LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS

Worlding Music: On “Organic Music Societies”

By Nicholas Nauman
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Early in the introduction to *Organic Music Societies*, the new book from Blank Forms on the art/life collaborations of famed musician Don Cherry and his longtime partner, artist and designer Moki Cherry (née Karlsson), co-editor Lawrence Kumpf states, “One of the goals of this book is to foster better understanding of what Don and his collaborators meant by ‘world music.’” It follows that the next few hundred pages exhibit plenty of references to Indian tampuras, Tibetan chants, Brazilian berimbau, flutes of uncountable derivation, and more than a few rhapsodies on the Malian donso ngoni, all sounded in an old schoolhouse in a Swedish forest by a woman from the north of that country and a Choctaw Black man who grew up in Watts. The book’s thoughtfully assembled series of texts makes clear, however, that this multicultural catalog of characters, objects, and influences does not define the “world music” the Cherrys worked to make. They sought a far more radical departure from the conventions of Western music than an inclusive reflection of the international could ever generate: the world of their music was one of active emergence, a verb as much as a noun, a devotional will to be and do that embraced difference not to fold it into what existed as a historical reality but to make and be made by it.

Organic Music Societies takes its title from a 1972 record attributed to Don but emanating from the evolving creative community (often called the Organic Music Theater) that he and Moki initiated in the late 1960s, and which cohered in various configurations until the early 1980s. With contemporary essays, archival interviews, journal entries, reminiscences, and artifacts from people involved, the book is a carefully curated depiction of “the full range of their collaborative undertakings […] not only music, visual art, intermedia performance, theater, and dance but also educational workshops for children and adults and new spiritual practices — an ambitious effort to create a new social space for creative music.” Much of the action revolves around the

abandoned schoolhouse the Cherrys bought in rural Tågarp, Sweden, in 1970, but that gravitational center extends its energies to projects in New York, Don's teaching stint at Dartmouth, and performances and journeys around the globe. Pages and pages of vivid photographs further emphasize the point: Don and Moki conjured an ecumenical scene of persistent reimagination. It is not insignificant that their earlier collaborations were named Movement Incorporated.

When Don and Moki began their life together, he was already something of an icon for having played with Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, and John Coltrane in pivotal ensembles that first defined what critics called free jazz. The book gives us the story of their meeting a few times, from different perspectives: Moki was a young artist and fashion designer in Stockholm with a deep investment in Black American music (Ayler practiced in her painting studio for a while when he was in Europe), and she went to hear Sonny Rollins's group play when it came to town. Don was on trumpet that night, and he and Moki hit it off. At this point, Cherry was ready to push further, beyond inherited strictures that regulated the composition not just of forms of music but of forms of living. If "free jazz" meant anything beyond an industry-approved genre label (Coleman preferred to speak of "harmolodics"), it wasn't about freeing jazz from post-bop forms or tonality; it was about creating the music as an aspect of the larger social practice of freeing Black people from murderous oppression. In Don's view, that meant it was about freeing people's most fundamental, daily modes of life from violent systems: the performative reality of getting free was a holistic thing that couldn't be relegated to jazz clubs or concert halls. Moki and Don came together to assert an embodied social existence that was truly otherwise — by the time her designs were adorning his album covers (and his body), the Cherrys had committed to realizing Moki's declaration that "the stage is home and home is a stage."

Histories of utopic initiatives in the late 20th century often figure this kind of art/life commitment as a hippie idealism ultimately abraded by the limitations of the "real" (i.e., capitalist, racist, masculinist) world, and whatever revolutions these artists enacted can get readily penned by the formal assumptions of archive and homage. *Organic Music Societies* doesn't confine its subjects quite so tightly. For one thing, countless moments indicate that the Cherrys' immersion in bright, baggy threads and unprecedented sounds was not a frivolous disavowal of the social/material conditions that structured the world they were born into. To live otherwise, they had to negotiate this historical reality rather than cling to it through mere negation.

Practically, this meant that settling in Sweden was easier than buying property as an interracial couple in the United States. Don's art had always involved an absolute repudiation of prevailing anti-Blackness, even when he didn't say so explicitly — he wanted to embody a true alternative rather than just spelling it out. He does say so outright a few times in this book: in interviews that are otherwise interested in his progressive approach to harmony and instrumentation, he discusses his support for the Black Panther Party and his desire to perform in local prisons. Moki, for her part, grappled with the constraints of normative gender roles even at the couple's schoolhouse: "I was my husband's muse, companion, and collaborator. At the same time I did all of the practical maintenance. I was never trained to be a female so I survived by taking a creative attitude to daily life and chores." The Cherrys insisted on making what they made with the daily rigor required of radical praxis. As Moki put it in a journal entry: "Who dares to make the commitment of living in the moment? The futuristic play within Now. No peace & love and all that crap. Grounded in the progress of Now. There is no one possessing and no one possessed. Dancing on top of a dragon's head."

Organic Music Societies makes a point of asserting Moki's presence as a crucial agent in the Cherrys' creative work. Her visual invention is overwhelmingly apparent in the book's many images, but a number of the texts also focus on her life and work: there are reflections by her daughter, Neneh Cherry, and granddaughter, co-editor Naima Karlsson (both well known for carrying on their family's inspiration); journal entries, poems, and drawings from throughout Moki's life; and an autobiographical essay that she wrote in a creative writing class in the mid-2000s. In these pieces, Moki claims her work with the savvy guilelessness that typified the permutations of the Organic Music Theater: "No modern person with their senses in the right place would have been able to set up and create what I did," she says. She describes an "amazingly blessed" childhood in which alienation from social norms found relief in nature ("Especially getting to see birds make love while dancing, if I was patient. I lived in ecstasy just to see, hear, and experience all that life and magic going on, all interwoven and connected"), and a progression through adulthood that continued to cultivate wonder as a strategy for dealing with socially codified obstructions. She does not shy away from expressing frustration:

I am a visual artist in our society and I have to be more of an entrepreneur than a member of the community. I have never lacked the need to express myself, but have lacked the skills to knock on the right doors. Or to mingle in the right way so as to meet a supporting voice to say, "Let this woman in — she has something to share with us humans."

Meanwhile, Don's music suffuses the book. Calling it "Don's" is a bit off-base; he's quoted repeatedly as saying, "It's actually not my music." Still, his name is on two previously

unavailable records that Blank Forms is releasing in conjunction with *Organic Music Societies*. One, *The Summer House Sessions*, finds Don in the eponymous Swedish abode with a smattering of international players for an improvisatory communication across language barriers in 1968. The music is a loose and exuberant stitching of the (non-)jazz background from which Don was coming and the further communitarian sounds that would bloom in and out of the Tågarp schoolhouse. The musicians move in enthusiastic, sometimes frenzied pursuit of a shared present — a unique example of the modes of liberated expression typical of the late 1960s. The recording is clear and warm, and pairs well with Moki's colorful painting that adorns the cover.

The other Blank Forms album, while recognizably evolved from the *Summer House* sensibilities, is a jam of a different sort. *Organic Music Theatre — Festival de Jazz de Chateauvallon 1972* is attributed to "Don Cherry's New Researches featuring Naná Vasconcelos" (the famed Brazilian percussionist), and it documents one of the multigenerational, global ensembles that the Cherrys made throughout the '70s. Originally recorded for French TV, the performance brings the inviting splendor of Moki's textile and stage designs to ecstatic, audible life. Countless voices, claps, and instrumental sounds clamor and recede around Don's deeply comfortable, relaxed but attentive compositional guidance. The original performance included a puppet troupe, and children sing and laugh throughout. To call it a live album is comically apt: this music is obviously, palpably lived. Don plays piano and sings with such approachable welcome that it's hard not to feel included in the sounds as a listener. The record begins with Don's invitation to join in chanted Hindi syllables, and moves seamlessly into an extraordinarily openhearted rendition of his invaluable "Butterfly Friend."

That song, a beautiful confounding of genre that evokes kids' tunes and the deep heart of spiritual songcraft (the not-so-live version on Don's pop-ish 1985 album *Home Boy/Sister Out* has a bit less holy vulnerability and a lot more polish and bounce), grounds so much of the Organic Music Society's expansive idealism. Its instantly joinable melody and plain statement of love for the delicate, powerful forms of the Earth suggest again that the Cherrys meant "world music" as an act of creative immanence, the stuff of being and doing as such. It's profound, but it's readily accessible — children not only could but did sing it. It's the sort of art that gets called, even in this book, "naïve," as if the Cherrys' devotions were obviously, if lamentably, untenable given the inescapable degradations of history. But the work of Movement Incorporated, the Organic Music Theater, and the Cherry family's community asserts a reconception of history not as the irrevocable inscription of past events but as an ongoing practice of collective realization.

Sometime during the 1980s, “world music” was rigidified as a marketable genre, a section of the record store where you could find albums from anywhere outside the United States and Europe. It’s a rote observation that this reification of “world music” coincided with the consolidation of global trade agreements and the emergence of the World Wide Web, a moment when sharing difference turned into commodified assimilation and atomization. That’s not what the Cherrys were talking about. In her essay “Oriki for Don Cherry: To Be Part of a Gathering-Work,” scholar Fumi Okiji activates a crucial theoretical potential that pulses throughout *Organic Music Societies*. As she writes,

Cherry exemplifies a way with time and earth committed to equivocality. It is a worlding driven by an inability or refusal to make an absolute exception of himself in relation to the earth and all that is in it. A way with time that cultivates a stammer in order to preserve non-ultimacy, an inability or refusal to accept self-preservation as sovereign instinct.

This is the radical vitality that Don and his collaborators meant by “world music.”

Organic Music Societies is a hefty publication. It’s filled out with long recollections by the Swedish musician Christer Bothén, and a complete reprinting of a magazine initially intended for local distribution around the Tågarp schoolhouse that features interviews with Don, Terry Riley, and all manner of contributors from the scene. The book is an engaging compendium, a convincing progression of Blank Forms’s mission to “preserve, nurture, and present” the kind of “time-based and interdisciplinary art practices” that the Organic Music Theater so potently exemplified. But it remains a documentary record. The immanent possibility the Cherrys embodied is hardly so neatly circumscribable, opening well beyond the pages of the book to greet you with/in difference. Like a world.