

GOING OUTSIDE

by Sunny Murray*,
as told to Robert Levin

For awhile
there were
a lot of
people
trying to kill me

See, it began a short time after I met Cecil Taylor — who is like the father of the New Black Music. I met him at a little place in the West Village called the Cafe Roue. It was in the winter of 1959. I came in one night with a cat named Wade, who had just bought a bass yesterday. All the bebop dudes that I used to play with were there. Cecil came in a few minutes later and sat in a corner with his collar up over his head. All the dudes immediately started packing up and when I asked them why they said, "You don't know Cecil Taylor, the way he plays can't nobody get together with him."

Well, you know, I've always admired a cat that stood out in a crowd because it meant he was very... very *useful*. He was a necessity. He wasn't one to shun, he was one to dig. And I thought, if you pack up when a man comes in to play then he must be *something*. Let come more come in that make you pack up and I'll be around some really good musicians. It was like when I was hanging out on the corner with the guys in Philadelphia. If a cat would come up who the other cats didn't like I'd want to know why. And if they gave me some sick-assed reason I'd say to the cat who'd come up, "Let's you and me split," and I'd leave *them* there. So I said, "Listen man, I'm going to play with him." And they said, "Go ahead, we will listen."

So I went over to Cecil and introduced myself and said, "I would like to play with you." And he said, "Do you know how to play?" And I said, "No." He said, "Are you *sure* you want to play with me?" I said, "Yeah." He took off his coat and everybody got all tense and he went to the piano and started playing.

Well, you know, in '59 it was a little different. I said to myself, damn, he sure *is* into something else, and I struggled along. But I played a whole three tunes. Wade played too even though he couldn't really play. Cecil said, "That's all right, let him do it if he wants." Cecil laughed. He had fun. A couple of times I didn't know what to do and I just stopped and Cecil turned around and said, "No, keep going, don't stop." I wasn't just playing conventional, like *tanka-ting* — I could have, but I decided not to play that way with him. I was playing on one. Like Elvin Jones was playing on one in Detroit, but I didn't know about him yet. I just thought it was hip to play on one. Bass players would always say, "Oh-motherfucker, you keep turning the beat around. So a lot of cats didn't like me, though some cats did."

I went back to play with the beboppers after that night and they all started laughing and kept saying, "Hey, Sunny played with Cecil, Sunny played with Cecil," and making a big joke out of it. And I was thinking, who *is* Cecil? Who the devil *is* this cat I played with? And I looked for Cecil, man, for days, everyday I thought, I ain't heard nobody play like that and I'm gonna make sure that I can play with him again 'cause I knew he had enjoyed

Finally I found Cecil at the old Cedar Bar. He helped me get a loft on Dye Street in a building where he was living. After I moved in I knocked on his door. There was no answer, but the door was unlocked and I just gave it a push and brought my drums in after me. Cecil was laying in bed looking at me. It was a depressing period for him, nobody wanted to play with him. I said, "You don't mind?" And he said, "Uh, um." And I set 'em up. But I was too nervous to start playing with the cat in bed. It took me about three weeks to decide, well, I'm gonna play anyway. I've got to practice and my drums is over there now, and he said, "O.K." So I played, but he wouldn't get out of bed. Matter of fact he never let nobody see him out of the bed and his windows was open and the snow was on the windowsill up about twelve inches and I'd be trying to talk to him and shivering, and finally I said, "I can't talk to you like this. Can I please close your windows?" And he said, "O.K." I'd been practicing there with a big coat on and I was getting tired of it.

Finally, one day, Cecil did get up to play with me. He got up to play on his old, beat-up, upright piano and said, "I want you to play something like you never played before." I said, "What do you mean, like a drum solo?" And I started to play a drum solo, and Cecil said, "No. Stop. Just... let yourself play." He meant like not to be hung up on artificial rules and roles and disciplines and orders that have been set up and which limit what you can express — or to be daring or hip while *still staying within the confines of those rules*, you know, like playing on one. He meant like to go outside of those rules and roles, you know what I'm saying, like to go outside of "time" and to play *naturally* — out of the *natural rules and rhythms of my body*. Also to play *with* him, not just behind him as an accompanist. Dig all the energy that is liberated with this kind of playing, and the things that can happen when two or three or four or a dozen cats are playing together like that. The spiritual things that can happen, that you can get to. Like if Charlie Parker had *really* let himself go twenty-five years ago we would be past all the shit by now and really out there. This is a whole new freedom and a whole new *system* of music. And dig the revolutionary... *enormity* of it.

Of course I have to admit that I didn't understand all of this right away. I was the first drummer to play this way, the first drummer to play the New Black Music, the New Jazz, and for a long time I wasn't really sure about what I was doing. It seemed like what I was playing was

my playing and it wasn't like I was bugging his nerves. *unnatural*, not natural. I was very disturbed. I used to listen to tapes of myself and wonder if I was going crazy.

It was really about three years until I really understood that Cecil was leading me into a new system. Those were a very difficult three years for me, particularly because of all the attempts on my life that happened during this period.

Like I went over to the Village Vanguard one night — I was living over on West 11th Street then — and I got into a discussion with some dude about the music, and he said that this music was crazy and would never survive. I laughed him off and went outside. But when I got to the corner there was a Thunderbird parked there with the lights on real bright. Something said to me, don't walk in front of that car, that's the dude you were arguing with. I thought I was being paranoid so I walked in front of the car. And Jim, if it wasn't a fucking movie scene! I had to dive and landed right on my fucking ass. The car took off. I got up and just stood there and I thought, why the fuck do they want to run me over? I started to walk toward my house and I saw the car again turning a corner coming toward me. I ran into the house and I went into a vacant apartment. There wasn't nothing there but a mattress — wasn't even no lock on the door. I looked out the window and there's two dudes getting out of the car. The door had a window — a misty window that you couldn't really see through, but you could see silhouettes. These dudes were standing in the hall looking for my room. I heard one say, "Do you know which apartment he went into?" One was a soul cat and one was Italian. They were standing right in front of the door — all they had to do was push it. I was scared as hell.

Finally they left and drove away. I ran down to Jeanne Phillip's house. Ornette Coleman was there. I asked them, "Am I out of my nut? Is someone really trying to kill me?" Jeanne said, "Sunny, I'll tell you the truth, it could happen that way because this music is bothering a lot of people who don't want black people to play this way. The whole club scene will come down if this music really happens." And Ornette said, "Yeah, that's what's happening, man." And I said, "Oh shit, you shouldn't be saying this, you should be saying I was nuts or something." And he said, "Listen, those people payed me *not to play* for a whole year."

I stayed at Jeanne's until the sun came up.

Then, when I went to Europe with a group I co-led with Albert Ayler — that was the Free Jazz Group and Gary Peacock and Don Cherry was in it — a lot more strange things happened that I didn't understand. Like when I had gone to Europe a year earlier with Cecil as the leader everything had been pretty cool. But with Albert and me it was different.

Like, first of all, part of the tour was cancelled when Albert hit some promoter in the mouth over \$10. I always thought he hit the wrong cat, the cats he should have hit he was always smiling at. And like later, when we got ready to go home, I had to go to the embassy because I didn't have enough money. Everybody else in the band was cool. I didn't understand that shit — why was I the only one that was uptight? The embassy had to give me a transport ticket to go home. Another funny thing was like on the first tour, when I was playing with Cecil at the Montmartre in Copenhagen, one night this bartender went crazy. He started screaming and tore up the bar. "STOP THE MUSIC. I CANNOT STAND THE MUSIC." Then on *this* tour he comes back. Albert, who had played with us on the first tour, saw him and said, "There's that dude!" And the dude came back and he said, shaking hands and very quiet, "You have freed me." He'd been in the home for almost a year.

But a lot of strange things. In Denmark, Art Taylor, who's been living over there, told me we were chased to Europe by the business world. The tour was agreed upon by a lot of business cats just to get us out of the country. He said that anything could happen and to be careful. He said, "Look what happened to Eric Dolphy." I said, "Man, are you serious?" He said, "Just watch yourself." And I almost did get killed.

See, I was getting strange vibrations all the time we was in Europe. We were very in tune with the spirits when the Free Jazz group was over there — we were the most spiritual band in Europe at the time. Eric Dolphy, who had come over earlier with Mingus had remained in Europe to play with us, with the free jazz group. He wanted to bust loose and really play free. But he died. Suddenly. Rumor was that he was poisoned. That set me off and I began to realize that a lot of people were doing things to me to hang me up and I started to get very nervous. It seemed like they was always doing something to me to stop me from the way I was playing. I was getting sick a lot — drugs being put in my drinks and shit like that.

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