

# Abdullah Ibrahim & Dan Morgenstern in Conversation

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>> From the Library of Congress in Washington DC.

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>> Dan Morgenstern: This is a kind of a reunion because Abdullah Ibrahim and I have not seen each other in a very long time.

But we do go back to New York where he had recently arrived, and we did manage to spend some time together there.

And it was wonderful to see you again, looking great and sounding marvelous, there was a concert last night of your trio, which was beautiful.

And we've had a chance to talk a while and reminisce a little bit and I think what we're going to do now is to find out about all the things that you've been up to since then [laughter], which would probably take us about a year and.

But to begin with, I remember that one of the thing that we did together was a concert at, in the garden at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

And that was a great evening, and I'm sure that you remember a little bit about that.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Yes, I do.

And Dan, thank you.

It's great to see you again, and you are looking very well.

Always fond memories, and my deepest appreciation because when I first came to New York, you really supported me like 100 percent.

And I'll always remember that, very, very kind of you.

I remember this concert very vaguely [laughter].

>> Dan Morgenstern: Yeah, it was with the Choir of Lancaster.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Oh [inaudible], yeah!

>> Dan Morgenstern: And Morris [assumed spelling], who was a fellow South African, and Sonny Brown was the drummer.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Yeah.

>> Dan Morgenstern: And I found their review from Down Beat way back, and let's see, Junior Booth was the bassist.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Junior Booth, yeah.

He just, he just arrived in New York shortly

He was from Buffalo.

Great bass player.

Alright.

You know, I remember that, and then I went on to form a trio with the Bad Lancaster and Kello Scott [assumed spelling], the cellist.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Oh, Kello

Oh, he was a wonderful player, yeah.

Yeah, he just made a handful of records, not enough.

And people don't know about him anymore, no.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: No.

>> Dan Morgenstern: And that was such an unusual instrument and, and.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Of course, you know, cello, and I was interested in playing cello since I was a kid.

When I got to New York, I got a little cello and started playing.

But then, I met Kello, and Kello also introduced us to Kodaly.

And of course, Kodaly cello suites, really resonates with, also with our dynamic of our understanding, how can we expand the harmonic and rhythmic possibilities.

So I formed a trio with Bad Lancaster on bass clarinet, and Kello on cello, and myself on piano.

And then I went to a New York club, I can't remember where he was and I said, would you like to book me, I've got a trio?

They said fine, but when we pieced off the other night, they didn't want to play me, because that's not a trio.

You see a trio is bass, drums [laughter].

So it took me 50, 60 years to create it again, and that was the unit that we saw last night.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Yes.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: This was the idea.

>> Dan Morgenstern: That was a, it's a beautiful combination.

It really, it's a special sound because there is doubling and [inaudible].

We heard quite a bit of piccolo.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Piccolo.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Which is an instrument you don't encounter too often, I guess, and he played it beautifully.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Incredible, incredible, wonderful player.

And also Cliff Guyton, flute player, cello, and clarinet, and piccolo.

The cello and bass player, Noah Jackson, this is his first gig out of college.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Really?

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: He came out of college last year and joined us, and quite, I think there's a, the younger generation of, of musicians who, technically skilled, but also have the passion, and also lock into the tradition.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Well he's a fine cellist and it's interesting.

Again, usually when the cello was used in jazz, it was pizzicato, [inaudible].

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: [inaudible] yeah.

Yeah, Kello Scott [assumed spelling] at that time told me, he said he'd play it amplified.

He amplified the cello and slung it, and then stood up with it.

So I ask him to tell me, why do you do this?

And he said, "I wanted to get away from the drummer" [laughter].

Because the only place you're right to the drummer and amplify it.

>> Dan Morgenstern: I saw Kello, I think not with you unfortunately, but I saw him live once at the Half Note, which was a nice club in downtown.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Yeah, I remember the Half Note.

>> Dan Morgenstern: They had very good food too, which was unusual [inaudible]

At the Velvet Shrineward [phonetic], they had nothing.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Exactly.

>> Dan Morgenstern: So, how long did you stay in New York at that time in the 60s?

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: It was quite a long time.

We stayed at least thirty, thirty years, thirty years at various, various places.

But then we ended up at the Chelsea Hotel, that's where we ended up staying for quite a long time with [inaudible].

And I had come from Cape Town to New York like a scouting party to come and look for accomodation, you see, and the family would follow.

And then Don Cherry [assumed spelling] introduced me to [inaudible], who was the manager of the Chelsea Hotel, and that's where we stayed at a colony of artists.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Yes, the Chelsea was a famous hotel on 23rd.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: 23rd street, yeah.

But before it was because the children had to go to school, it was a walk away, anywhere that you wanted to go, you want to go down to the village, yeah.

>> Dan Morgenstern: That's a good location, and then as you say, you know, a lot of artists lived there.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Yeah.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Interesting people.

And it was more or less of a residential hotel.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: It was residential, yeah.

And then a few years, over two or three years ago, it all changed when it changed ownership. Yeah so then, we had to move out.

>> Dan Morgenstern: But then, it took some time before you went back home.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Yeah, I went back shortly in 70, 74 and then it became like most, for most of us during that time, it became totally unbearable.

Because it was very, very suppressive.

And then we left, and then didn't return until Mandela was released from prison in 98.

>> Dan Morgenstern: And you performed at Nelson Mandela's inauguration.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Yeah.

>> Dan Morgenstern: What was that like?

That must have been special.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Thing that I remember most that we had this, it was only like unconscious fear that we were not supposed to be there, you know?

Because it happens to all of us, so suddenly.

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A place like Pretoria, where you'll even be weary during those years to walk, to walk the streets. And it was, it was exhilarating and it was something confusing also because it was too much to handle [laughter].

Too much to handle at the same time, but the inauguration was very remarkable because there were close to a million people at the Union Building.

So we never could go, I never went.

And for me, I mean, it went on for hours and hours, I met all the musicians and other artists who performed.

But the display was incredible, because it was a military display of strength, and just to see how they then managed to handle this transition without major conflict.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Yeah well there have been some tremendous changes there over your lifetime.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Yes.

Those are, we always understood that the period after the change would be very, very difficult. And there's some of the problems that we face now.

Because in some ways, we were not, we didn't prepare ourselves to handle it properly.

But I'm quite amazing, in spite of all the negativity, there are people there who are unsung and working behind the scenes, very dedicated, and also very knowledgeable, and also have the vision for the people.

So we are, we're hopeful.

>> Dan Morgenstern: You make your home now in Cape Town, is that where you have your sort of main residence?

Because you travel so much.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Right now, I'm at the Hyatt [laughter], Hyatt Regency Washington, but I have a base with my fiancé in Germany.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Where?

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Chiemsee.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Chiemsee is beautiful.

My grandmother had a place not far from Chiemsee.

So I knew that region, when I was a child.

Yeah.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Yeah well, quite, quite beautiful.

So my fiancée, Dr Marina O Marie [assumed spelling], she's a medical doctor.

And so she invited me to come because at some point I had a illness that I had to go ahead to deal with.

And through her assistance the problem was solved.

And this is one of the reasons why I live there, the other reason was that most of the work at that time was in Europe.

So to commute from South Africa to Europe in the Northern Hemisphere was a bit tricky.

And also, my dream in [inaudible], of course, when European is in, you've got an instrument like that, you have to have hope.

And so Fazioli [assumed spelling] factory, is about four hours drive from where we are [inaudible].

So it's just across the border.

So I know Paulos, from very first years when he started playing piano.

So he invited me to his factory, I did a concert there and then I said, okay, let me try and buy an instrument, but now you must have a home to put it.

So that's why I'm in Chiemsee, beautiful instrument.

>> Dan Morgenstern: I don't think I've ever seen one, they're not mass manufactured, I think.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: No, he is a, I think he creates about 100 or 50 or 75, but it takes time to mature.

It's very meticulous on the sound, and the materials that he uses.

And the instrument is very, it's an incredible instrument, one of the instrument that really resonates with you.

You don't have to fight with it.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Well, I can imagine that that is very important to you because you get such a beautiful sound from the piano.

You have a very special touch and you, you know, you just create a very special kind of feeling from that instrument.

Some people use it very precursiely, but you have a really beautiful, almost romantic way.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Oh, thank you very much.

[Inaudible] it comes, it comes through, through trial, trial and error.

Which is what, what is the best method to, to transmit what you, what you're really feeling?

And I discovered that if you just work acoustically with the sound in the venue, instead of amplifying everything first.

If we play bigger concerts, for example, with a group, I suggest to the sound engineers that we first play acoustically.

And we can hear each other on stage, and then transport this into the, you know, into the whole

And [inaudible] sense of technique that I can, I can actually hear, at what level of volume I should strike the note for it to reach, you know, to fill the space.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Well, it's started with so much music is over-amplified these days.

And unnecessarily, I mean there are clubs in New York where you could hear perfectly well without, you know, having a bunch of microphones on stage.

But they always put them there, and once they amplify the drums, then they have to amplify everything else [laughter].

I once did something, I had a very short career as a concert producer.

It wasn't anything that I did primarily, but [inaudible] with George Wayne who asked me to do a few things.

And I wanted there because Carnegie Hall has such great sound.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Yeah.

>> Dan Morgenstern: And when Stan gets played there, sure thing he said, turn off the mic. Everybody would, you know, looked at each other, what does he mean?

[inaudible]

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Yeah.

So I got the idea doing a duet at a concert of acoustic duets at Carnegie Hall, and it came out quite nicely.

Abdullah Ibrahim Yeah.

So far as we normally play acoustic, if it's a larger venue then we ask the engineer just to put a touch of it on, and work from the natural sound.

Sometimes the engineers have to earn their keep, you see.

So they have to be seen [laughter].

>> Dan Morgenstern: They don't want to be made obsolete, of course.

So, you spent some time at the Library of Congress, which is where we are now.

Did you find it interesting?

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Quite amazing, kind of amazing.

I had no, I had no idea the scope and quality, it's quite something, I was totally, totally blown away.

And of course, looking over at Larry, he introduced me, and then took out some of the, you know, the scores and charts.

You see that some of them I've been trying to track down for some time.

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Remember I've been looking at the Ellington's turquoise, on a turquoise cloud.

And, so, Larry showed me, showed me the charts.

And incredibly, you know, you remember that Ellington asked me to work tempo music in New York.

He asked me to help pull it, pull the publishing company together.

And also I used to transcribe some of his, some of the music.

The Virgin Island suite, when it came back from, they just had tapes.

You see, so I transcribed it, and then submitted it, you see.

And then I had some of my own compositions.

So when Larry pulled this Ellington, they were my transcription.

>> Dan Morgenstern: My transcription.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim There all so, and you feel quite honored.

>> Dan Morgenstern: That's fascinating and it's completely off tempo, but just about two weeks ago, I re-listened to that Virgin Island suite for the first time in years.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Really [laughter]

>> Dan Morgenstern: Maybe I had a premonition.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: I remember, where was it again?

And Larry showed me the address also of tempo music

But his sister was running, it was in his sister's house.

In Ruth's house.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Yeah.

Did you ever visit Ruth in her apartment in New York?

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: That's where the publishing company was.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Everything was white.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Yes [laughter].

>> Dan Morgenstern: It was an amazing place, on Central Park South.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Exactly.

And for me, it was wonderful to be there, because I could really access some of Ellington's music, scores, first-hand.

And of course it gave me a good schooling in the business of publishing.

>> Dan Morgenstern: You met Ellington in Switzerland, right?

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Switzerland, yeah.

We were playing in this little club, and we met a lot of American musicians because they passed through on concerts.

I met Gana [phonetic], the Messengers, that's when I first met Wayne Shorter.

A lot of them came through, Coltrane.

And the, but this club that we played in, we knew that Ellington was coming.

The club owner didn't want to let us, let us off.

So Sathima went to the concert, and we had finished, in fact, the club owner was just locking up when Sathima arrives with Ellington and his entourage.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Wow.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: I don't know today how she managed.

What did she say to Ellington?

But he came and, okay, we went in the trio.

And I was asked to play, and we played a few pieces.

And then a few days later he took us to Paris to record.

He was ANR man for a [inaudible].

Frank Sinatra.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Right.

Right.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: It was incredible because when we got into the studio, he said to Sathima.

So what do you do?

And she said, I sing.

And he said okay, we'll start with you.

And that's how we recorded, it was recorded in the afternoon in Paris.

Which was then later, later released.

It was not released in the same time, when my recording was released.

A learning experience.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Ellington was an amazing man wasn't he?

He was just.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Yeah he was a, always, always remind me of this wise old men in the village.

You have to watch what you say.

Like Mandela.

I was [inaudible] with Mandela, when you apt not to say anything.

And when you start saying it, you realize that you put your foot in your mouth [laughter].

Because the old [inaudible] and Ellington, almost like the seven sense of understanding, or almost like foreseeing.

And I think it's maybe it's a quality that we try to develop as jazz musicians, this almost anticipation, not just in the music, but in one's life.

To develop this propensity to see in others what is deeply embedded, and how we can resonate with such.

And Ellington was a master, he was a master at that.

And also his response, you know, how he would respond to a situation was quite masterful.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Yeah, he knew how to bring out the special quality in a musician.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Yea.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Some cases once they left him, they never recaptured that.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Yeah, from that.

Yeah, one of the things that I learned from him is that when I saw writing for why the instrument's wider than the piano.

So you actually, you write for the musician.

So you, that specific ability or specific that specific sonority that a musician has.

And then write the song for that specific individual, instead of the other way round.  
Instead of just writing music, and at the same time, people that have to play it.  
And I think this is why he had this, and of course, the great thing is, was, that he had the orchestra at his fingertips.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Well that's why, you know, he kept that orchestra, even though it, you know, it cost him a fortune.

And he kept them on salary even when they were not working because he wanted that to be there when he had music that he wanted to hear.

And we're lucky that he did that.

And of course when he wasn't recording for a label, he recorded stuff for himself.

We have that whole treasure trove of things.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: How do you manage to keep these great musicians with you such a long time?

So, [inaudible] I've got a gimmick.

I give them money [laughter].

And then be with them at the studio.

Because they paid them out of his own, out of his own, out of his own pocket.

>> Dan Morgenstern: There's a big literature about Ellington, of course, and there's a recent book

I don't know if you've seen it, but Terry Teachout about Duke, and it's become quite controversial with Ellington fans.

And I think rightly so.

Because among other things, he says that Ellington was really not a very good piano player, I mean he was okay, but he was no more than sort of mediocre.

Which is such a idiotic thing to say, you know?

Because the sound alone that he got out of it.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Yea.

I mean, listening to, listening to Ellington and, like you say, the sound, but the concept of listening now to, what did you just say, the Ella, the Ellington [inaudible].

And one of the things that I learned from Ellington was this comping, you know?

How to accompany a singer or the soloist, and it was quite incredible.

Because if you look at just a simple song like, Do Nothing To Hear From Me.

So there's a basic chords, you know, but what he does is this inversion of the chords and runs with you [laughter] you never thought of.

But it, it, it does not interfere with the spirit of the vocalist.

A lot of accompanies, you know, will overcrowd.

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>> Dan Morgenstern: Things he plays in the cracks in an arrangement, you know, just perfect enhancing.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: So that's a pianist, and [inaudible] listen to Ellington and then we always are stunned and say, well, why didn't I think about that?

I can imagine this as a negative response [inaudible], but I mean that is over because they said Monk couldn't play either.

>> Dan Morgenstern: And Monk was, really loved Ellington.



>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Yeah.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Yeah.

When you listen to the 1930s small group recordings where Duke sometimes, you know, stretches out a little more, you can hear stuff that Monk picked up from him.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: That's right, yeah.

And then [inaudible], those were Ellington, and then [inaudible] was the one that really, the first musician to endorse, to endorse Monk.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Monk, yeah.

I've seen the magazine, there was a magazine called Music Dial, which was published by black musicians in Harlem, it was a unique magazine, the only one of its kind.

It lasted a couple of years, it got started in the mid 40s, very funny, 43.

And Herbie wrote a column so then that's where he mentions Monk, the first time he got mentioned in print.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Wow, I must look that up.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Did you meet Herbie?

Did you know him?

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: No, I didn't.

I tried to play all his tunes even in South Africa, you know, the ten inch, the blue note, ten inches.

The first time I went to Japan, you remember those little jazz clubs that they had, the size of postage stamps all over Japan, and I played this [foreign language] way up in the winter.

I go into this club, little small, little club, and the guy says, is this, I've got everything.

I said [foreign language].

So I realize then that, I mean, this music resonated well beyond, beyond borders that we maybe created for ourselves.

So when I was a, when I first had [inaudible], I tried to play some [inaudible], but that already was pushing, you know, it was pushing the boundaries.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Well it was lucky that Bluno'd [phonetic] recorded her because otherwise there would only be a tiny amount of stuff of his.

He didn't have much luck, he was such a nice man.

I met him through Roswell Rudd, Roswell and Steve Lacy, they loved Herbie, you know?

So tell me, what are you, what is the next thing you are about to do?

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Tomorrow we go to New York, we're there for a few days and then we go to, with the band, with [inaudible] and seven piece, we do a US tour.

We go to San Francisco, Seattle, where else are we going?

Dakota, Dakota Jazz Club, I haven't been there for years.

Phoenix at the music museum, it's a tour until about the 9th of May, then I go back to Germany and then we go to, I go to South Africa do this project with Musikkeller [assumed spelling] with Ekaya, my band, and Musikkeller [assumed spelling], we do two nights.

And it is a commemoration or maybe a revisiting of the jazz episode recording that we did in the late 50s, and this is going to be perhaps the beginning of a curriculum for an academy that we have been planning on and working on for many years.

It looks now as if we have some, or we've been having the support from government and my, my suggestion to them was that we should really invest in the academy.

And it looks as if we have it together, so, coming to Library of Congress, everybody knows that I'm here.

And that I'm meeting with you, and also how we can create this, some kind of a synergy, you know, because with this incredible wealth of material that is here, you know, especially in terms of reading an academy, especially for young musicians.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Yeah we, we really, we need good, good teachers, we need to transmit the tradition.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: So we've been doing it with Ekaya, you know, with my, with the band, whenever we travel, like I said, we have workshops.

>> Dan Morgenstern: You do clinics?

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Clinics, yeah.

The problem is that there's no follow through, you see.

So you do it for the concert, or, and then it's gone.

So there's no follow through, and this is what, we need, need this academy, of course a total agreement that the most important aspect of this is getting the teachers and mentors who firstly know the tradition and who are passionate about it.

So I think, I think we've, this visit here to the Library of Congress has opened up a very possible [inaudible].

And I'm speaking to you and I just, your expertise and your, your [inaudible] knowledge that you have of the music and its environment.

>> Dan Morgenstern: I've just been very lucky because I never thought when I was first became interested in jazz and, you know, from recordings and see, I had the good luck of seeing Fats Waller in Copenhagen when I was not quite 9 years old and he blew me away.

But I never thought I would be able to make a living out of that, but I started writing and then it's just one thing led to another and, you know, it's a blessing to have been able to make a living at something that you really love and the music is so, you know, I still, you know, I still get a kick out of my Louis Hot Fives [laughter].

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: [inaudible] how the music, there's a filmmaker, John Irving, he's asked me to do, to write some music for a film.

And we were talking about this, he said, when he was 14 years of age, he heard Ellington in London and there was a singer with him, it was a blind singer, but he never knew what he was, and I said, Al Hibbler.

And that led me to the Liberian Suite, you see with Al Hibbler "I Like the Sunrise", being blind. So until you, Liberian Suite, I don't know if it is performed much.

>> Dan Morgenstern: No.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: But that is one of the works for his uncle, [inaudible] the Liberian Suite, and get this interconnectedness that has happened, happened with the music.

And especially for teaching, for it to be in the curriculum.

So we can understand that the, the music in the diaspora is far and wide.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Yeah, there's such a wealth of stuff, such a treasure trove of music that can be introduced to people, and especially to young musicians who very often are totally amazed when they come into contact with some of the past that, you know, we had at Rutgers University where there is a master's program in jazz history.

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And then somebody saying they heard, for the first time, "Weather Bird", which is a beautiful thing with Earl Hines and Louis together.

They were doing that in 1928?

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: I agree, it's absolutely imperative that we, that there must be some vehicle, this should be passed onto the other generation.

>> Dan Morgenstern: Well, it's been wonderful to see you again, and I hope it won't be another 60 years before we do [laughter], it was so good to see you.

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Thank you for this, thank you for your time.

>> Dan Morgenstern: I look forward to hearing more of your beautiful music live and recordings and all the best to you.

We're both, I'm a little older than Abdullah, we're both oxygenarians [laughter], but we're still doing it right?

>> Abdullah Ibrahim: Still doing it

We're blessed.

Thank you so much.

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