded show or recording project. I still haven't gotten close enough to finding a regular ritual or relatively stable institution that encourages this. It's been a history of baby steps, more due to my social shyness and 'prior genre associations' (commitments) or institutional racism than any lack of chops. But it's the root and ground of my mission on this planet, and if I fail to embody it, I can at least point the way for others.

## A LEONARD COHEN DETOUR

20:

Yet, right now Greg Ashley wants me to be part of a horn tandem for an album and one-off live show that comes closer to this sound. It's a far cry from James Brown, but a little closer to soul tracks like 'Tell Mama' by Etta James. It's only one song on an album on which most songs are less grooving than even Sir Nose D'Voiddofunk is: *Death of a Ladies' Man* by Leonard Cohen and Phil Spector. In many ways, Leonard Cohen is the polar opposite of James Brown. He's the heady, singer/songwriter and author of books of literature. This has much more in common with the social roles I've played in public (under the name 'Chris Stroffolino') for over 20 years. And, yes, I have been spellbound at times with his music as well as his books (especially the *Death of a Lady's Man*<sup>2</sup> book, a strange companion piece to the album Greg is covering) over the years, but I've never really considered Leonard Cohen a musician the way I consider James Brown, Sly Stone or even Steven

---

2. Spelling is correct; titles are different for the book and the audio.

Malkmus. Yet this one song, ‘Don’t Go Home With Your Hard On,’ is the rocking exception in Leonard Cohen’s oeuvre.

21:

‘Hard On’ is the closest to a Stax/Volt horn romp that Cohen ever achieved, in part because Phil Spector wrote the melody and musical arrangement (the line is blurred between these roles just as it often is with James Brown). In the context of Leonard Cohen, it’s radical, or as Phil Spector put it at the time, ‘punk rock’ – at the time a very fashionable, if misunderstood, word in American white pop/rock music industry. But, musically, it’s funk/soul (with verses that are more like disco). It’s the closest Cohen gets to a dance track.

22:

In the context of James Brown, or The Ohio Players, however, it’s a feeble, lame piece of music; Phil Spector is straining to achieve earlier glories (like perhaps Ike and Tina Turner’s ‘River Deep, Mountain High’) and update his style that has become obsolete, and Cohen is straining to go along with it.

23:

So, musically, it doesn’t hold that much intrinsic worth for me (since so many other songs do what it tries to do better), but being offered this opportunity to play this song live at the Henry Miller Library in Big Sur for a book release party for a new biography of Leonard Cohen by Sylvie Simmons’ (by far the best writing on Cohen to date) fascinated me musically, literarily, culturally and professionally.

24:

This event brought together two ‘extreme’ social roles I’ve always been trying to de-specialize, or at least balance and accommodate. It was like an art gallery ‘variety show’ in the

best possible sense, and would allow me to reveal a core aspect of my true musical self that could provide a service to those who love literature, and Leonard Cohen's oeuvre in particular. In my case, it is not playing the role of 'singer songwriter,' but rather helping give embodiment to the singer/songwriter, if s/he needs that. If I couldn't dance so much since the accident, I could at least help others dance. This is the core reason I got into music, but it got lost because, like Cohen, I was known as a published writer first; then a session man in a band lead by a great singer/songwriter (who some called the Leonard Cohen of Generation X — and there are certainly some similarities), who generally grooved less than even 'Hard On' does (though *Death of a Ladies' Man* was one of David Berman's favorite albums).

25:

While David Berman or Leonard Cohen may have achieved a balance between music and writing in their songs, I achieved a balance by writing abstract, metaphysical (often non-rhyming) 'free verse' poetry on one hand, and dancing my ass off on the other. Because of overspecialization, the two rarely met — but there are ways to change this. This is why I was so fascinated with these liminal artists. Yet, if Gil Scott Heron, Cohen, Dylan and even Ginsberg (the last three, by the way all sang together on 'Hard On,' albeit only as a drunken party joke, since none of them had soul trumpet ambitions!) were like a bridge between the specialized disciplines of music and literature, I was looking for a more primal unity, and James Brown and other dance music was like a subterranean tunnel beneath the walls you don't have to explode to unify.

26:

By the aesthetic standards of the social worlds I was mostly known in, rarely, if ever, was anything judged by James Brown standards. If anything, James Brown would more likely be judged by Leonard Cohen expectations. Musically, I was not meant to be judged by those expectations. I'd rather be judged by James Brown musical standards and get a C or B than by Leonard Cohen standards and get an A.

27:

Yet, I had to make space for evangelize for the funk, in hopes of bringing others along with me (at least as well as I could when I could dance more). It's become a matter of increasing urgency to make this truth more public to anyone willing to listen. I need to be part of an artifact that could at least serve as a calling card for what I saw as my mission, and 'Don't Go Home With Your Hard On' could serve this function.

28:

My Personal Mythology of 'Don't Go Home With Your Hard On': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIAPIGNpqi0>

29:

I soon found myself standing on a beautiful outdoor stage on a dark night where we could see stars sparkle above the redwoods at The Henry Miller Library, leaning against a tall amplifier playing trumpet to an audience of Leonard Cohen fans, most of whom consider this to be one of his slightest, and most embarrassing, songs from his worst album (while childhood videos of young Leonard playing ice hockey with his family in the 1940s in Quebec were projected above our heads). Indeed, this could be seen as a 'punk rock' gesture of defiance, or, pedagogically speaking, 'teaching the conflicts' with a collective sly wink on the part of Greg Ashley's conceptual bar

band. Certainly, this was a factor in Greg's choice to record the album in the first place (see my liner notes to Greg's album released on the Oakland label, Guitar and Bongos, in 2013).

30:

Yet, for me it was also something else; it was a bridge between the largely white social scenes ('indie rock' or the 'literary world') and the African American popular art form of R&B. It was a way to comfortably signify, and ease a transition into soul and funk and cathartic healing without turning my back entirely on the 'white lie' which seemed to be a necessary fiction for survival in this culture.

31:

So, if 'Hard On' represented an edge, an extreme pole, of Cohen's art, for me playing trumpet on it could represent a new beginning – not a culmination, but a watershed chapter in the conceptual art project of my narrative development, or spiritual journey from the Euro/Western standards of art I had to pretend to embrace in Academia (and even in the Silver Jews) toward the higher standards of The Black Art Aesthetic: a poetics of funk trumpet. In the art gallery retrospective of my art vision I imagined happening before I died, this moment should be given at least a hallway (and maybe a room even if it runs the risk of seeming fetishized).

32:

I had also created a little sloppy/charming demo using the melody and chords of 'Hard On' with Apple Garage Band beats over which I rhythmically read one of the prose poems from the *Death of a Lady's Man* book ('It's Probably Spring') to

supplement what Greg was doing. Since I always loved the book as much as the album (albeit for different reasons; read the book alongside of other post-modern literature of the same time such as ‘L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry,’ and you may realize, as I did, how this book is severely underrated, in both literary circles and among the quasi-literary devotees of Leonard Cohen’s songwriting).

33:

My little experiment to set the words of the book to expansive, grooving, musical structures that contrast with most of Cohen’s own music worked well enough that I considered asking Greg if we could use his instrumental track to ‘Hard On’ and read one of the pieces from it as an alternate version. But it might be even better to set this writing to music that comes much closer to a groove that goes beyond the Spector-produced album, a groove that seems to ‘go with’ the over-the-top tensions of that book. I began to work on an album of noise rock musical settings of other pieces in this book that would be a fitting companion piece to Greg’s cover album.

34:

I rehearsed some of these with an amazing psych/punk rhythm section led by Rachel Thoele, who performed with such bass-heavy groove bands as Flipper, Frightwig, and Mudwimmin. What we began creating was like a cross between the kind of symbiotic mesh The Fall achieves between Steve Hanley’s basslines and Mark E. Smith’s vocals and the literary noise rock of The Velvet Underground’s ‘The Gift.’ It may not be James Brown funk, but it’s more danceable than most of the *Death of a Ladies’ Man* album.

35:

Due to unforeseen economic and health circumstances, I was never able to record the album, but it could increase appreciation for the art of Cohen's book. It could help bring two or three different kind of audiences in closer contact with each other, which at the very least is a worthwhile cultural endeavor even if it rankles the feathers of some purists.

36:

Yet, all of these activities, are still putting myself in relationship to the standards of the alienated white Euro-American culture industry, and are nothing but a footnote to an audience who judges from the perspective of The Black Art Aesthetic (whether they call it that or not): a more holistic mass popular, political, even revolutionary, art. So I still have a long way to go on my journey to have an intimate creative relationship with a rhythm section that aspires to 'Papa Don't Take No Mess' or 'Funky President' for instance: music that is grounded in the body and spirit that you can get lost and found in.

37:

So when I became homeless almost immediately after performing *Death of a Ladies' Man* with Greg at Big Sur, I made sure to load up my trumpet along with a piano and a computer into a van so at the very least I could practice every day to keep my lip in shape and contribute to my anti-smoking ritual. This is why the 'piano van' was as, in truth, as much of a 'trumpet van': to call it a 'piano van' was a half-truth at best. It was never intended to be a self-contained enterprise, but a way to meet people who would help me help them create something bigger (a movement, a community center) in which music and the living word could play a vital part — at least as much as I achieved professionally in the 1990s

38:

For the first several months I was in LA (surviving on the dole), I began to find some musicians who let me join them on stage playing trumpet, most notably a young blues band called The Downtown Train, who had a great bassist that knew how to get people dancing. There wasn't a lot of room for trumpet because they had a harmonica player, and we never had any practice sessions in which I could learn definite parts and develop dynamics with the harmonica player. But as long as they told me the key, I could lock in with the bass and improvise with the groove, and people responded.

39:

My lip was stronger than ever, and these guys kept on inviting me back to join them for selected gigs, as did the great young Tijuana-based mod/psych band, San Pedro El Cortez, who I had performed with at Burger Records.

40:

I also rejoined Sweatlodge, with my dissonant noise punk trumpet when they played in the LA area on tour. This punk band, fronted by a full-blooded Navajo named Rocky, may have played too loud live for my aging ears, but working with them had the advantage of being able to play really 'free' (like Don Cherry at his most screaming on Ornette Coleman albums) and it worked just as well if I was playing bad notes. The 'dissonance' added much to the experience for their fans.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NicdKk\\_Mi-4&](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NicdKk_Mi-4&)

41:

The trumpet was becoming my primary musical vehicle, and the piano was put in its proper place as a 'sideshow,' a side dish, something to do after working out the demon in a more

healthy way by playing trumpet. I was coming closer to achieving that musical balance than ever before, yet things would change shortly as my role as piano player became emphasized after becoming homeless by the mere fact that I was sleeping in one.

#### BIO NOTE

*Chris Stroffolino* is an American poet, writer, musician, critic, performer, author of twelve books of poetry and prose, and probably best known to the general populace for working alongside Steve Malkmus and David Berman on The Silver Jews *American Water* album (1998 Drag City). Stroffolino, (born in Reading, Pennsylvania) attended Albright College, Temple University and Bard College, The University of Massachusetts Amherst, before receiving a PhD at Suny-Albany with a dissertation on William Shakespeare in 1998. See Wikipedia at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris\\_Stroffolino](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris_Stroffolino) for more detail.