

DAMBALLAH RISING: The Lost Miles Davis/Jimi Hendrix Sessions
by Michael Ventura
Black Clock – Autumn, 2004

Everywhere in vodun art, one universe abuts another.
-- Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*

Was it a rumor or did I hear it on good authority? It was a long time ago, and I no longer remember the source. I could pick up a reference book but... I'm a little past that. Anyway, if I get up from this chair I might not sit down again, at least not in this chair. If these are the last sentences I write, and they might be, I care less about accuracy than about truth. If that seems a contradiction, you need a lesson in universes abutting each other. (The quote above, by the way, is from memory, not from opening a book. I think I'm through with books all of a sudden, and if I can finish this piece you may understand why.)

Anyway: On rumor *or* good authority, I heard long ago that Miles Davis and Jimi Hendrix intended to record together, but that Hendrix died before that could be arranged. I've been quoted, accurately, as saying, "That was the work of the Devil." In the *Tanakh*, which Christianists call "the Old Testament," Satan *is a servant of God*. He is called "the Adversary," a terribly powerful angel on speaking terms with the Lord (they converse congenially in the Book of Job). The Lord sends the Adversary on missions to test human beings. So, to "unpack" (as the academics say) my statement: The Lord sent the Adversary to test Jimi Hendrix and Jimi Hendrix was found wanting – or, in police terms, found DOA, a drug overdose, dead before the greatest and most psychically liberating collaboration in American music could take place and change nothing less than the course of history. Or so I thought. And I was half-right.

Now, of course, we know that Jimi faced down the Adversary and the session did, after all, take place. Secretly. In violation of contracts with their competing labels. The tapes were hidden, we are told, and lost track of – we are told. Jimi died all on his own, without anyone's help. Then Miles became ever more erratic and grim, and he finished out his time amongst us making predictable minor music that vaguely occupied a No Where Land somewhere between *Bitches Brew* and wallpaper.

Ah... and now the tapes have surfaced! Thirty-odd years and many mysteries later. Soon to be released, a three-disc set: *Damballah Rising* – their original title, agreed-upon, as we now know, by Messrs. Davis and Hendrix. For the uninitiated: Damballah is the great West African deity, or force, or fate, represented usually as a serpent, who became paramount in the vodun or voodoo religions of the Caribbean and New Orleans. A god of the spinal cord (which is what the serpent symbolizes), a good of the nervous system, a god (or goddess, take your pick) at the quick of all *response*. When you respond to anything, the first voice you hear (ye who have ears) is Damballah. But you hear it dimly. At full force, Dionysus would shudder before it; Odin would run; Buddha would flinch; Jesus would weep. Damballah is (if you want to be abstract) the principle of *anything*. Which might also be called: the principle of history. Or possibly: the

principle of chaos. Human beings are capable of *anything*. Anything can happen. And does. Regularly. Damballah rules.

Damballah is the snake in Eden's garden. Irresistible. It will drive you out of Paradise. I know most of you don't believe you're in Paradise... but that's only because you've yet to meet (or hear) Damballah, full force and raw.

It's important to get the etymology straight. Miles and Jimi didn't pick this title by accident. They were brilliant men. Artists extraordinaire. And – in between fixes and promiscuousness – they (erratically) read books. Knew what they were talking about. Knew what they were making music about. So: Damballah rules. And so: *Damballah Rising*.

Now that I've listened, repeatedly, to the soon-to-be-released tapes, I no longer believe the PR story that the tapes were “lost track of.” I believe they were hidden by someone with good sense and/or a fear of God – someone without courage enough to destroy them and, ultimately, without strength enough to protect them, or to protect us from them.

As is well known (that is, amongst the tiny circles that follow such things), I was chosen to contribute to the album notes because of my 1985 essay, “Hear That Long Snake Moan,” which argued for the (beneficial) influence of West Indian religion and Haitian Voodoo on North American blues, jazz, and rock. As is also well known (to said tiny circle), upon hearing the music I refused to participate in the project. It may well have been that the Devil or Adversary tried to stop, or at least delay, *Damballah Rising*; but if the Devil did it, he did it because he was scared. So am I – though it's too late for me to be frightened or... anything else.

I'm writing to tell you not to listen to this music.

I realize that the overwhelming onslaught of hype accompanying the album's release next month will make my little attempt, in this obscure publication, futile. I feel a bit like Ishmael clinging to Queequeg's coffin on a choppy sea – but before, rather than after, the Great Whale has destroyed the *Pequod* and all who sailed in her.

First consider what happened to the principals of that session:

Jimi Hendrix died that same week. From an overdose, yes, but I now believe it to be self-inflicted. He couldn't get The Scream out of his head. (More on The Scream later.)

Gil Evans was present, though once he realized what was going on he refused to participate – but he stayed, and left that studio a broken man. Which explains the paucity of his output, and its uneven quality, from that day until his death.

Miles Davis, as audacious as he was foolish, bravely tried to harness what he'd experienced that night into the music that became *Live Evil*, his last significant work. Then he ceased playing entirely for a few years. When he returned to music, he was, for the first time, harmless (in his grouchy way).

And don't you think it strange that, of all the other musicians on *Damballah Rising* – the drummers, the shriekers (male and female), and that tenor sax who sounds like Coltrane returned from the dead and afflicted with the stigmata – not one has emerged to claim credit, even though (could participation be proven) the profits would be handsome?

As I said, my attempt to caution you is probably futile. It may even be that I'll make the recording more attractive to you – Chaos works that way sometimes. As for

me... I don't think I'm losing my mind, I am certainly struggling not to, but I have grown, how can I put it? – overly sensitive to sound. (Was *that* why Miles had to stop playing for a few years?) I write this on a yellow pad, with a pencil. I ask my friends to whisper. And I speak only in whispers, and only when necessary.

No doubt I should describe the music but, as you've noticed, I'm reluctant. And there is Melville's admonition: while composing *Moby Dick* he wrote to Hawthorne: "The Truth is the silliest thing under the sun." I will sound silly. Well... my critics will testify that that's nothing new. But there is in me the last shred of the professional journalist, an instinct that desires that I go out as a professional, make the deadline, do the job. So be it.

There is a Scream out there. It has always been there. A Scream that began with The Beginning – for *Damballah Rising* teaches, in a wailing and keening Jimi Hendrix *Eloi Eloi lama sabach thani* vocal: "In the beginning – was the Scream – not the Word – only the Scream – the Scream only – Only Scream –" and the way he screams that scream is unforgettable, and then Miles making a sound on a trumpet like an angel dying, and the saxes running up and down spinal chords, and the drums a polyrhythmic storm of purposeful thunder. And Jimi's guitar, there were always snakes crawling in his sounds, marvelous pythons with glittery scales, swift rattlers, little pretty deadly asps slithering over groupie Cleopatras, and fantastic two-headed snakes (and they exist, I saw one in a zoo once) dancing on the tips of their tails, yes, and snakes that exist only in prayers, whether in fear in the Garden or in celebration amidst Marie Laveau's voodoo drums – but nothing like when Jimi connected to Damballah. (I hate describing it because it makes it louder in my head.) So much for the title cut.

There's a way in which the slow cut, "The Garden of Sacred Detritus," is worse. You know those poor devils who hear The Scream all their lives and know they will never be strong enough or loud enough to scream it, and they spend their lives on thorazine, in the mental wards, and the drug dulls everything but the sound of The Scream. This is their ballad. This is what they hear all the time. Not that it's not beautiful. But how would you like to be connected forever to that moment in Eternity when everything went wrong?

What I am trying to tell you is:

This is not music. This is a *being* encoded in music. This is the DNA of Damballah in the form of music. Yes it's genius, one of the greatest musical achievements of all time. And I don't believe Hendrix or Davis knew what they were getting into when they started – certainly they often sound surprised, and certainly they both agreed not to release these tapes. It's just that their combined genius became possessed by something much larger than themselves. "Stare not too deeply into the abyss, lest the abyss stare into you." So Nietzsche warned, implying: The stare that enters you becomes you. Because this music is a *being*, Great Damballah risen and given form and body as sound, when you listen it goes into you. And it's not likely to leave.

The other commentators who wrote for the album notes of course think I've lost my mind, as do the record execs, and the big-name music critics who've gotten advance copies. Oh you should read their serrated emails! And maybe you have. But I wonder if are they critics still, or have they become servants? (Of course, most of them always were, but most of you know that already.) The question is: you.

Do you want The Scream in your ears, awake or asleep, for the rest of your life? Will you host the *being* of Damballah? There's beauty in it, I can testify to that. I respect Damballah greatly, and, please, do not think I equate The Serpent or The Scream with evil. What could be more boring than the Garden of Eden? Thank God for the Adversary who drove us out. Chaos is fructive. But do you want to be joined physically with the very source of Chaos? Do you want never to be able *not* to hear The Scream? After all, it's destroyed better people than us – not because it's evil, but because it's a level of intensity we are not meant to, are not constructed to, bear.

Of course... it's possible we'd all be better off if everybody listened to *Damballah Rising*. After all, Damballah already rules, and always has. History is The Scream. But do you want to hear that *inside you* all the time? Believe me, you wouldn't be able to watch anymore television. (Like I said, maybe it would be better.)

I can tell you this: once you've heard it, those not already heart-dead to life will want to scream. Their little scream will want to join the big Scream. And it takes a lot of will power to stop yourself. Which is why I can't do this kind of thing anymore; writing brings me too close to it. Maybe I'll be a grocery store clerk. All that florescent light, chilly processed air, days and days and days of watching people waiting on line, Seventies pop on the speaker, punctuated by a cheery announcement of a bargain on pickles in aisle five... maybe such places were created as shelters from The Scream? (And I think of the last cut, a cover of Dylan's "This Wheel's On Fire," it goes on for thirty minutes, and all the young gals banshee-laugh every time they hear, 'Notify your next of kin! this wheel will explode!'...)

Eqr{tkj vÍ "Okj cgrlXgpwt c0CmlTki j w'Tgugt xgf 0