

Patricia Nicholson and William Parker: Endless Vision

Transcription by Elizabeth Johnstone

Chinen: Maybe one question just to start, is a reflection on this year's festival and what really struck you about it. I know there was some expanded purview, but what are your memories of this festival this year?

Parker: Well, one thing in particular, okay am I getting my days right? I think it's Sunday morning when the high schools played, it could have been Saturday, but the morning that the New School was there and Celine Washington, and Brooklyn College was there. Who else was there?

Chinen: We can look it up, too.

Parker: Well, I can find the flyer. That afternoon, I remember that because there weren't too many people in the audience. It was mostly parents. Oh, and Tom Zlabinger's ensemble from York College. It was a very good program because this year, one of the things that the Vision Festival was trying to do was to--and it did it last year but people for some reason there wasn't much audience because it was earlier in the day and maybe people were hanging out later, or they didn't know or didn't have much interest because it's student musicians and younger people--is that they performed. And Tom's band performed some Charles Mingus compositions. But the last thing they performed was an original thing they did with Roy Campbell as soloist. It was all well done, good spirit, and very enthusiastic. So, for the second year in a row... (phone rings, musical ringtone) William Parker picks up the phone). Hello. We're just starting to talk. Warm up the tape recorder. Okay. Alright. No, everything is cool. Alright. Bye.

Chinen: Is that your regular ringtone, or is that a designated...?

Parker: No, that's my regular ringtone. So that morning was good. So then the guys from the New School, who actually were my students...there were about 5 or 6 of them and they played their original compositions. What we talked about during the year was to try to find your space in history and play, put together music that you felt was close to you, and not be afraid to do what you wanted to do. Which means if you heard a Russian lullaby and then not put that in because you think it's not hip, but if you liked it and you really wanted to do it, then put it in. Or put anything you wanted in the music, and that's what they did. And they all contributed a composition. I liked that very much, and I also liked what Brooklyn College was doing. So that was a very good evening. And the thing I did out at the park, the pre-concert event, with the kids I'd been working with in the projects. Again, that was making a connection, trying to introduce younger people to music, and to begin to tap into the audience in the housing projects. Then that made a connection to this thing which we call Little Huey Ensemble...because out of the connection with the projects, with kids being discouraged and saying, "Well, you

can't be a poet. You can't fly. You have to fit into society..." It's in its embryonic stage but it's beginning to make outreaches to the community....

Chinen: Right.

Parker: ...that we serve. So that was very good. As far as the festival, proper...

Chinen: Well, let me interrupt you for a second because I want to expand on that idea of outreach.

Parker: Okay.

Chinen: That's the thing that really struck me, looking at the schedule this year...was how much you were reaching out and bringing in. And my understanding of this Guelph database is that they're talking about society, improvised music and social networks, and the way that this music and this art exists in the world. So what brought you to that purpose with this festival? Why is it so much more pronounced this year than in other years?

Parker: Well, the idea is not new. We've been talking about these ideas since 1973. You know the idea of music and people. And people were different than listeners. Listeners were also people but they were people who had background, who when a certain musician were playing, they would go listen to him, buy a CD. The people were people who were workers, students, people who were living their lives but didn't cross paths with the music, and I always thought that those people were really the heart of things. Simply in numbers. There were much more of them than there were of the listeners.

Chinen: Right.

Parker: And that these people could be listeners too, except that we had to reach out to them. You know, it's almost like we're calling them but they're not hearing us. So how do we reach out to them? And last year we did workshops with the kids. Lewis Barnes, Roy Campbell, had gone to schools and they had been doing workshops, and every year, the last three years we're bringing in the high school band. There have been little attempts, steps to get closer to the community. It's almost like the idea: if the people don't come to the music, you have to bring the music to the people. And that's very important, especially nowadays because people are living their lives and looking at screens and putting things in their ears, and they're not really hearing anymore. So it's very important to eventually get a little closer, a little closer, to eventually not just doing one day in the projects, but every day having an event there, or every Friday for 52 weeks...that's concert day and we're going to bring the music there. Now, why it happened this time? Because it just came together. Patricia decided to do it. You can ask her when she gets here exactly why now. The funds this year were not that hot.

Chinen: It was a tough year all around.

Parker: It was a very, very, very tough year. But in a sense, when the funds are low you do more. To keep things moving. So that's why it was done, and I'm just glad we did it because right now we're at a stage where we can't keep talking about things. You can't say, well, gee, I thought of something in 1973. It's 2010 and you haven't done it yet? Now, we have flooding in Pakistan, flooding in Louisiana, flash fires in Russia, with smog. I mean, all this crazy stuff is happening. So now, take a chance. Now we're trying to get more into doing things than talking about things. Because it's just important to really start doing them.

Chinen: Yes. You were about to talk about some of the musical offerings of this year's festival, as well. Why don't we touch on that, and then talk a little bit more broadly, I'll ask you a broader question after that?

Parker: This festival, I was there every night, I must say. I usually get "Visionitis" after a couple of days and I've got to cool out [laughter]. But I think I heard every set. The only sets I wasn't able to hear because I had to go run off and do something were, I think, the night Amiri Baraka and Jayne Cortez played. Those last nights. I was there every night, hanging out and listening, and I thought that every night the music was very, very good. I'm not going to say what I liked but it was good to have the thing dedicated...although the sadness arose when Fred Anderson died, but it was good to have that evening for Muhal Richard Abrams because I hadn't really talked to Muhal in years. I used to play with him and we hadn't really talked since we were doing those gigs. So it was good to have him do something and give him recognition, as well as Billy Bang, his night, have Wadada Leo Smith and [Günter] 'Baby' Sommer, Joëlle Léandre. To have David Ware come back and play. I mean, if you really look at it, and maybe come back and look at it again, and then maybe look at it a third time, you'll see that every night there was something happening. Even a night like Sunday, the night Guillermo E. Brown did his gospel rock thing. A lot of people got upset about that, they said, "Well, it doesn't belong in the festival. It's not appropriate. He shouldn't be doing that here." I said, "Guillermo," I said, "Man, you got hired to do something and like it or not you were brave enough to get up there and do what you were doing." Whether the people liked it or not, or it's not appropriate...people think that the festival has only got to be this, or only that. But I was happy that he did do it, and that's what you're supposed to do in the festival. You're working on this...to step up and do it. So every night there was something very good at the festival. I thought it was, again, a big success artistically. Now, you had a lot of other things going on at the time of the festival, as you know. So the audience, you know, I don't really know the numbers. Chris will tell you how many people came but it was enough to have a good feeling like we always do. And all the musicians got to hang out, and this is a very important part of the festival, that musicians get to hang out and talk and communicate. You don't get to do that. It's not like you play at the festival and you're on, and then after...you play down at New Orleans five minutes, and you get that hook. You don't get to talk to anybody really. So that's really what makes it...and then the people, the audience. So it's always a success at that level. On a social and musical level. Of course, you have one guy who's not that hot one night, and one guy, it's not his best performance, but basically everybody has a

level where it's pretty good. You can nitpick. Everyone's got their favorites, but basically I thought that all the music was good.

Chinen: When you mention all of the musicians talking to each other, it strikes me that above all the Vision Festival has always modeled this notion of a musical community with these relationships, and to that end the tribute to the elders has been a really great thing in recent years. This year when we lost both Fred Anderson, as you mentioned, and Bill Dixon, I thought about the fact that I was lucky to see these guys in recent years because of the Vision Festival. Bill Dixon had that opportunity to premiere that amazing extended composition, and of course, Fred was almost every year turning up on the festival.

Parker: People say, "Why do you have Fred every year? Why do you have Fred every year?" and all I could say was, "Fred, we have him every year because there is going to come a time when that doesn't happen. So don't complain. Just listen, and just bear with it." He's one of the elders of the community, and as long as he can come....he was in Chicago, and he was saying just before he really went into the coma, he was saying, "I gotta go to the Vision Festival. I gotta go to the Vision Festival." He really wanted to come. I feel good about that too, the fact that there was a point where it was decided let's stop honoring people that have passed, and let's start honoring living people. I really think it's a good thing, and it's a good thing for the people in there who have reached 75. They can have some place every year to play. Marshall Allen's 86? He knows when he can't do it anymore. You know, he's gonna know when he can't jump off the stage and on the stage anymore.

Chinen: I almost can't imagine that.

Parker: He's gonna let you know. Because that was the credo. Fred said, "If I can't play all the way, I'm not coming." He wasn't riding on the age thing, with everyone like, "Wow, you play good, Fred." If he wasn't top-notch, he wasn't going to play. It was a good example to set for the younger guys to always have a good credo about when you play. Whatever it is, you do your best and try your best, as long as you can play. I was really happy about that idea for the last couple years.

Chinen: I think I was reviewing another show the night of the Muhal. I think I was reviewing Herbie Hancock. I was very sorry to miss that because I'd been looking forward to that evening.

Parker: Well, you know George Sams? Where are you from, California?

Chinen: Hawaii.

Parker: You're from Hawaii.

Chinen: Not much of a scene in Hawaii.

Parker: Because I ran into George Sams yesterday. I don't know if you know who he is. He's an alto. He's a trumpet player. He played in a group called The United Front, and he was just telling me he's playing with Bobo down in St. Louis, Bobo Shaw, and that Bobo is doing very well. I knew him from the 70s. He's a good player.

Nicholson: (joining the conversation) So what have you been telling Nate? (laughs)

Chinen: We started out by talking about the community aspect of this year, bringing in more of the students and focusing on a little bit of outreach with the festival.

Nicholson: We did students last year too, but they were younger. It's been strengthening. The way I think of it is, we bring them there because we want them to have the opportunity to see what they are developing within a context, a historical context. There's such an incredible focus on what's the newest thing, and really, if you want to take the newest thing out of the context of history, that's like saying "Let's develop a new car and not use wheels – you know, we're going to be really new. This car is going to be so new." And you'll end up with something that goes and it might be interesting, [laughs] but it's kind of foolish. And that's the way we approach art, having the context of history. It's bringing them in and it's educating them at the same time by bringing them in.

Chinen: Right.

Nicholson: It's really a concept of our history in both directions. Our history and our future.

Chinen: A continuum.

Nicholson: Thank you, that's the word.

Chinen: So I wanted to ask, and I don't want to forget to ask this, about the lifetime achievement honours which we were just talking about. Has that process of choosing, those elders to be honoured, has that ever been a difficult thing to decide? This year this is the person? Because it seems like more and more of our elders are getting older and older, as happens. What is that process like? As far as deciding?

Nicholson: It's almost always obvious. This year was a little less obvious. I don't know why, but it was. It was more of a discussion, and that ended up being reflected by the fact that we honoured more people in a way. Muhal is really important. That's why we honoured him. But he's also less integral to this particular, our particular scene. We tend to honour people who are at least in their seventies, but then we realized we might be losing them younger than that. That's one of the reasons why some of the musicians got together and wanted to make sure they had the ability. That's really important. You know it's not fair if you don't make it to seventy, and there are a few people like that, in our world who might not. If we don't honour them, no one will. It's not that they are not worthy of being honored, but if we're in the strongest position and also we represent an

aesthetic that is not only not mainstream, it's not funded equally, it's not acknowledged by a lot of foundations or a lot of other organizations as being equally honourable.

And I was wondering why it's so weird now. I don't know, maybe it always was but you only live in the time period you live in and so you don't really know what it was like. But it seems like there's so little out there that's supporting anyone or anything that it seems like....[addresses Parker] and you can jump in on this if you have a different opinion... that there's some jockeying for position as good, hip, cutting edge, valid, what people will spend money on, give support, give money to. It's mostly where the money is given and there's a little bit of a jockeying for that.

Chinen: Well, it's a smaller pie.

Nicholson: It's a really small piece of the pie. But it doesn't seem to be just a straight natural rising of things. Because you rise to a certain level, and then as soon as you're above a certain level, there's a lot of it. Someone wants to get up to your level or on top of it. Because you're talking to maybe five people, not literally, or maybe if you're talking about funding then maybe you are. I'm not sure. It's very crazy, and I don't really understand why it's such an unhappy thing. Do you know what I'm talking about William?

Parker: No. (everyone laughs)

Nicholson: Do you know what I'm talking about Nate?

Chinen: I think so. I want to touch on an aesthetic question though. You mentioned that the Vision Festival doesn't represent the main stream, which is I think obvious. How much of the mission of the festival at this point stems from that distance? Stems from the fact that this is out of the well-trod path? Is that defining in some way?

Nicholson: No. I don't ever quite think of it like that, (to Parker) do you? It's irrelevant, isn't it? Mainstream? What do you mean by mainstream?

Parker: Well, you used the word "mainstream."

Nicholson: So what do I mean? So maybe we should define what we mean by the word "mainstream." What do you mean by "mainstream," since you asked this question?

Chinen: Well, I meant it broadly.

Nicholson: There's mainstream jazz. There's mainstream music. There's the culture of the common.

Chinen: Right. If we limit the conversation to, or if we limit these parameters to, the music we can gather under the umbrella of jazz and we talk about that...

Nicholson: Well, my answer is still no. Because I actually think that all the boundaries are non-useful. That is part of the problem as I see it. I go through all these words to describe, and the words I've gone through are "avant-jazz," and "innovative music." I actually don't even like the word "innovative." It's the one I like even less than "avant-jazz." Although I like the sound of it. It gives people the wrong idea.

Chinen: William, as a musician, what is your response to that?

Parker: We would always say that the mainstream is not the mainstream, and for most musicians that I know, it's all about the music. If you look at Charlie Parker, and then you go from Charlie Parker to what Eric Dolphy was doing, you hear a continuation and an extension. Which is what is supposed to happen. You're supposed to hear Charlie Parker and then add your own language to the area that he was vibrating in. So you have Eric Dolphy, and then you have Ken McIntyre, Sonny Simmons, Ornette Coleman, Roscoe Mitchell adding something else, and that's how the music has been. Anthony Braxton, and everyone is coming out of this main reservoir. All the musicians from Europe, if you ask them, "What was the first music you heard?" They'll say, "Oh I heard Louis Armstrong on the radio." They always go back to that, you know, when I was a kid...you ask Peter Brötzmann, "Oh, I heard Louis Armstrong. Han Bennink: "I heard Louis Armstrong." So that's the spark, and we can't get away from that being the spark, and we ignite it and add things to it, and I think that's all I'm concerned about--not what it's called--but just being able to present the music. And when called on to explain...What are you doing to explain what I'm doing? Maybe I can give you a little hint on what he's doing. Him, I don't know what he's doing. He'll have to explain it himself. So my main concern is that it's all music. As far as I see...because we can dig... the problem has been...we can dig...Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock, if you like...and you can dig Dave Burrell and Matthew Shipp and David S. Ware, if you like. More musicians than not, I would say, have no problem with the whole spectrum of music. They know what's going on, but they have to do what they have to do because that's what they do.

Nicholson: The whole idea of these streams. Who are creating these banks and then saying "This is the main stream." So I think creating these streams, in a way, isn't talking about music at all. You're talking about economics, and how the economy will support you if you do this or if you do that. So the economy supports a non-creative process that then becomes the mainstream. Not that you can't play if you're considered quote unquote "the mainstream." That doesn't mean you're not a creative musician necessarily, but that the creation of the stream is an economic reality, not a creative reality.

Parker: But economic realities are artificial, in the sense that if you have a radio station that plays one artist five hundred times a month, and then they play this artist three times a month...

Nicholson: At three am.

Parker: ...at three in the morning. And then you say, "Well, it looks like this guy doesn't sell." So I think it's artificial because it's created. No one has really given the underdog or underground music a chance to really present itself on a royal platter, so to speak, like the other music. There's this illusion that people won't like it, or it doesn't sell, before it's really given a chance.

Chinen: Right. It strikes me as we talk about this, that there was a time early in the history of the festival when the reflexive thing for people to talk about was a model of opposition. Because there was a big festival in town with a big sponsor and a lot of money and you guys were doing the other thing.

Nicholson: We were the upstart.

Chinen: Right, and now we're past the 15 year mark. There's an identity that the Vision Festival has that is whole and distinct, and even a tradition within the festival, and so to talk about it within that oppositional term is really, as you said, it does become ridiculous.

Nicholson: Well, it was always how other people framed it, not how we framed it. Because we were very, very conscious, and if anything, more so at the beginning. You know after awhile you get comfortable with who you are. But, really carefully, at the beginning we were inclusive of different ways. We've always tried to be. Even though I think in the age of the Internet, if you didn't include people they got cranky and then they started voicing, and then you become a myth on that level. And since I'm not and none of the people close to me are Internet kinds of people, I don't involve myself in the discussion. Which may be a mistake, or maybe not.

Chinen: And when you talk about myth, is that a myth of exclusiveness?

Nicholson: Yah. What I explain to people is that Vision Festival has a brand and that brand represents a certain impetus in art.

Chinen: That's an awfully corporate way to put it, "the Vision Festival has a brand."

Nicholson: That's because I have to meet with people who give me these words. I'm learning them. I only learned that word last year. Fourteen years before I learned it. But it already had a brand. It means that people expect a certain thing. I remember one year, years ago, we booked from Texas, David 'Fathead' Newman. We were really happy to present him because a lot of musicians really liked him, and he's definitely more mainstream but so what? And I couldn't believe it, the house was almost empty because our audience likes a certain thing, and I couldn't afford to hire him again. Not because I didn't like him but because Vision audiences won't go to see him, and his audience didn't feel comfortable at the Vision Festival.

Parker: I want to say one thing...

Chinen: That's really interesting though....

Parker: If the Vision Festival was presented in Europe, instead of getting 300 people we'd get thousands of people. And if we had presented David Fathead Newman, we would have gotten a packed house because the audience in Europe...the program that's put on....if we were in Paris, or Amsterdam, or wherever, Italy, they come from all over. A Vision audience, they're not as open, they're a little slow...

Nicholson: They're cliquish, or faddish...

Chinen: I think about, for instance, an event that for me was a real landmark of my time in New York. When the Bell Atlantic Festival had its brief moment and Ornette Coleman played in Battery Park City outdoors. To see that there, in such an open setting, with so many people getting an opportunity to see what he did, that strikes me as getting to the heart of what you're talking about in terms of just opening everything up. Now if it wasn't Ornette Coleman, I don't know how it might have been different. Someone that doesn't have quite that much cachet about his name maybe would have been different. I do think about what you're saying with audience response. I wondered sometimes when you talk about the history of musician-initiated and musician-run events, especially dating back to the 70s and what was happening here in New York, whether the conversation about the quote unquote "loft scene" ends up having this long-term ghettoizing effect. Where it's supposed to be a shoestring thing. God forbid you have comforts. It's this notion. That's the romantic idea.

Nicholson: Well, there's also the romantic idea of the starving artist which legitimizes underfunding of the arts. Because what we really respect in this country is success, and so artists are never really supposed to be successful. Unless you're a really big star and then everyone respects it, and that's really it.

Parker: It's a mindset. You have a musician-run mindset and a businessperson mindset. In 1988, we put on this festival called...(Nicholson in the background: "Well lets use the word artist, then, because I'm a dancer")...The Sound Unity Festival. I went over to Michael Dorf at the Knitting Factory and had a meeting with him, and I rented the Knitting Factory for a whole week for 1000 dollars. We had Sonny Sharrock, Peter Brötzmann, Milford Graves, Dewey Redman, and the place was packed every night. So right after that in 1980, the next year, he began the Knitting Factory Festival. But the way he worked it was he had the Knitting Factory Festival for one year and then the next year it was the Heineken Festival, and then the next year it was the Texaco Festival, and then the Bell Atlantic Festival. He had the mind to immediately go corporate, while we, if we'd done that festival it wouldn't have been done the same way because we don't think the same way.

Nicholson: I think that there are more differences than that. There are more differences than just that he went corporate, because that's not what defines you. It's much more subtle, or maybe not so. When you are a business trying to present a festival you want a lot of people to come, you want a lot of notoriety. You're thinking business things.

And when I work with musicians to put on the Vision Festival, I think, “What is the future? What is the past? What mark are we leaving behind? How clearly do we define this mark? How well can I treat the artists?” Well, it’s easy to treat them better than George Wein. That’s a no-brainer. But am I treating them as well as they do in Europe? Well, I can’t quite afford it. So we think about all these things, so the mindset affects if we get corporate. I would never call the Vision Festival anything but the Vision Festival. But if someone gave me 500 thousand dollars, I’d let them put signage. The reasons why you do things, the subtleties. You know what a pain in the neck it is? I don’t think you realize, and it brings me almost no money, the marketplace, creating the environment. That’s important, that creates a special atmosphere that is totally unlike anything else, which is really kind of nice. That is the Vision Festival. Well, that costs me a lot of energy and time and money, and doesn’t bring me back very much. So it’s not economic. No business mind would do it this way. I’m doing it for subtle effect. So that’s the difference. It’s not whether you call it Heineken actually, even that’s not the difference. It’s one difference. It’s what that represents.

Parker: There’s nothing wrong with the Heineken Festival. Everybody loves Heineken (everyone laughs).

Nicholson: Not so much Texaco.

Parker: It’s just a matter of a lot of other things that happen. We’re not really talking about how Michael Dorf went up and down....

Chinen: Well, it strikes me....I’ll just jump in and say...I don’t know if “telling” is the word but it’s really instructive to think about how much attention and energy and money was involved with that period of Michael Dorf’s career. And Michael Dorf is no longer putting on festivals and the Vision Festival has this history and has not faltered. And I think that’s a really telling difference in terms of the sustainability of the project and where the priorities are, as you were saying, Patricia.

Parker: It just shows you that money is nice, but it’s what you do with the money and the feeling you have. Where you have a festival and the musicians are protesting that you have all this money and you’re trying to pay them 60 dollars a gig...who work all year at your club and now here’s your festival time and they get a gig and you’re not really paying....So the evil is not the corporate sponsor, it’s what you do with them and, again, how you relate to the artist and how you treat the musicians and how you do the best that you can with what you have. At a festival up in Guelph--well, first of all if you go to Guelph no one locks their door (laughs), so it’s a totally different thing than New York--all the festivals up in Canada. There was a period where Du Maurier, the cigarette company, was sponsoring. Then they passed a law that cigarette companies couldn’t sponsor. But that Montreal festival, they had money. Whoa. They seem to have a lot of money. That Guelph community is a little community and they’ve been able to get a lot of grants to do stuff, but they’ve also been able to maintain their integrity. The money hasn’t corrupted them, and that’s the thing, you can’t be corrupted by the money. You have to, again, have the music and the event first because you need

money to put on the event. The Vision Festival is basically the whole thing, in three weeks it was done once, basically with Patricia and two or three other people. It was Patricia, and Todd Nicholson, and one other person all year. Of course, at the time of the festival then you have your volunteers and people. It's quite a lot of work, and no other festival does it. Every other festival they hire a person for this, they hire a person for that, they hire a person for transportation. I mean, I'm running and picking people up from the airport. All the major festivals, they've got a driver named Hans, or Joe, or whatever and that's what he does. He gets paid a salary and he picks people up. But I do that. I cook, I do this, I do that...but it's okay.

Nicholson: The volunteerism isn't as good as it used to be, and I'm wondering if it's because we've been around. People assume you should have enough money to do these things, but I don't. I mean, we have less, a little less, than we've had at other times because the economy slips. But another thing, just for the record...I was reflecting back on this. It's always sort of bugged me. I don't think it gets called this anymore but I would say at least for the first five years, and maybe longer, it was referred to, when they talked about the Vision Festival, that we were very "retro." And it was a put down because it was related to the 60s. Now if you relate it to the 50s, it wasn't retro. If you relate it to any other decade...but the fact that it was retro, and relating to the 60s, and it was stuck in the 60s...and the reason "60s" has become a put down is because the people who were writing and feeling this could not relate to what they must feel, or have felt. I don't know if they feel it now. This "out-of-date" idealism. And how in the world can idealism be out of date, I ask you? How in the world? What does it mean to be idealistic, really? It means that you're willing to sacrifice and work for something to be better than. Wow. So, it is hard actually. It takes a lot of commitment. But I don't see quite I know that the 60s have a rep for being...that that was more acceptable then. But the idea that that could be equated with a time, a decade, is absurd. I told someone who came to help me with branding, I said, "I think I'm more idealistic than I was when I was younger." Because I've been doing it for so long.

Chinen: So doing it for that amount of time has not bred cynicism? It's bred the opposite.

Nicholson: Well, I get cranky. [laughter] Well, you get determined. It's determination. You understand. You don't do it to accomplish a set result in a certain period of time. You do it for its own sake. You do good for goodness' sake.

Chinen: Now a recent development the last handful of years has been the series that run not during festival time but at other times during the year. And I wonder...we've talked a little bit about branding and we've talked a little bit about a sense of community, and it strikes me that this seems like a way to emphasize both, or have both at the same time.

Nicholson: Well because we wanted to be more open and more inclusive we stopped using the word "vision" with it, and gave it its own name. And actually the name that I

ended up liking the best was the “Evolving” name, but we still use RUCMA too. That’s the community building. It came out of two things. One, there needs to be places to play besides once a year. That was initially what it was, and then it really morphed into “we really do need to open up and make sure we’re really reflecting the ebb and flow of what’s going on right now.” And there needs to be a place where people can get a gig in New York when they come from out of town. Although it’s embarrassing. It’s embarrassing they’re playing off the door and the place is small. Although it’s becoming cool and hip, and people like going there. I feel like I’m supporting the venue too much but I can’t give guarantees for that. What I do is I send out the weekly emails. I send out what we’re going to work on...eventually the new website should be up...and what will be clearly part of our website...and all these things. You can’t only exist once a year. That’s kind of stupid. We live every day, not just once a year.

Chinen: Right. There is a lot more. I feel like as you talk about the inclusiveness of that series there are a lot of younger musicians and younger groups that find their way onto the series. Probably more that play the series than play the festival.

Nicholson: Absolutely.

Chinen: And that brings up the question for me of the renewable resource of this musical community. You’ve both been on the scene, and William, as a musician, you’ve been on the jazz scene for a long time. What does this moment now feel like to you, as far as the interaction of older musicians and younger musicians, and the talent that’s coming up? Does this feel like it’s different than any other time? Is there something that’s distinct about right now?

Parker: I know that there are a lot of younger musicians and I think quite a lot more than 10 years ago and twenty years ago. Before there were a lot of musicians just coming from out of town and deciding to live in New York, but now there are all kinds of school and crops. I don’t know where they come from: the New School, from here, from Minnesota, from Kansas, from all over. They come to New York and they can’t just sit around and watch cartoons all day. They have to play. They’ve got to develop. They have to find out what they sound like. They have to find places to play. They need to create places. That’s what they’re doing. I think that’s great. The only thing I just wish is that older musicians had a bit more time to come out and listen, to come out and interact with them. But when you reach a certain age, you get over 50 (laughs), you get a little tired. You’re trying to work on your own music. You’re over 50 and you’re trying to get on the map yourself, and you have younger people trying to get on the map. So everyone’s trying to get on the map. But I wish there was a bit more exchange, not only between the younger musicians but between our own community. We don’t see each other enough. We don’t really talk. Maybe we’ll be able to do something about that in the future, to be able to communicate with people, have large ensembles more, and begin to get out a bit and interact with each other.

Nicholson: Well, the thing is, what used to be, and I’m pretty sure this is true, when a young musician was coming up they would hang out and try to play with older

musicians. Maybe there were more jam sessions along with this, that gave them a little more opportunity for that to happen. I'm not sure if that's true. But they would find older musicians to play with. They would play with them for a certain length of time and then they'd break off and start their own groups. That doesn't happen much.

Parker: Well, that's what I did. I did an apprenticeship with older musicians. I played with Frank Lowe, Sunny Murray, Cecil Taylor, Roscoe Mitchell, Don Cherry, and that's how you would learn. But I think the difference is now the older musicians don't have any work. There are no working bands. So how can you do an apprenticeship with so and so, when he never has a gig. So therefore, in order to learn you say, "Well, I just have to go get my own band because I want to play with this guy but he never works."

Nicholson: That may be part of it, but I don't think that's the reason. Now we're speculating.

Parker: When Dave Douglas came to town he immediately auditioned for Horace Silver's band. Horace Silver needed a trumpet player. So he went up and auditioned for Horace and he got into the Horace Silver band. Dave Douglas was playing with Horace Silver. When Wynton Marsalis came to town he auditioned for Art Blakey. So when you get to town and you say, "Who do I want to play with? I want to play with Marty Ehrlich." Well, Marty Ehrlich only has two gigs a year, so how can I audition or play with Marty Ehrlich. When they're not working. They're my hero, but my hero is not working.

Nicholson: You're assuming they want to, and I don't think that's the case.

Parker: Well, now this is something different. Wait a minute.

Nicholson: I don't think that's the case because the young kids, the young musicians, are mostly coming out of colleges, and they form their bands in the college and then they start booking their tours from there, and they don't even have it in their mind...the idea of performing with an older musician. It doesn't even occur to them, and it doesn't for various reasons. A lot of the time they don't know. They are going to college and what do they know of the history?

Parker: That's also true. That's very true, because I teach these kids and I don't know what they learn but if you name a trumpet player or a saxophone player....I'm teaching a guy drum...I've got all instrument students....and I say, "Have you heard of Ed Blackwell? No. Have you heard of Billy Higgins? Well, maybe."

Chinen: When you talk about that, that's recent. You're not asking about Baby Dodds here....this is a different...

Nicholson: What they don't know is absolutely unbelievable. And then, there is also the thing that may have slipped by you, but most of the kids are coming out of the New School and these are the kids who don't know anything. The kids who are coming out

of other schools.....that's why I had the Brooklyn College there and York College there...I want to make sure these kids know that there's something else.

Chinen: Right.

Nicholson: I mean, these young people.

Parker: I must say that in the pedagogy of the music there are a lot of holes. There are a lot of holes as far as what's taught and who's mentioned. I know with the New School they miss a lot. Whole sections and periods of music...people like Jimmy Lyons. They've never heard of Jimmy Lyons. Andrew Cyrille. Well, Andrew Cyrille is over there, so they say, "I think he teaches here" but they don't know what he does. So that's absolutely true, that there is a big disconnect with the historical.

Nicholson: That is part of the mainstream.

Chinen: You mean the educational institutions.

Nicholson: Yes. With the record industry.

Chinen: What's left of it.

Nicholson: Well, what it was. The former record industry, and the radio, created the walls that created--instead of a reservoir--a stream for some people to get by and be able to work and make money.

Chinen: This issue that we just talked about, of basically a cultivated ignorance--is that basically what we're talking about?--how much of the Vision Festival ethos is aimed at that, at addressing that, or somehow rectifying it.

Nicholson: Well, we're small. Limited manpower and budget. But the aim is to address as many things as we can, whenever we can. The Vision Festival has a lot of my temperament because I'm the driver. I'm a very responsive person. If I get something in my head, if something is bothering me, I start thinking about what I can do about it. Maybe I spend too much time on that and not enough time on trying to figure out how to get more money. But also I get upset about all of that, where the money is.

Chinen: I'm going to wrap up with one more question for each of you, and while William's on the phone I'll ask you...

Nicholson: You don't want to keep us going on...

Chinen: Well, I feel like I've kept you for long enough, and we have a lot.

Nicholson: I know you do. I'm just joking.

Chinen: But there's one, and I want you to answer this from your subconscious, okay. Think back over the history of the Vision Festival, and all the music and art that has been presented, if you could flash through time and relive one moment what would it be? I want the first thing. You have to pick one. It could be just an instant, a moment. (William returns.) I'm going to repeat the question, and this is my final question. I'm closing on this. Looking back over the whole history of the festival, and all the music and all the performances, if you could relive one moment right now, just boom you're there, what would it be?

Parker: Well, when I was playing with Fred Anderson and Kidd Jordan. Or maybe it was just Fred, or Kidd was there too. We were playing on MacDougal St., or what's that street?

Nicholson: You mean Mulberry St.

Parker: Mulberry St, and we were playing and out of nowhere we got to this groove and it was really happening. It was fantastic. Everyone was dancing and moving and grooving. It was good. So that's what particularly stands out in my mind.

Chinen: That's a good one. Okay, your turn.

Nicholson: I don't know. I'm too close to it. There are moments.

Chinen: But you have the time machine and you have enough juice for one trip. What is the trip you're taking?

Nicholson: Well, it was a difficult one, but the first year. The first year is always the most fun. Oh, and also the fifth year. The fifth year and the first year. The first year because I'd had a vision. I knew it was going to work. We didn't have any money but I was absolutely sure, and everything, you know, once we had a couple difficult moments, every concert was stellar. Everything was beautiful. It was before people messed with it and started complaining. In the fifth year, I had this realization that people were bringing us their best game. I could really hear it in a specific way. I realized that everyone was playing their best. They were trying to play their most creatively. The musicians I expected to play more on the inside, weren't. They were proud. They were saying, "Yah, I can do this," and I thought, "Wow." They were all inspired. And I don't like being specific, anyway. It's just not in me.

Chinen: I love the thought that your instinct was to go to the first festival, which of course was the one where there was the most element of the unknown and everything was sort of in the dark. It strikes me that that's a pretty good metaphor for a lot of what the artists bring to the table when they're entering the Vision Festival world. That kind of peering out into the unknown.

Nicholson: That's actually what any artist will tell you when they create art. Creation is that moment, right before you make that piece, you're about to leap off a cliff and you just hope it's all going to work. That's a creative act.

Chinen: Well, clearly the Vision Festival has been a creative act, and I'm very much looking forward to many more years of continued perseverance and success. So, thank both of you, for taking part in this. I'm really happy that you were able to carve out some time for me.

Parker: And just for the record...Patricia is the founder and organizer. I am...I help out from time to time. I'm more like the board.

Nicholson: And there's a bunch of artists who participate in all the cooking.

Chinen: Duly noted.

Nicholson: And William also ends up...for various reasons...although I have a lot of my own ideas, as you can tell...William is so poetically verbal. He's verbal in a beautiful poetic way that reaches people. I'm more like the preacher and William's the poet.

Chinen: That's a good characterization. Well, thank you again.