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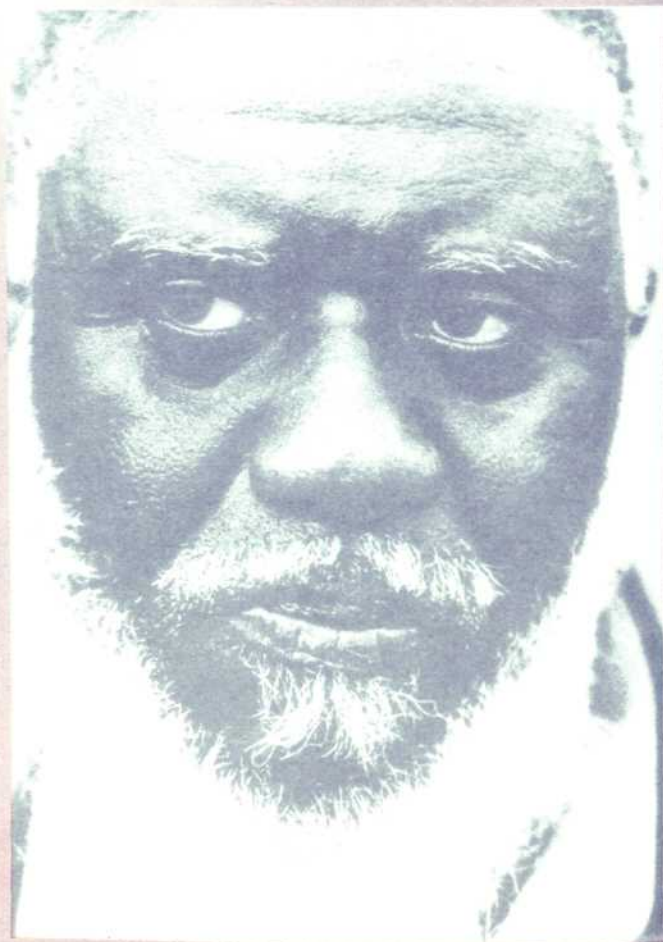
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ENCOUNTERING

The Trance of Seven Colors

Through Pharoah Sanders

In June 1994, tenor saxophone legend, Pharoah Sanders traveled with producer Bill Laswell to Essaouira, on the Western coast of Morocco, just days after the death of their longtime friend and collaborator, guitarist Sonny Sharrock. Teaming up with a group of master Gnawa musicians led by Maleem Mahmoud Ghania, they recorded "The Trance of Seven Colors (Axiom)". On the 25th September of the same year, **Charles Blass interviewed** the legend.





GR: First, I'd like to congratulate you for a great performance on the record.

PS: I could have done better. I think I was trying to get close to the musicians more than anything, trying to feel them out.... We managed to get together and get close, we got very, very close, and got to know each other... and went on and did the music.

GR: How long were you in Morocco?

PS: About four days. Bill Laswell contacted me about going over there. He had some ideas and I said yeah, it'd be quite an experience for me to play with the Moroccan Gnawa musicians.

GR: What can you say about the recording or performance process? How involved in the ceremony did you get, for example?

PS: Ceremony?

GR: The liner notes describe the music as being performed in a ritual context, in a healing ceremony. Did you get involved in that at all?

PS: I just played. Maybe they were more involved in that than I was... being that they experience it from the spiritual part of their lives. Myself, maybe I was just being Pharoah Sanders.... I came to play and that's what I did. Like



I said, we felt each other out, carefully, and just went on from there. There's nothing else to do but just play. You know I've been playing with some Moroccan musicians in Northern California, so it wasn't anything new to me. And the brothers out on the West coast, they're Muslim also...

GR: Would you consider it similar to other experiences you've had traveling in different parts of the world? A similar attitude or openness that you encountered?

PS: Maybe it was a little bit different. I don't know why.... Because I didn't tune in with them, I just tuned in to myself and they tuned in to themselves, and we went on from that point. They're more tuned in to the Earth. Here you tune your pitch close to the next person, you know that the piano [and] the bass tune in to each other; everybody communicates a lot better if everybody's in tune. But in that case, it didn't matter how I was tuned, this way or that way, flat, sharp, whatever. Sharp and flat didn't have anything to do with it. It was just a spiritual kind of thing... like a singer, how he or she would do it.



All I can say is I'm not really a jazz player myself. I always have been into a more Eastern music, all my life, trying to mold this into my saxophone



GR: What about the instruments? Was there anything in particular you would comment on?

PS: Well, I like the *guimbri*. It's a very low instrument, and the one you hear played mostly throughout the whole piece; you know, it's a stringed instrument. It has a very low frequency, and a person might think it's close to the bass fiddle in a way. It has that very deep-rooted feeling to it. But also, it's very rhythmic. One thing about playing with the *guimbri* - I had a chance to play in another register that I'm not used to playing in so often. It made me think in a lower register of my saxophone; I had to think my whole thing on another plane....and it made the whole thing balance out. That's the most interesting part of it, when you talk about the pitch and the sound, and about the communication.

GR: And then, of course, there's all the rhythm going on from the clapper instruments.

PS: Mainly, I was playing with the *guimbri*—that was the most important instrument. Anything else around it was okay too. Mostly, it



just helped to motivate what we were doing.

GR: What can you say about Maleem Mahmoud Ghania as an artist or as a collaborator?

PS: I think he is one of the greatest players in the world today. We really should acknowledge him a little bit more. I consider him to be one of the greatest in my time.

GR: You've been working with different kinds of instruments and exploring the edges of what is called "jazz" for a long time. Any comments on such terminology as "jazz" or "world music"?

PS: All I can say is that I'm not really a jazz player myself. I always have been into a more Eastern music, all my life, trying to mold this through my saxophone. This is what I've been working on over the years.

GR: There are some other quite notable figures in the world of music that you've collaborated with, and, of course, the name Coltrane comes up a lot. Is there anything pertaining to the spirit of the *Trance of Seven Colors* that you might mention in terms of either feeling or the tone...?

PS: Well, I do feel this way: I heard John's music in Morocco, especially his earlier works, 'My Favorite Things' and a lot of other beautiful recordings that he did. I heard all of the sound, maybe not as far as the tunes are concerned, but the feeling. I was surprised, when I went to Africa, that I heard all that. And I hear a lot of African musicians influenced by John Coltrane's music.... they were playing his music, like 'Giant Steps' and a few other tunes. I'd walk into a place and an African musician would be playing guitar, playing John's music, and solos, and 'dI hear phrasing....

GR: Did you ever collaborate with any of them?

PS: No, but I did talk to some musicians...We liked to communicate that way. I was on a State Department tour.



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GR: What about your experiences with Sun Ra? How did that relate to some of the sounds that you heard over there?

PS: I don't know, maybe not as much as in John's music. Sun Ra's approach to music is very different. Sun Ra is just, y'know, Sun Ra. I don't know if I heard that over there. I think that Sun Ra's music is something that he created. I can't say that he got it from somebody else playing like him, I haven't heard that yet. If it's out there, I haven't heard it.

GR: Any comments on Sonny Sharrock, in the wake of his premature passing?

PS: I feel like he was very close to me as a friend, and always a very happy and cheerful person, very sweet kind of guy, you know. He was very, very serious about his music, that's one thing. Whatever had to be done, he'd work hard at it, trying to perfect it. He was that kind of person. A lot of guitar players I've noticed have been influenced by his playing. I think he was one of the most innovative, creative players in the world. He was very gifted and very very original.

GR: And there's a piece on *The Trance of Seven Colors* that you dedicate to him... ["Peace in Essaouira"]

PS: Well, we all thought that it would be good to do that. It had just happened- he passed away just before we left. Bill Laswell asked me, and I said, "okay, I'll try to make up something, and dedicate it to Sonny". Also, before Sonny passed, I had a tune that I wrote and wanted him to play on his next album. But I never got a chance to give it to him.... I guess maybe I'll just do it myself. I was really hoping that he would play it.... but anyway I guess the Creator has His way of doing things. **GR**