

From Performance by Artists
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CHARLEMAGNE PALESTINE



Kathy Agnoli

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France Morin interviewed Charlemagne Palestine in Montreal on March 24, 25 and 26, 1978.

France Morin: Charlemagne Palestine, you are Russian American. Were you of the generation that came to America or was it your grandparents?

Charlemagne Palestine: My mother and father were both children when they came to America. They were born in Russia and both came around the same time, the second immigration of Russians around 1913. From Minsk, which at that time was considered to be part of Poland. My father came from Odessa. Both their families established themselves in New York. In mother's family there were seven children. My grandmother left my grandfather for another man in the Yiddish theatre. She disappeared and left the seven children with him. He had a breakdown, heartbroken and everything and the family split up. Some of them went to orphanages, some of them went to different places. My mother got married very young to my father. He had her work for his aunt, cleaning the house for room and board and a little money. That went on for a very long time and finally they got married. So she married, in a sense, out of necessity, not to be out in the street; I don't think she ever really loved him. She openly admits it now. *Was she a happy woman, when you were a kid?*

No, she was very energetic, in fact if anything did affect me, it is the fact that I never really had a father and that my mother was so energetic all the time. She was always working, she was always doing things in order to compensate for, I guess ... she was never a submissive woman, she was never in love. Even if she loved music, she loved to listen to the radio, she would cry when she listened to a beautiful song but I never got a sense that men had any real

vitalness in her life except maybe as the key to survival. In fact, the only man I ever remember her having a real strong powerful, emotional and poetic link with was me. I was in a sense her only husband and perhaps still am.

You are talking of a very early age?

We are talking about the beginning, as soon as I could walk, or talk, or take over, she was my protector against my father. Eventually my father liked me because I sang in the synagogue and he used to like to come and hear me sing. I was six or seven, seven maybe. I used to do imitations of Johnny Ray and Frank Sinatra's songs, that kind of stuff for the neighbours. As a little kid, they tried to get me on Children's Hour and Ted Mack's Amateur Hour because I was a real entertainer. I would sing all these songs that were on the hit parade like I was a crooner. A little kid doing stuff like tearing his shirts and singing. My mother always used to show me to all the neighbours.

Did you consider yourself as a hero or did you feel lonely?

I never considered myself a hero. No, I was a lonely kid, but I was always making things, doing things. I was also a very precocious kid.

And what about school?

I was just like I am now. I had a lot of style. Teachers either loved me or hated me. I could not memorize things well and stuff like that. I was good at math for a while and then I got bored with it ... I had style, the way I talked, the way I thought, the way I would get somebody else in trouble; I was a cute kid, I had a lot of theatricality about me. But I was not a good student. Women were always my allies. They always helped me all through my schooling.

What kind of relationship did you have with

your brother?

I never really had any relationship with him. He had a relationship to me in that he was always envious on the one hand and idolizing on the other. It turns out that finally he wanted to be an entertainer. My mother would call him your lazy middle-of-the-road-kind-of-guy. That was the way he always was. Then, later on in life ... he had a funny way about him, because our family has a funny way about them. You know, we are nutsy-kookoo and Slavic and his physicality was very strange. He had a lot of charisma but he never used it and finally, later on in life, it got stronger. Some people start very excited and then they peter out, but he began to look more and more intense every year. The last year I saw him, he followed me all around New York. We would go from bar to bar and he would imitate my actions. He would stand in different parts of the bar and he would do these antics. The first time we ever had a comic show together was the last year of his life. He would even imitate some of my style; he would watch how I would do something then he would do it the same way. It is like he was playing the salesman, he was beginning to understand purely what delivery was about and he was shockingly good.

He never had a chance to perform publicly before he died?

Actually, he began to call me up on the phone a lot, at four, five in the morning, the last months and I had the vision once of holding the phone and it was shaking, so intense was his delivery. I had the first terror ever that he was going to surpass me. I remember feeling it the first time and did not have much more time to experience it because he was dead soon after. That is why he died, he could not handle it. It is like, as a magician, I was given my stripes

early so I slowly learned to use it. I went through bad times around fifteen or sixteen, going to a psychiatrist. I did not know how to use all this power, all this energy, all this knowledge. But I had many years to slowly learn how to deal with the energy I had inside me. With him it came like a geyser that had been stocked up for years. All of a sudden the cork pulled out and it was like a champagne bottle gone berserk.

I guess it changed a lot of things in your life?

It changed everything. First of all, I became the comic, I had always been a bit of a comic, the idea of the comedian, of he who stands, who looks around and speaks of it became a part of my work almost instantly. Within a few months there was a piece, I did not even know, it was unconscious, but I took on his life, I added his quest to my own. I had always seen the image of the world with him in the middle and me on the edge. He was going to have children in the middle of the world and I would always be tightropeing on the edge. The second he died, I started pulling away from the edge and started moving closer to the middle.

... moving away from the edge because you were afraid ... of doing the same thing?

I knew that I could not die. I had a death wish from the time I was very young. He became me in some strange way, I don't know, I am even wondering if he did not become me. This may sound bizarre, but maybe there was a sacrifice that was supposed to happen in my family and I was to be the early sacrifice. My psychiatrist said that if I had not come to him, I would be dead. So maybe he saved me. Somebody was supposed to die. A death wish is not something that everybody just has. I almost did die a couple of times, car accidents, etc. *You seem to always be running away from death?*

Yes. I once told a friend: "Death is at my

heels every minute and I just keep running away from it." In some way that is how I feel deep inside. It is survival. It is the idea that at any moment the enemy is everywhere. If I stop for just a minute I will be killed.

It gives you that incredible impression of "readiness" ... I guess for whatever can happen.

Yes I am ready, that's all. I am not terrified. I am not optimistic. I am not pessimistic. I'm just ready.

Did you believe in a God or the notion of a superior force?

He is invisible, that is the big difference between Catholic kids and Jewish kids. We are waiting for the Messiah, so we figure the Catholics saw this guy come around and they chose too early. It is all from the same source, but from our source, he has not come yet. Nor do we believe and I don't think we ever will, that God is about love, God is somebody like the kids who used to wait for me after school. God is Jehovah, God is very temperamental and unpredictable. He is not what we call "good". Every so often, he throws his power around. I don't trust him. I spar with God. He manifests himself in his power. Storms are his power, the sun is his power, the moon is his power, the sea is his power, the mountains, the wind, that is when I see him. That is how he shows himself to me.

How can you feel some relationships with people from the same part of the world when your origins are so unprecise?

The only way I have come to understand my own heritage is by searching my own body. That is the only way I found out. I found out a lot because I have begun, almost like a historian, digging into myself for answers.

... and how did you get involved in the field of entertainment?

My mother wanted me to be the big deal, like a Jerry Lewis, Tony Bennett, Frank Sinatra, like the important Jewish entertainers anyway. For a Jew, the great singer was Al Jolson, he was like a cantor, like the cantor for the populace. Then there are the great Jewish actors like Edward G. Robinson, Louie Strasberg, they all come from the Yiddish theatre. So there is the actor, there is the singer, the crooner, then the cantor, then there are the rabbis, the rabbis of entertainment. Then there are the buffoons of which we have a great many. I feel I encompass them all. I have begun to encompass all the traditions of those public members, the cantors, which proved that through the power of their voice and sentiment, through song, uplift the people. The actor who through the power of his persona and his delivery, uplifts the people and then the comic who through the power of his comedy shows people their foibles. Those are the three major models of male Jewishness, of what the great master was in the village, the magician, the medicine man or the shaman, plus also the power of dance, not secular dance, but sacred dance which is what the Hassids used to do. They were like dervishes. Their dances would get faster and faster and they'd do it for hours and hours, jumping up and down. In that sense I am a Hassid as well. So I encompass in my work all the properties of the artisan building temples. Filling places with magical papers and things that transform. I am like a middleman between God and that is what my role is even in Soho, I am not just an artist. I am very much a senator in the family and many people have a moral or spiritual role in their life so that they can feel better about their life. I am probably intuitively just living a rabbinical life, that shamanism is not just in my work. But nothing in my work has anything to do

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What about your education, you studied classical music?

Theory mostly, conducting, composition; I said to the teachers: "If I don't bother you, don't bother me." We made a deal. Since I was good at doing things intuitively, I had genius immunity. I would disappear for months, come back and still could do better than anybody else. I just learned what attracted me. I am still that way. I could never learn a subject, just to learn it.

You also said before that you conducted an orchestra, that you sang, do you ever want to go back to those activities?

I was supposed to be a great singer, I studied with the same teacher as Frederico von Stade, now a famous opera singer. We used to sing duets together. Then, I studied conducting at the same time as many conductors like Michael Tilson Thomas, George Cleve, who are now quite well-known. I just had to live out a much more complex and far-reaching vision. Now I could go back to these other things. It would be fun conducting, I would not mind spending a year conducting, a year writing, a year doing a film. That is my dream now. That is my ideal, to spend every minute of my life working on all possible endeavours until I die.

How did you get involved with the art world?

In the art world I started by getting involved with multi-media. It was in the sixties, the early sixties and it had to do with electronic music, lasers, light, film, dance. It was a hodge-podge. When I started: there was Cage, Stockhausen and computerists like Xenakis. To me, Cage's personality permeated his approach though his content seemed to me very hodge-podge and unclear. I brought unification of content, where every element I dealt with was focus-

ed in itself, was communicative in itself and could relate to any other medium. I was involved with electronics, I was involved with dance but in a superficial way, not superficial in terms of my involvement but in what they were as mediums; I consider that it was superficial as part of a stereotype. All I met were stereotypes. I tried to merge all these stereotypes together to come up with something.

You were living in New York at that time, what was your relationship with the art world? In terms of history, did you like the abstract expressionist painters, for example?

I just loved the Jewish New York painters. I even did a few paintings. Now I am thinking of painting again, going back to the way I used it then, right out of the tube. I would do long continuous gestures and then I would pinch them onto the canvas. Like long snakes. I did a whole series of paintings like these close to fourteen years ago. As far as the art world, I met Tony Conrad in the experimental film world and Mort Subotnick in electronic music. That was my link with the multi-media world. I also studied with Pran Nath in 1969 where I met La Monte Young. We were both doing continuities.

You were also playing the bells at that time, around 1965-66, what exactly were you playing?

Well, I was supposed to play just hymns but soon I began to play John Cage's music for carillon. I began to play my own pieces around 1965 that were all about pure sonorous ringing. I would be up in the tower and the bells would ring and ring enveloping me in their gyrations and vibrations. I began to play a continuous work evolving each day with another segment, realizing finally that I had created a soap opera, one piece that lasted for five years.

Was it structured in any way or totally im-

provised?

It is just like I do now. With my performances people often want to know if it is notated. I can only work in the spontaneous moment, I can create a work that has all the elements of a finished work because I carry it with me. When I am given to do it at the intense moment, it all comes out right. I cannot do it in the abstract, I can't do it alone or privately, I have to be in a public place and then it comes out as though it were written. It is not improvised. That is just my style which is about the moment. People have said I was involved with the sound as an object, making the sound like a sculpture. It is pure sensuality, what makes me feel good, then I look at what makes other people respond and then I decide how to use that knowledge. But first I indulge myself completely.

Did "glory" preoccupy you from the beginning?

Yes, from the beginning I wanted to be *the*. It is just about power, what you are doing is harnessing anxiety into power, into energy which is the most powerful thing you can harness. There are two energies, there's faith, people who have positive faith, they become like the great protestants, or the missionaries. That is using power coming from a positive notion, even if a perverse one. Then, there is the harnessing of the negative notion. I was the harnesser of such a powerful negative notion that it has made me superman in a certain way. It could be dangerous.

How do you deal with all that energy?

Energy is a powerful thing. Lots of energy is dangerous unless you know where to put it. Energy can break windows, yet the energy, if it were used correctly, could build a table. I had an incredible amount of energy and it was all negative energy, all self-destructive energy. Once I began to let it out in the

right place, it did not matter what its source was. There were all these little pixies inside of me with little knives stabbing themselves that made me a generator of one of those big engines and by the force of their stabbings created my power. When it was backing up, like a clogged toilet, everything shorted and I was a mess. Once I began to let it out in things that gave pleasure, I became better at it. Now I am much more relaxed, but still these little pixies are stabbing themselves and it is still an energy source, but now it's successful business. The method has not changed, it won't change. *What about this sentence: "This pain and this feeling of impotency comes back all the time, everything just looks so bleak all of a sudden." Is this sensation depressing?*

No, I don't think so, it's just a price, that's the price. So maybe once every day for half an hour I feel like that or maybe for an hour or maybe for more, the price for living a life like I'm living. It doesn't seem like such a terrible price for glory ... It just seems like that's my destiny and that's the way it has to be and so it doesn't seem contradictory to me. Look at people who work in a factory, I'm sure they feel exactly that way more often than I. It's sad for them too and they rarely have any sense of glory in their lives, only degradation in a certain way, and humiliation. I don't feel any more humiliation, degradation, impotency or fatalism than they do.

And when you said: "Sometimes I'm afraid of going too far"?

I'm not afraid of insanity but in a way what manifests itself in me is to get myself killed. I don't think I've ever been prone to the kinds of extremes that insanity shows itself in. I'm prone to extremes but it's not the kind that would happen just in my mind. It's the kind that would take me somewhere, I would do something beyond the fringe in

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