

“There’s Something About the Look”: Thomas King in Conversation with Dionne Brand

Transcribed by Mauricio Martinez

June 21, 2013

DB:

I find the photographs in this show strangely both public and intimate. These musicians, these jazz figures in this public space, the space of making that music or hanging out, but you manage, I think, to get this odd intimacy to them. Tell me what you're thinking when you're doing that.

TK:

Partly it was dependent on the equipment, believe it or not. In the early days, when I was first shooting the Guelph Jazz Festival, I had a film camera, and the ability of the lens to collect light is limited. I'm shooting a lot of the time in the evening—the musicians would come in the afternoon, and go and do the sound check. Well, the sound check space was always very dark. I had to wait until I could bring them out. And I had to find some open shade someplace and this normally took place just as the sun is dropping and I'm losing my light. So those were always a hassle to do, and primarily I was doing informal portraiture, where I would pose the person, get them set up, and then the shot would depend on whom I was dealing with. Some of the people were very stiff in front of the camera. And there's no way to make them feel at ease. So you have to work around that. The low light, the limitations of the equipment, the small window of opportunity to shoot those shots, and most of them had to be outside. Then I switched to digital, partly because I couldn't stand the fumes of the darkroom anymore; it was beginning to hurt my health. And digital was able to capture more light than film had been able to. Now I was able to go inside with a long lens and start shooting the sound checks. So I could get the people as they're practicing for their performance. I didn't shoot many performances, primarily because there I'm in with an audience. So I did a lot of sound check stuff and I approached it as I would approach street photography, where I'm grabbing shots as I can. As I see a shot, I try and grab it. I don't try to set it up, I don't say, "could you turn your head a little bit to the right?" I took them as I got them.

DB:

But the *look*. There's something about the look that got beyond the technical.

TK:

I go looking for particular things. You get a stage filled with instruments and other musicians moving around. They're not in position, they keep on moving around back and forth. And what I do is I will take the time to look at the situation to see if there are any patterns there. I'll try to imagine a shot that's available to me before I even begin clicking. I look at the setup, and I say, "ok, what's available to me? What do I have? What can I make out of this? What are my angles? Where can I stand to get a good shot? What is the person on stage doing that is either going to assist me or hinder me in that?" And then I try to work around that. So I'm shooting, actually, for one shot only. I may take 50 shots.

I may do that. And sometimes as I'm doing that I'll sort through them to see if there's anything that catches my eye, but normally I'm shooting for just one shot.

DB:

That Amiri Baraka shot was...that's a beautiful photo. I mean, the frame, all the elements in it, the composition, it's fantastic.

TK:

It's one of my favourite shots. I had just taken a shot of him and William Parker on the porch of the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre. He wanted to go across the street, to get something from the convenience store. He started walking down the stairs and I just happened to turn and see that frame. I knew, as soon as I saw him do that I said, "There's my shot," even though it's the back of him. And I also got a shot of Abdullah Ibrahim, and he didn't want any formal shots taken. I was at the back of the River Run theatre. I was in my car changing lenses. I was getting my equipment set up, and Abdullah comes walking past the car. And I got a shot of him from the back, walking sort of up that pathway, which I really like too. So that's happenstance—just lucky on those kinds of shots.

DB:

There's something... back to the Amiri Baraka one, that just captures... because I just know his work ... it seems that the one [photo] captured everything about him. The angle of his body, the years of his craft...

TK:

It was a lonely kind of shot and the way he walks, he sort of pulls his shoulders up a little bit as though he's hurting. And that touched me, I guess. Sometimes, I'll see those shots and I know that's a good photograph--that's a good moment. Without even having to try to describe it, to explain it to myself.

DB:

I'm thinking that the thing that you're doing in shots like that is that they have a certain self-composition. They're self composing in a way. I mean there are lots of shots historically of jazz musicians or blues musicians, where they're classically posed. But there's an outer-ness to them, but in yours I've found kind of a self-composition, that the artist is who he or she is.

TK:

I try to wait until the artist stops screwing around with me, with themselves. Where they're not saying "ok, this is a photograph and I want to look like this in the photograph." Sometimes they don't drop that; they don't drop that façade. So not all the shots that I get are particularly good. But I try to wait for that moment when they let those things slip away. And I think I've got a good eye for recognizing that, when that happens. So a lot of times I'll take pictures of people walking down the hallway. I'll know they're coming, to go into the auditorium, and I'll sit down in a chair with my long lens and have it all set up, and as they come down I'll shoot, and hope I can grab something.

When I'm shooting the sound checks, I try to stay out of the person's line of vision. So they're not looking at me, or the camera—they don't see it.

DB:

Talk about Jöelle Léandre.

TK:

There was one photograph I took of Jöelle Léandre. I was taking shots, and it was kind of boring—not her, not the music—but it was the angle I had. So she was there, and I'm taking shots of her and I'm getting bored with the shots that I'm taking. And then I thought, “you know what, maybe I can put a little motion in there,” so I took the camera and I set it on a very slow speed, and just took the photograph and tapped the side of the camera so it has this [waves hand], and so what I got was the same kind of vibration that she's getting off the strings [on her double bass]. As her strings are vibrating so is she. And it puts her out of focus, and it puts motion in, which are generally two things that are no nos. But in this case I got a great photograph of her and there is a movement to it, or there is a vibration to it that I quite like. Now she won't like the photograph probably, because it's not a flattering photograph of her. But it's a *good* photograph. That's always the problem when you're shooting people, where everyone wants a flattering photograph rather than a *good* photograph.

DB:

This brings me to a point I was making earlier about these public shots, these are consummate artists. And you are a window into them, and I find the shots that you've gotten of them—have a lot of integrity.

TK:

It's a funny thing. Every year the Jazz Festival comes to town. And these guys are good . . . and I find it intriguing that they've chosen to do this kind of music. So my job that I try to do as a photographer is to try to capture that or try to find out—photographically—what that's all about. I don't talk to many of them. I don't have a chance to talk to them. I introduce myself, but really I'm an anomaly in their lives, sort of a remora to their shark—I just kind of watch what they're doing.

DB:

What do you think they're doing?

TK:

I don't know. I watched Jesse Stewart play saw blades, these big saw blades, as a percussionist. I was absolutely intrigued with the types of sounds, the combination of sounds, the concordances, the discordance that he'd get out of those things. And I remember the first time I saw him, I thought to myself, why is he playing saw blades? Couldn't he get the same quality of what he's trying to get out of a standard instrument like cymbals? And I still don't have the answer to that, but that's sort of like asking me [as a writer] why I play around with the mythical and the contemporary in the same piece. Why do I think I have to run off on an oral story and pretend it exists in the world that I

created--this sort of very real, very contemporary world? Why do I bother to do that? So I figured that they're doing the same thing I'm doing.

DB:

Why do you bother to do that? Let's keep going there.

TK:

I bother to do that because I find it fascinating to expand the limits of time, and the limits of space And if I construct the world in that way, I can do anything I want, I can move characters any place around in there. As long as I can be convincing. And that's the trick. As long as I can convince my readers that this is a legitimate world that I'm talking about.

DB:

Or to go with you.

TK:

Or to go with me--just to take my hand and walk with me down that path. If I can get 'em to do that...

DB:

I think you've just described jazz. In a funny way.

TK:

Well it may be that...

DB:

This business of time, and the constricted world we've been given. And I always think of jazz as the possibility of busting out of it.

TK:

Well the musicians that come to Guelph bust out of something. It is amazing. [But] I [still] don't know how to read improv.

DB:

I think you're reading it well.

TK:

Well I don't feel as though I have a handle on it particularly, but the photography helps me get whatever handle I do have on it. It allows me because I'm trying to tell a story at the same time they are--telling slightly different stories perhaps.

DB:

I think that dissertation that you just did on time... I think that's really... there's the similarity.

TK:

Well, what do you do with your writing? Jazz and your writing?

DB:

People say it's there, but I'm just trying to imitate it. Like you, I don't have a music background of any kind, I have no idea.

TK:

I'm surprised--I would have thought you were musical.

DB:

I couldn't carry a note if it was in a suitcase. But I like the structure that I hear. And I like that outer worldly-ness. Because this world is so... constrictive.

TK:

And I think maybe that's where our writing and jazz overlaps . . . in that sense of restrictions and that need to get past that. The new novel I'm working on now, *The Back of the Turtle*, features God and his son who have been reduced to running a motel on the West Coast. Things have been so bad for them that...as a matter of fact God, who's known as Dad, and his son, who's known as Sonny--Dad's died a while ago and Sonny is running the motel while Dad's still in room number one--like he's just taking a rest. People are going to say, "what in the hell is he doing with that?" But it's a wonderful idea; it suggests a kind of world that we've created that's gone astray. It's a riff I guess And if you can you can pull it off, it's going to work, and if you can't you're on a high board. And the question is, is there water in the pool or not? And you don't know until you jump.

DB:

I often think about jazz too as... there will be water in the pool or there will be some other substance. That you will fall into.

TK:

You are an optimist.

DB:

We haven't imagined that substance yet. I think of it as... I remember, I think of an old recording of Charlie Parker, playing "Ornithology," and it's recorded at a particular time, and hearing that piece of music just work its way, way out of its social context, way out of the social context in which it appears. So he's blowing way out of that decade, which was a horrible decade. It was horrible for people, but he's blowing himself and all aspirations out of there. Sometimes when I hear that, I think, that's what's going on in that music.

TK:

One of the magical moments for me...I think it was Miles Davis. I was listening to him play a piece, I don't know what the piece was, and right in the middle of it, there's this

dead silence. And there's about, I don't know, fifteen, twenty seconds of nothing, except there's this kind of low level white noise that's there, and then he picks it up again, and plays on through. And for me that was a wonderful little interlude, you kind of settle down into that space there and just travel along, you don't lose the music at all. And you know it's coming and you just wait for it, it's like watching for a train coming down the track. And I hadn't thought that dead air would ever qualify as music or qualify even as a passage from one side to another, and it did. And in my writing, I like to have those moments where I make my readers leap, or I make them wait. And I know I'm being naughty. I'm making them wait for something that they want to hear. They want to...they've lost that note, they want to hear it again. And you don't give it to them until you're ready to do it. And that's what Davis . . . did. He would count in his head: one, two, three, and just how far that audience would carry along with him before he had to come back up again and make himself visible. And I like that.

DB:

And after... that moment of surprise. Because he could have gone anywhere.

TK:

And you don't know what he's going to do. Is he going to come in soft, is he going to come in hard, is he going to come in at all? Is he going to end the song and just walk away, and that would have been fun too, probably.

DB:

It takes you to--not the expected place, but the other possibilities for place. Because in some senses that aligns itself with the order. The previous order, or the order that we live in which is sometimes oppressive.

TK:

Sometimes it's lovely, and it's comforting, and it feels like a warm blanket and sometimes it's oppressive as hell. The trick I think is to be able to move away from that whenever you feel like it. To have the skill or the ability or the desire to say, enough of this, I need something else. And I think probably improv is one of those ways of doing that, particular kinds of writing are another way of doing that, art, abstract art certainly is some of that. But what do I know?