



# PHEEROAN AKLAFF

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

**D**rummer/composer Pheeroan akLaff was born Paul Maddox in Detroit in 1955. Before moving to New York in the '70s he lived briefly in New Haven, where he established lasting relationships and received the name Pheeroan akLaff. He has led his own ensembles and worked with Cecil Taylor, Andrew Hill, Wadada Leo Smith, Amina Claudine Myers, Geri Allen, Oliver Lake, Anthony Braxton, Henry Threadgill, Reggie Workman, Sonny Sharrock and many others. For over 20 years he has been teaching privately at Wesleyan University. In 2006 he co-founded Seed Artists through which he has mentored youth and produced musical events focused on building community and engagement with the arts.

**The New York City Jazz Record:** Tell us about those seminal years in New Haven. I've heard you say that there was "magic in the air" and "a 1970s feel that cannot be described when it came to a reverence in music." Will you elucidate?

**Pheeroan akLaff:** The ethos of Alice and John Coltrane had permeated the drive of many musicians in the liberating African-American cultural milieu. Meditation was the new turn-on, abstract expression was the new tune-in and dropping out became lifting off. I experienced Santana, John McLaughlin and Khalid Yasin [né Larry Young] with Billy Cobham; Sun Ra Arkestra with drummer Francisco Ali Mora; Horace Silver converting to macrobiotic eating; Strata East: Stanley Cowell and friends and Strata West: Kenny Cox and Friends; Yusef Lateef introducing world music compositions. These experiences made me want to get involved with ensembles that expressed a holistic approach to music. Many creative people acted upon the collective conscience in their search for meaning and their desire to change mindsets and paradigms. In 1975 I decided to go to New Haven with my friend Dwight Andrews and start a band. I wanted to meet Rashied Ali and possibly play music in New York. Because Dwight was working in the African American Studies department at Yale I managed to meet Professor Robert Farris Thompson and audit his African Art class. Department founder Charles T. Davis [pianist Anthony Davis' father] was a conduit for several great minds there and an encouraging father figure to many young musicians. Professor Thompson, John Blassingame, Henry Louis Gates, Irene Jackson-Brown, Toni Nathaniel Harp, George Edwards of the Black Panther Party and many people who had either studied at Yale or experienced the trial of Bobby Seale were influencing the vibe of how our band made music. Some of the best friends and music associates that I still have today were there: Wadada Leo Smith, Mark Helias, Ed Cherry, Bobby Naughton, Mixashawn and Rick Rozie, Mario Pavone, Jane Ira Bloom, David Lopato, Joe Celli, Jarawa Brian Gray, Jay Hoggard, Nat Adderley, Jr. and many that I am probably forgetting to mention. At the time, DejaVu was more than a cool name for a band. It was a family of people with shared principles. It happened at a time when myth and

science became tenable complements to music for me.

**TNYCJR:** Tell us about Brother Ad and Sister Akua, perhaps how you came to change your name and what influence they continue to have on your life and music?

**PA:** Ad Theotis Holland, Yale Divinity School circa 1972, Egyptologist, and Akua Audrey Ficklin, Unity minister and Astrologer. Both were clairvoyant and sort of adopted me and gave me a moniker. It stuck. They could see that I was directionless with good intentions, with the potential to become significant or to explode. They were friends with Charles Stepney, Verdine and Maurice White and others with spiritual intent in their music and they hoped the best for me. Much of my career life was predicted by them.

**TNYCJR:** What is your ongoing study of or approach to philosophy and/or spirituality?

**PA:** I study humans through their patterns of mistakes and discussions of miracles, but I also study their destruction and the building of walls with their ideas. There are more pleasant studies like poetry. Philosophy has been more infused in my life from an Eastern perspective. A synthesis of Zen and reducing experience to its purest form. Several processes inform my spiritual meditation. Ethics and Aesthetics are increasingly more important than Logic and Reason.

**TNYCJR:** What is prayer? Or, how do you pray?

**PA:** My doctor was asked by one of his assistants "Why do you pray for your patients?" When greeted by someone from India, they may briefly put their hands in a praying position while approaching you. You might notice a person in Japan sharply dip their head when entering a space occupied by others. Those in touch with courtesies of Islam or African continental reverent gestures may touch their heart when greeting or saying goodbye. These are just a few acts of human motion toward recognizing the divine in our midst and it is prayer. If we see God in every molecule and especially in the obstructions the human form presents, we develop the sensitivity to modify our space. That is prayer for me. I believe in prayer for healing. I also pray for healing of all sorts when I play music.

**TNYCJR:** Your Wesleyan faculty page mentions, among other things, "physiological attunement". What does this mean and how is it fostered?

**PA:** I encourage music to be developed as active meditation with welcoming confidence, receptivity and concentration. When students are out of shape, physically and otherwise, playing drums can promote humor, joy and remission of lethargy. My protocols borrow from many kinesthetic maintenance techniques. I have also recently enjoyed exploring creativity in

music and cognition with Dr. Psyche Loui, professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at Wesleyan. Creativity and improvisation figure highly in my view of cultivating a healthy spirit. I am interested in restoring emotional qualities that connect music to health.

**TNYCJR:** What are your views on health and how are these incorporated into your music and your teaching?

**PA:** I swim and eat healthy food and encourage students to do so. I focus on a student's gait and help them develop a command of their aura. I don't always tell them what I am doing.

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## MUSIC NOW! AT THE BROOKLYN COMMONS THURSDAY, MAY 31ST, 2018 \$15

7PM: RAMSEY AMEEN-VIOLIN / JOEL FREEDMAN-CELLO  
HILL GREENE-BASS / RAS MOSHE BURNETT-TENOR SAX  
CHARLES DOWNS-DRUMS

8PM: DANIEL CARTER-REEDS  
RAS MOSHE BURNETT-SOPRANO SAX & FLUTE  
DAVID FIRST-GUITAR, ELECTRONICS  
DAVE SOLDIER-VIOLIN / DAVE MILLER-DRUMS

9PM: DANIEL CARTER-REEDS / JOE RIGBY-REEDS  
MATT LAVELLE-TRUMPET, BASS CLARINET  
MARK HENNEN-PIANO / LARRY ROLAND-BASS  
CHARLES DOWNS-DRUMS  
RAS MOSHE BURNETT-TENOR & ALTO SAX

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★MAY 1ST - MAY 6TH★  
**ERIC REED QUARTET**  
TIMOTHY GREEN, MICHAEL GURROLA, MCLENTY HUNTER

★MAY 8TH - MAY 13TH★  
**STEVE COLEMAN AND FIVE ELEMENTS**  
KOYAKI, JONATHAN FINLAYSON, ANTHONY TIDD, SEAN RICKMAN

★MAY 15TH - MAY 20TH★  
**VIJAY IYER SEXTET**  
GRAHAM HAYNES, MARK SHIM, STEVE LEHMAN  
STEPHAN CRUMP, JEREMY DUTTON (TUE-FRI),  
TYSHAWN SOREY (SAT-SUN)

★MAY 20TH - 3PM MATINEE ONLY★  
**JOHN ZORN**

★MAY 22ND - MAY 27★  
**GUILLERMO KLEIN Y LOS GAUCHOS**  
DIEGO URCOLA, TAYLOR HASKINS,  
RICHARD NANT, SANDRO TOMASI, MIGUEL ZENÓN,  
BILL McHENRY, CHRIS CHEEK, BEN MONDER,  
FERNANDO HUERGA, JEFF BALLARD

★MAY 29TH - JUNE 3★  
**BILLY HART QUARTET**  
CHRIS POTTER, ETHAN IVERSON, BEN STREET

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★JOE LOVANO & DAVE DOUGLAS★  
★DAVID MURRAY★  
★TOM HARRELL★

MONDAY NIGHTS ARE RESERVED FOR  
**THE VANGUARD JAZZ ORCHESTRA**

MONDAY THRU SUNDAY  
8:30PM & 10:30PM

178 7TH AVE. SOUTH AT 11TH STREET 212-255-4037



(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

TNYCJR: Please tell us more about Seed Artists?

**PA:** Seed Artists is a small non-profit that thinks big. We got our first grant from the Elisabeth Irwin High School to take students to sing at hospice centers and community gardens. Now we are a catalyst for service to our community by promoting daring music, youth literacy and community arts for all ages. Chris Napierala, our Creative Director, has worked very hard in the last few years to bring great music to Montclair. We even have jazz listening night in the Montclair Public library hosted by professor Peter Bodge, who prompts discussions with several swanky seniors. Our library concerts have been great outreach for bringing people together. The list is long, but Sheila Jordan, Richard Davis, Cyro Baptista, Oscar Noriega and several great artists have enriched our community. We had brilliant book talks with authors David Greenstein and William Parker at the New York Buddhist Church. We have contributed to Community Real Talk with ex-offenders, the police department and community groups. We are best known though for the Eric Dolphy Freedom of Sound Celebration, in which we featured over 40 musicians to commemorate the 50th anniversary [2014] of his untimely passing. The symposium included Eric Dolphy's friends Richard Davis, Gunther Schuller and Grachan Moncur III and younger scholars James Newton, John Szwed and Michael Veal. We performed his known and unheard compositions, later to be inducted into the Library of Congress. Since then we have partnered with William Paterson University, The National Jazz Museum of Harlem, The Jazz Foundation of America and the 73 See Gallery in Montclair. On May 11th we will surprise middle school children during class time with a concert by pianist Angelica Sanchez. On Jul. 7th, we will co-present Randy Weston African Rhythms quartet with the Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning in Queens. This summer we will have concerts at the Montclair Public Library and the first weekend of October we will have our first Millennium of Percussion Sound Celebration festival in Montclair. We intend for you to get involved with a wide range of music for body and soul regeneration.

TNYCJR: So it's not all jazz.

**PA:** It's almost never jazz to me, or I should say not jazz only. One of the distinctions I like to make is jazz the music and jazz the culture. One of the reasons I got involved with music was because of jazz the cultural ethos, which may be found in several areas of life, as well as a music we butcher words to describe. Its impact upon the world has represented the greatest absolving music of an era of cruelty. Not only have we educated, or mis-educated, a generation to emphasize virtuosity but we've also mis-educated the public to think that this interaction of performance and applause is something that is going to benefit both parties. Jazz the music inspired a cumbersome educated virtuosity. Jazz the culture inspired social activism. The matrix that these two areas should be used to comprise do not work so much in tandem today. There is an applause button on one and a pause button on the other.

TNYCJR: What were you saying about virtuosity?

**PA:** In some cases we're mis-educating jazz players to think that to be a virtuoso on their instrument is the key part of their development. But virtuosity alone cannot help us explore the tender, the frail or the process of selflessness leading to the majestic. Think Chick Webb, George Russell or the accompaniment range of Freddie Waits or Paul Motian. Perhaps some great ones were looking for something that went beyond the physical experience and in so doing they

ended up sounding in a way that would astound us. I'd love to hear an interview with Art Tatum just to know what he was trying to make happen beyond demonstrating how hard he worked to expand the many embellishments with overwhelming facility. Drumming has always represented an exploration into a stratified environment generated by memory and shaping ideas until they deserve to be reconstituted or abandoned. Trance is also important, which is different than just using one or two of these elements. The beating oneself into a frenzy like at a disco era of the '80s is now seeping its way into jazz and so it makes me a little sensitive as to just how I want to hear the percussion world. Some reverie brings on the worst and some brings out the best. It's part of what makes percussion so powerful.

**TNYCJR:** A recent academic publication in the discourse on jazz education compares what they call "street level education" with current curricula and argues, I believe, that jazz education programs are missing the "street level" part.

**PA:** "Street" sort of reduces that side of the equation to how we think of something in contrast to university settings. "Street" can imply a lot of things. In the last few decades "street" is a code word for having a nose for skullduggery, emphasized by a colloquial vocabulary tone. But to actually learn by assembling parts of the nuggets of wisdom acquired from as many beacons as you can meet...that's a good street. The best of black music for me is not empty riffing or overstating the forlorn. I like the simplicity of absorbing the most from least. There's a famous song that Totó La Momposina of Colombia sings called "Dolores has a piano". The whole song is about Dolores having a piano and therefore having a massive influence on their quaint society. It's a visual example of African diaspora adaptation at the turn of the 19th century. Some stuff doesn't come up in jazz education. What's important in all this is remembering the connection to the music that has healed communities, not to just be one who toots their horn! I've been fortunate enough to be associated with huge mentors and made music with people who have advanced a lot of good things: Andrew Hill, Sonny Sharrock, Amiri Baraka, Cecil Taylor and many ancestors who commandeered life with a great amount of depth and perseverance. My situation is unique and I appreciate the amount of inner strength that I developed from working with many important trailblazers. Reggie Workman got me my first jam session gig in Harlem and, 20 years after that, a seminal record with Mal Waldron titled *My Dear Family*. Geri Allen helped me score parts from my crude etchings for my first ensemble CD, *Sonogram*. John Szwed produced several concerts for our Double Duo band [Rashied Ali, Ravi Coltrane, Mixashawn] at Columbia University. I'm still learning so much from our rich musical environment. ♦

For more information, visit [pheeroanaklaff.com](http://pheeroanaklaff.com). akLaff is at The Stone at The New School May 4th, solo at Issue Project Room May 5th and Rubin Museum May 18th as part of *Jog Blues*. See Calendar.

**Recommended Listening:**

- (Wadada) Leo Smith New Delta Ahkri—*Kanto Pri Homaro* (Song of Humanity) (Kabell, 1976)
- Oliver Lake Quartet—*Clevont Fitzhubert* (A Good Friend of Mine) (Black Saint, 1981)
- Air (Henry Threadgill/Fred Hopkins/  
Pheeroan akLaff)- *New Air: Live at Montreal Jazz Festival* (Black Saint, 1983)
- Pheeroan akLaff—*Sonogram* (MUWORKS, 1989)
- Yosuke Yamashita—*Ways of Time* (Verve, 1994)
- Wadada Leo Smith Golden Quintet—*America's National Parks* (Cuneiform, 2016)

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Bill and Donald. In 1996, I was recording Donald for the album *Enchanté!*, with Steve Nelson, Bill Easley, Essiet Essiet, Billy Higgins and the French trumpeter Stéphane Belmondo. I always try to understand what the musicians are doing and suggest tunes and special guests to make combinations. When we did the recording of Bill Mobley with Mulgrew Miller [*Moodscape*, 2007, a quartet session completed by Robert Hurst], I think that Eric Harland was not Bill's first choice, but I like having someone of another generation bringing something different.

The same way we did Donald's *Born To Be Blue*, I invited two young drummers, one of his sons, Kenneth, and Marcus Gilmore, which brings something different to the vibe. People like Donald or Bill have an open mind. That's how I see the role of the producer, to suggest or bring something a little different. I don't have to explain to them what to do. I worked two times with Buddy Montgomery. I recorded several CDs but only released one [Buddy Montgomery All Star Group, *A Love Affair In Paris*, 2000] because Buddy was a little sick, but the music was extraordinary. I wish I could find some time with Lenny White and Donald, I know exactly what to do to put it out. The tunes Buddy wrote and the way he organized the music, he was a master."

When asked about issuing historical recordings, Felgeyrolles explained, "I'm open to do it. I have a recording of Illinois Jacquet with George Duvivier and Hank Jones, but Black & Blue has already done something similar [*Blues from N.O. (Live)*]. I have an unreleased project by Donald Brown and an unreleased concert of James Williams with Billy Pierce, Mickey Roker and Peter Washington. I need to talk with Cedar Walton's widow. I have a concert with his trio plus Wallace Roney and Vincent Herring. When I try to issue this type of recording, the main thing is to pay the expenses. If people will buy them, it's okay with me."

Space Time artists are generous in their assessment of Felgeyrolles' contributions. Mobley remarked, "It has been great working with Xavier over so many years and getting his feedback and input regarding my projects. I feel very thankful he has given people like me, Jean Toussaint, Donald Brown and others like Essiet Essiet and Keith Brown the opportunity to record and get our music out there. Being connected with the great Donald Brown gave me the introduction to Xavier Felgeyrolles. I only regret that Xavier is so far away in France and cannot work his magic so easily here in the States to hook up all his great artists with more work in the States."

Brown is no less enthusiastic with his praise: "We met when my album *Early Bird* was out and Xavier contacted Sunnyside Records to book me for his festival. He became my number one fan. I consider him to be one of my closest friends. He has been invaluable to my life on so many levels. That's carried on to my kids; he has recorded them. He makes sure my records are played around the world and doesn't let me fall by the wayside. When I had health issues, he was working with me to record. He has had great ideas and provided direction. He wanted me to reinvent myself as well, suggesting a duo record. Everyone in my household knows him and loves him to death. He has been a driving force." ♦

For more information, visit [spacetimerecords.com](http://spacetimerecords.com). Artists performing this month include Kenny Barron at Jazz Standard May 1st-6th; Essiet Essiet at Smoke May 11th-13th with Eddie Henderson, The 75 Club at Bogardus Mansion May 18th-19th with Steve Williams and James Weidman and Zinc Bar May 21st and 28th, the latter with Strings Attached; Eric Harland at The Jazz Gallery May 18th-19th; Ali Jackson at Rose Theater May 18th-19th with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra; and Harold Mabern at Fat Cat May 9th and Smalls May 16th. See Calendar.