

Magic Flute: A Conversation with Marvin Sanders by Richard Whittaker

I met Marvin Sanders during a film festival at Berkeley Art Center. At the time, Sanders ran the Sunday evening music series there. On the first evening of film screening, Sanders was there to help at the front desk. Chatting with him, I discovered he plays the flute.

"Jazz?" I asked.

"You say that because I'm black, don't you?" he replied.

I was taken aback, but realized I'd been offered an opening to a deeper level of conversation. I admitted he was right and before long, we were in the middle of an unexpectedly rich exchange. The question of the use of music in films came up. Sanders had strong opinions on the subject and I was intrigued by his thoughts. "We'll have to talk more later," I thought, making a note to self. Meanwhile we had a film festival to deal with.

After the screening that evening a few of us, including Marvin, went out for drinks to unwind. I found myself seated next to him and we picked up where we'd left off. It wasn't long before I found myself asking if he'd be willing to be interviewed.

He was. It took awhile for schedules to line up, but finally Sanders and I got together on a quiet, sunny afternoon at the Berkeley Art Center. We sat in a small patio just outside the center's foyer. From time to time, the voices of visitors could be heard through an open door. The informal conditions seemed right. One of the first things I'd noticed about Sanders was how relaxed and open he was. On my way to the interview, I'd grabbed my camera and stuck a 50mm lens on it rather than the wider 28mm lens I often use for such occasions. But as we sat there talking, I soon regretted my choice because Sanders' expressive gestures kept extending beyond the edges of my viewfinder. After experimenting with backing my chair up, leaning this way and that, I let go of my photo concerns, and just listened...

Richard Whittaker: I know you spent some time on the streets here in Berkeley. Would you say something about that?

Marvin Sanders: Well, I came here in 1982 from Aspen. They have a summer music festival and I'd spent two summers there. At the end of the summer of '82, after the festival, I just thought I need to get out of here. I thought, New York? No, I've tried New York two or three times; it's too urban, too concrete jungle. But I'd been out here before so, on a lark, I hopped on a Greyhound bus. I had a bottle of gin with me. I was drinking heavily in those days, all right? [laughs] I'll tell you a story in Aspen. May I?

RW: Sure!

MS: There was a house in downtown Aspen right across the street from the police station. It had been used as a thrift shop and they had some zoning issues. The place was empty at that time, so I just moved in. I lived in that place for almost two years! It only had electricity, no running water or heat.

I don't want to stray too far, but I was drinking heavily in those days. Well, there were a couple of churches in town—one's a landmark—and I was using it to practice in. I'd drink just before practice because it loosened me up. I had bottles of liquor stashed around in this church, in the loft, in the bathroom and around. Well, they discovered it one day and said, "Out!"

When I got here, I just got over this booze thing. I didn't have a single drop of booze for about fifteen years. Anyway, I had 600 dollars in my pocket when I got here, and I spent it in about a week. So suddenly I was penniless and homeless. I thought should I head back east? But first I went down to Monterey and hung out right next to where they built that Monterey Bay Aquarium. Again, there was a beach cottage right there! It was part of an oceanography research area, and it was empty. I stayed there for a few days. I was eating fruit this guy would throw away from the back of this fruit stand. I ate so much citrus fruit that the citric acid burned my tongue.

So I decided to come back up here. Someone gave me a few bucks and I caught a bus into the Greyhound terminal in Oakland. I saw something there about "Traveler's Aid." So I went there thinking I was going to go back to, maybe, Ohio. I got to talking with this woman and she said, "Why don't you try Berkeley? I think you'd fit right in!" She gave me twenty bucks and I came over here. It was kind of an adventure for me. This was before you saw quite so many homeless people here on the streets in Berkeley.

RW: How long were you on the street?

MS: I know exactly. It was from September of '82 to April of '83, a little more than half a year.

RW: You told me that somehow you'd figured out how to climb up on some roof and climb down in through a skylight.

MS: I told you that? [laughs]

RW: Yes. Now, that's an interesting story.

MS: Incriminating... [laughs] I was homeless and just sort of walking around in a stupor in September and October. I was always looking for places to practice. I would practice over in that eucalyptus grove by the entrance to the UC Berkeley campus.

RW: You'd have your flute.

MS: Right. I had my flute with me. I discovered I was good at finding spots. I started sneaking into what's called the Florence Schwimley Little Theater in the Berkeley High School complex. It's a lovely little theater. I'd put a piece of cardboard in the door lock so when they left, I could just open the door and get in there, and I'd spend the whole night. I'd practice in there.

Then one night, right across the street from that same place, I was practicing under a huge redwood tree and it started raining, the first rain of the season. I was new to the area, remember, and by then it was October. It took about an hour for the water to seep through the branches and start hitting me on the ground. All of the sudden I think, "Wait a minute. This won't do!" So I just started walking. This is when I discovered the place I told you about.

It was right where Vista College is right now. Right behind that place there was a stairway and when you went up to the second level, you'd be above the rooftops of the adjacent buildings. I was standing there and I saw some skylights the next building over. I just hopped over there. I don't even think it was a conscious thought; I kind of felt the

skylight and it lifted up! I looked down into the loft of this architect's office. So I lowered myself down in there, maybe five feet down to landing, and I was inside. So that was my place for the winter.

RW: You'd come in after hours each evening?

MS: Yes. Then I'd get out by six o'clock in the morning. I wouldn't leave a trace of myself.

RW: You were meticulous.

MS: Yes. I still don't understand why homeless people leave such messes behind themselves. Anyway, one night I was in there and I had a really bad headache. I heard someone open the door. It was all dark and I said, "Someone's here." I didn't want to have that surprise happen. "Who is it?" the man said. "I'm a friend of the janitor's," I said. "Well, would you leave?" And I left, but I continued using it. I think they knew after awhile. When I finally did move into a place off the streets, I started playing at that restaurant Au Coquelet.

RW: How did it happen that you started playing there?

MS: I was playing on the streets and I was walking home one day, and I just walked in there out of the blue. I asked the owner, "Would you like some live music?" Medea is his name. He still owns the place. He said, we'll try it.

I took it seriously, and I did it for several months. By that time I was playing on the streets and paying my rent that way. That must have been after April of '83.

There was a bookstore/restaurant called Upstart Crow that was right on the corner of University and Shattuck. One night I was playing on the street and someone told me that they were looking for some live music. I went over there and met this guy named Ken Kitch. He was the manager and he loved classical music. He told me I could play Sunday brunches. I wound up putting together a trio: flute, harpsichord and cello, and I performed there every Sunday morning. He started calling me the "impresario." That's how I wound up here at the Berkeley Art Center, through that propensity I have to want to provide or create performing opportunities for myself and other musicians. I did it at there and I did it at the Unitarian Church on Cedar and Bonita. I organized concert series there. An interesting guy used to be the Pastor there, Paul Sawyer.

RW: What was the music you were playing?

MS: That's a good question, because I was just back in Ohio and was talking with my first flute teacher, Randy Hester, and an oboist, Steve. Randy said to Steve, "Oh, by the way, Marvin played on the streets in Berkeley." Steve said, "Yeah? What did you play?" I told him that's when I started playing all this Bach music. There's a flutist who put out a book of excerpts from the Bach cantatas. Bach wrote a lot of cantatas! And he wrote a lot of flute parts. So twenty or thirty years ago some flutist put out a book of all these excerpts. So I started playing Bach. It went over really well on the streets.

RW: That's really something.

MS: [laughs] Mind you, this was also something new to me. I mean, it was a way of getting over my stage fright. I started playing flute late. I was twenty years old when I started. So by that time, I was already thirty.

RW: Okay, let's go back. How did you start playing? Where were you? And what were you

doing?

MS: I was in Denver, Colorado working at a gas station. Those were the days people would pull up and someone would walk out and pump your gas and wipe the windshield. I was working there in 1971-72 and, strangely, my mother—I was talking with her over the phone—she asked, "What do you want for Christmas?" [laughs] I mean, I'm twenty years old! I said, off the top of my head, "How about a flute?"

She bought me a pawnshop flute. I visited her for Christmas and she gave it to me. Half the keys didn't even work, but I didn't know the difference. I took it back to Denver with me. I was working ten hours a day, six days a week then. But you know, at nineteen, twenty years old, you have all kinds of energy. I had a natural aptitude for it. I enjoyed playing it. That's how I started.

RW: Did you just start out playing by ear?

MS: Well, I did know how to read music because I'd learned that in elementary school. But, yes, I started out by doodling and just enjoying it. That summer I hooked up with my girlfriend who'd come out from Ohio. We decided we were going to leave Denver and go to Florida. I had this nice little Volvo P1800. They don't make them anymore.

RW: The old style with the curved back.

MS: Yes. I loved that car. Working in the gas station, I could doctor it up. When they finished working, I'd pull my car in there and between people pulling in for gas, I'd make sure the oil was changed and so on.

We struggled all the way across the country in that little thing! We drove from Denver to LA, and then from LA to Florida! Driving across Texas was really awful, I remember. But the people were really nice. We drove through the Deep South, Mississippi and everything, and this a white girl...

RW: Sounds like it could have been trouble.

MS: [laughs] Very easily! But it was not. People were extremely courteous. We got to Florida and we stayed in this motel all summer. It had a pool. In those days you could go to a town and pick up any kind of job and find a place to rent. You can't do that anymore! I could move to a town and work in a gas station or wash dishes and be able to pay the rent! When I was in Denver, I was paying sixty bucks a month for a one-bedroom apartment. Anyway, we wound up in Florida. I still had my flute, and I practiced. I got a little job putting in telephone lines underground.

After the summer, we headed back to Ohio where my mother is to this day. I got into a trade school to become a respiratory therapist. I learned a lot. [Marvin is smoking as we talk. He waves his cigarette in a little pirouette, and laughs at length.] But I'm still playing the flute all the while. By this time I'm copying some of the Jethro Tull stuff by ear, you know. So I got a job as a respiratory therapist. I would take my flute with me to the hospital. I was working graveyard shifts a lot, and I'd be practicing in the hospital. Those tiled rooms would be echoing! I worked that job for a year, and one night I just walked out. No plan at all. That was the end of that.

RW: Where was this?

MS: Columbus, Ohio. I was really interested in jazz in those days. That was my intent, to play jazz flute. I started studying with a jazz trumpet player, Bobby Alston. I thought I could learn the art of improvisation that way. I was doing it, but I didn't know what the

hell I was doing, really. Then one day somehow I got a recording of some Bach flute sonatas played by Jean-Pierre Rampal, the French flutist. I was really impressed with his playing, so I called the Columbus symphony to find out who their flutist was. I wanted to take lessons from him. This is the same guy I was talking with a couple of weeks ago, Randy. He's the first flute for the Columbus Symphony Orchestra.

RW: So you just called him up?

MS: I think I must have realized that if I really want to learn the music, I need to learn the instrument. In fact I think this is one of the problems with jazz flutists like Herbie Mann. His flute playing is really not very good by, I guess, by classical standards. But I think that the classical standard is the standard for good flute playing. So I decided I needed to learn the instrument if I wanted to play the Bach flute sonatas, and I started taking lessons from Randy. He was a tremendous influence on my life. Not just flute playing, but he introduced me to Eastern Philosophy, Zen Buddhism and things like that. At that point he had just gotten out of the Eastman School of Music, he and the oboist I saw a couple of weeks ago, Steve. I met them both at the beginning of their careers in the Columbus Symphony. They've been there for over thirty years now, in fact, they've been with the symphony orchestra longer than anyone else now.

RW: How long was he your teacher?

MS: Well, he still is, actually. About six months after I first met him, I got into Ohio State University as a music major. That was in January of 1975. I auditioned, and then there I was! The people there were very encouraging. So that meant something to me.

I was studying with Randy, but I also had a flute teacher at Ohio State, a guy named James Westbrook. I picked up some things from him. Everybody was being very encouraging, making me feel very special. Then Randy told me about this woman flute teacher fifty miles away in Dayton. It was one of the most interesting confluences of events in my life, ever. I was studying with Randy and this teacher from Ohio State, all very hyped about the music, and then Randy mentioned this woman in Dayton. And I started taking weekly lessons from her, too. I'd drive the fifty miles each way every weekend. So at one point I had three teachers at the same time.

Randy never did charge me for lessons. I think he saw my enthusiasm. Maybe he thought, "No need to charge him." [laughs] I wound up moving from Columbus and transferring to Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. I moved to this lovely town called Yellow Springs, Ohio. It's where Antioch College is.

Those were truly magical days for me. I was playing. I was discovering all this new music, Brahms Symphonies and things. I had two really fine teachers, Randy and this woman I studied with in Dayton. She was like a mother, in a way. They instilled a belief, or they helped it. That lasted for two and a half years. Then life started to intrude. Well, the music is life, too.

There was a girl, another flutist. Long story short, she sold me a flute, a Powell flute. I'd given her seventeen hundred dollars for it that I'd gotten from the department of education. But she wanted two thousand. A couple of years later I still hadn't paid her the remaining three hundred. I wasn't even thinking about it. But she and I had had a brief little affair, that's what it was to me. Looking back on it, this is when things started breaking in a different way. She came by one hot summer day and asked for her flute back, and stupidly, I gave it back to her. She gave me twelve hundred dollars back. Why didn't she give all of it back? But I can see how that really led me to Berkeley. This is 1977 and five years later, I ended up in Berkeley.

RW: Had you graduated?

MS: No. I'd become a terrible student. All I was interested in was the music. So I dropped out, but mixed in to all of that was the fact that I'd fallen crazily in love with another woman. That's one reason this woman wanted her flute back. So she gave me twelve hundred bucks and I went crazy, literally. I didn't have a flute, and I was heartbroken from this woman that I was in love with. It was hot as hell in summer and with that twelve hundred dollars I hopped into my little VW bug and decided, "I'm going to Boston." I decided I had to have that same kind of flute. I headed there in order to rob the place.

RW: Wow!

MS: Crazy! I drove all the way to Boston in that little 1965 VW bug chugging along. But en route, I saw Jean-Pierre Rampal with the Cleveland Symphony. I saw his stage presence and all that. I went backstage and met him! He autographed my program. He had this energy, this focus; there was a light about him that was really—it was a magic moment for me. I was keeping that magic alive. So I was still on the beam.

So I made it to Boston and I was going to go and break into the Powell flute factory and get me another flute! I got myself a little motel room. I bought some glasscutters and some burglar tools. I scoped the place. I was serious about this! It was a little cottage in a residential area where they made these flutes. I went there and parked and waited for them to close and for it to get dark. I sat there for hours. I remember some kids who came out and were playing basketball. Oh, and I had these bolt cutters, too. It got dark, and I remember there was a railroad track or something behind the building. The windows had these wire protective things around them. I was going to cut the wire away and cut a pane of glass out and somehow get the window up and get in there. I even cut a few stands of that wire—and then I just stopped.

RW: What happened?

MS: Nothing! I just, all of the sudden, stopped. I got back into my car, and I headed back to Ohio. When I got back to Ohio, the first place I went to was my teacher's place. I remember I was hot and sweaty, and I was still on this mission. I was just burning up with it. To make a long story short, a couple of days later I went to a pawnshop and spent two hundred dollars for a flute. That's how I resumed. For the next several years I played a two hundred dollar flute. I wound up in Boulder and I bought another one there.

RW: Do you ever reflect on that decisive moment when you had the bolt cutters in your hands and you stopped?

MS: Yes, but in fact, to this day, I'd still like to get my hands on a Powell flute. But I like the flute I have. It's not as easy to play as one of the newer flutes. In fact my teacher used the term "resistant." But you have to like your instrument. We did a recording in here last night and I had some of the best musical moments I've had in a long time.

RW: What did you play?

MS: Bach—I think he's the best, by the way—and a piece by the American composer Charles Griffes. He died young in the 1920s, I think. It's a great piece for a flute.

RW: How do you account for your interest in music? Are there things from your childhood?

MS: Only that there was always music in the air. Always. We moved around a lot. Far as I

know, the first five years of my life I was with my grandmother and grandfather in Alabama, a little town that probably has less than a hundred people in it now—Newton, Alabama. It's about forty miles north of the Florida border. After that I was reunited with my mother and sister and her husband at the time. When I was seven years old we moved to Atlanta. We were there for about three years. Then we were in this rather ugly place in Alabama for a year. From there we went to Columbus, Ohio in 1964, I think it was, where my mother is to this day. I remember there being a piano in my grandmother's place, and I remember a metronome. I remember tinkling on the piano, but I don't remember anyone actually practicing on the instrument.

I had to go to church every Sunday with my grandfather. There was some singing in there and then I remember my sister, who's a year older than I am. My sister is a talented singer. And some of my earliest likings were soul music: rhythm and blues and then the Motown sound. My sister would sing along with the Supremes. To this day, I think a lot of that stuff—the Motown, the Temptations and all—I see that classical influence. They had strings behind a lot of their music. There was the use of classical forms, but they were Americanized so much.

What I'm getting at is that in a lot of classical music, harmonically, for years up until Mozart's time at least, they stayed with tonal music. They'd go tonic, dominant, tonic. One, five, one. Then more and more, they'd go to one, five and before going back to one, they'd go to other areas. But the Temptations, they'd use a lot of that basic classical format, harmonically: one, five, one. But you can do a lot with that simple form.

I bought a couple of tapes of the Temptations recently and when I listened to them, I could see clearly their influence on me, how when I really began to familiarize myself with classical music, I already had some of that from listening to the Temptations. The aesthetic was there. But it wasn't until after I met Randy—I must have been twenty-one years old—that I really started becoming familiar with classical music. The first live concert I ever went to was flute and harpsichord at Ohio State. Bach. I remember thinking how sparse it all sounded! It didn't have the thumping beat, the drums. It was just two instruments: flute and harpsichord.

RW: You like that sparseness? "It seemed so sparse." A person might think you didn't like it, from that phrase.

MS: Yes. At least, I was more than ready to listen to it. And to this day, I really like that combination, flute and harpsichord. It's a sparkling sound. I think of champagne when I hear that sound. I love it.

RW: I remember how, when I first learned that you play the flute, I assumed the predictable...

MS: ...Jazz.

RW: Right. You called that to my attention, that since you're African-American, everybody thinks jazz. You set me straight right there, although in a nice way. I didn't feel attacked, just corrected.

MS: I did? [laughs]

RW: You wanted me to understand that you played classical music. This was when we were having our first film festival (The Berkeley Art Center International Small Film Festival). You talked about how you didn't like the way music was used in films. That interested me. I wonder if you could talk a little about that?

MS: Now I recall, and later, that same evening I heard this African flutist on that one film (Asylum). It sort undermined what I had said earlier. I know that many scenes wouldn't have half the power they have without the music, but there is still something that's slightly unappealing to me about using music in that fashion. Maybe I'm just being too much of a purist about it.

RW: What it is that bothers you about it?

MS: Well, it's simply that when music is put to any other use, aside from itself, it's kind of prostituted in a way. I guess I am a purist, in that sense. I was talking about the sparseness of that flute and harpsichord—I much prefer that. I like the baldness of it, just letting it be there. It's its own reason for existence. I mean, Stravinsky said essentially the same thing. You can't really put any other reasons for the existence of music except music itself. But nowadays, in a lot of movies, it's just used purely for effect. TV is full of it, you know, commercials and things. Do they always have to have some music going on behind? Again, they're using that one, five, one [he hums it] to sell diapers, or whatever. I spent a little time in London and you don't hear that so much there. First of all, there aren't so many commercials. They just say what they have to say. That's the worst, when you have that constant bombardment of people talking and then they have the music in the background. That's really a bad use of music, and I do resent that.

RW: I listen to NPR. On some of the news programs there will be a story, seventeen kids killed, then a little music. Now here's the next story, the price of gas is up. More music. It's a typical example. Sometimes it strikes me as surreal, even bizarre.

MS: It's insulting, too. Music is used in the mass media in ways that I really detest, nowadays. Speaking of which, you know I told you I started playing in restaurants, Au Coquelet.

RW: Yes.

MS: Ultimately, I had to stop because the effect would sometimes really make me ill. I'd play there and after playing an hour or two with the constant din of conversation, my head would be spinning. I played in a number of restaurants, but I had to stop. It's funny, but playing on the streets could often be quite noisy, too, but it wasn't quite the same.

RW: What was it like, playing on the streets?

MS: I had some wonderful moments, but I had some truly torturous, nasty moments, too. I did it for about four years. At first, it was all adventure. I was surprised that people would even put money in the box! "Wow, that's amazing!" For the first maybe year and a half it was like that. In the beginning, I'd go over to San Francisco to play, but I'd always come back to Berkeley every day. Eventually I realized I could just stay over here. To this day, a lot of people I know I met in those days, playing on the streets. I was out there all of the time, but basically, left to myself, I'm kind of reclusive. I'm pretty much content just with my own company.

RW: Out there you'd be vulnerable and exposed, I'd think. How was that?

MS: Well, you know, there's Alicia de Larroche, she's a great pianist. She's an old woman now, but she concertized internationally. She said she hates being on stage and having people looking at her! But yet, that was her life. And yes, at times, it would be awful for me. There would be times I'd be playing and someone would be standing there looking,

and sometimes it was not a good feeling. As you say, I was completely vulnerable because I was very conscientious about what I was doing.

Yes. I was playing on the streets, but still, I'm going to make the best of it. And I still feel this way now. When you're making music, you become open to everything in your environment. That can be very beneficial to your playing, but you're also liable to not just the good stuff in your environment. Suddenly everything is there.

Certainly, you're as selective as possible, but there I was. Total strangers would suddenly stop, and they're literally looking down my throat. Sometimes it was really unbearable. But I was also thinking, well, this will certainly get me used to playing in front of people! And sometimes I felt that some people intentionally wanted me to be as uncomfortable as possible. So playing on the streets is a mix.

I had some exquisite moments, too. A woman once said to me in San Francisco, "You really grace the streets." That meant something. It made my night. I remember an alcoholic one night. I was playing over in Union Square. This guy, a well-dressed guy, but he had been drinking, came up. He stayed there and people would walk by. After awhile someone would be walking by and he'd [reaches out to grab me by the arm] "Stop, stop. Listen to this! Isn't this just great?" [laughs] But I got into a fight once near the end of the time I played on the streets. If I had to sum it up, I'd say it was a good, interesting time, but when I finished, that was it. I have no desire at all to do that again.

I learned some painful lessons in those days. There's that feeling that you can't force anything on music except for music itself. When I'd go out there, I'd have to say consciously to myself, "I'm not playing for money." Yet, I needed the money. People would come up sometimes and make you feel that you were playing for the money—if I like you, I'll give you something. And sometimes people would make you think they were going to give you all this money [gestures like pulling out his wallet] and then they'd leave you just "ohhh." Some days were like that. Nasty feelings. I had to teach myself not to play, and I do feel strongly about this, for anything other than music itself. It hasn't been easy, but the music has made it bearable.

RW: What is the essential use of music, or the purest use?

MS: Well, first of all, I think we, as human beings, are intrinsically musical. I mean some people almost brag, "I can't sing two notes." I wonder about that. It's almost as though music came with us. I would like to think it's one of our best, our highest, faculties, insofar as it sort of embraces all of life and everyone. If a person gets the opportunity to practice to develop music, I think it's a great opportunity to explore life itself—sound, vibrations and all. I have a huge interest in the physics of it, also.

RW: Say more about that.

MS: Just the physics of sound, specifically with the flute. Every instrument produces its own distinct wave of sound. To this day no one can accurately say how it is produced in the flute. The air stream goes in, but you're not just blowing through a tube, it oscillates back and forth and sets up a frequency like that. Anyway, those things are almost as interesting to me as the music itself. There's a real divide, though. One of the most intriguing aspects is the question of where that stops and the music begins, the real music.

In other words, most of my practicing still has to do with the sound—scales and passages and stuff like that. Seventy-five or eighty percent of my daily practice time is given over to that. But suddenly, I'm into making music. There's a real distinction between those two, but that seventy-five, eighty percent, you've got to go through it to be able to make the real music. But it breaks off somewhere there. There's a transformation that goes on, which I experience...

RW: When it moves from practicing tones to something we call music?

MS: Exactly. It's something that I can experience. I might not ever be able to depict it in words. It happened here last night when I was recording.

RW: Music happened.

MS: Yes. Suddenly you're in; it's like a realm. See, that's the thing! I've had these experiences right from the very beginning. The difference between now and then is that now I have a much better technique of getting to that area. Earlier, it would happen and I wouldn't know why it did, or how I got there. That's one of the biggest appeals, and I think that's true of all art; at its best, there's something miraculous about it!

But see, the miracles are perhaps too subtle, or the subtleness of it all can easily be drowned out by the world we live in. It takes some focusing or application to see it or appreciate it. That's one of the most valuable aspects of music, I think. But what value is that for today's society? I don't know.

I think, individually, it might help one to be a good person, or a better person. After practicing, I have a heightened sensitivity to everything! That's worthwhile, but it's also fraught with some perilous things. I literally used to be afraid to walk down the street after practicing. I was too exposed, and I'd have a feeling like paranoia. I'd have this feeling until the first encounter with someone, however slight. That would break it. Suddenly there would be [exhaling] "now I can relax." I still go through that, but in nowhere near as traumatic a way.

RW: After you've practiced are you more sensitive to the sounds, the light, the feeling of the breeze?

MS: Oh yes. Everything! I've got to tell you, when I mention things like this, talking about influences, people will laugh at me. Did you ever hear of Carlos Castaneda, those books he put out?

RW: Yes.

MS: Those books had a big influence on me, too. I still use a lot of that stuff and a lot of people really are scornful of that.

RW: Could you give me an example?

MS: Well, the first thing that pops into my mind is that he uses the phrase "stopping the world." To me that's very akin to Zen Buddhist meditation and experiencing emptiness. "All thoughts cease, and all thoughts of separation cease between you and your surrounding." When I'm going through something like that, like after practicing, I feel really connected with everything. And I have a knack for, I can stop that sort of... [gestures toward his head]

RW: ... The inner talking?

MS: Yes. Just like that, pretty much. I think it is something that can be used beneficially. So I use that, but then there are countless other ways those books have influenced my perceptions of things.

It's interesting that so many people who knew about those books are so scornful of them. People called him a fraud. They said, this is not real anthropological research, blah, blah,

blah, you know. To me, they were completely missing the point.

RW: Well, getting back to the physics of music, what a mystery it is that these sounds, just vibrations coming through the air, come in and I suddenly I have this feeling.

MS: I mean, can you explain that? It happens to everyone! It's totally inexplicable, but wonderful! Truly wonderful. Yes! I open myself to that. But strangely—even ironically, in a way—"real" musicians sometimes can be very scornful of those feelings. They say, if it happens, you must "take it apart and examine it and see why it's happening." So you can utilize it. Like last night, I had these wonderful musical experiences. I may have to stop and even tear that back down. But at least, I have to examine it and learn from it.

You know, one of the things that really amazes me is that this is all pertaining to the flute. This is a small instrument. It's not producing a big sound that you're going to hear two blocks away. Yet, it's a whole universe!

RW: Let's talk about the Sunday program of concerts here at the Berkeley Art Center, and you've been doing that since...

MS: ... Since January of '97—and I didn't even know this place existed until then. A friend of mine, Bob Baldock, who was affiliated with KPFA at the time, would bring in literary and political figures to give talks here. A lot of people would come and all the while I was saying, "Hey Bob, why don't you do some music?" Well, he did for a couple of events. I played as the opening act for Anne Lamott, I think, and I did it for the Haitian President, Aristide. Danny Glover was there.

Before they'd talk, I'd go out and play some Vivaldi, or something. So I kept after Bob and finally, maybe out of frustration, he introduced me to Robbin [Henderson]. She was very open to the idea of having some live music here. Suddenly I was just so hyped! This was January of 1997, and at the very same time, I started school at UC Berkeley to finish that degree I'd started at Ohio State.

RW: Did you finish it at UC?

MS: Yes. I got a BA in Music. So all of the sudden, after about ten or fifteen years of living, as they say, off the grid, I got real busy. I'm back in school and everything! I literally would go door-to-door in this neighborhood (around the Art Center) leaving flyers on peoples' steps. I wasn't even thinking about making any money. So when she offered to pay me, that was like gravy.

The very first concert drew forty or fifty people, a string quartet that I'd just gotten together. I get some satisfaction if I hear a good musical performance and I helped set something up.

So what am I saying? Just recently I asked myself, "What am I doing here?" Essentially, through my efforts, my willingness to be here, I'm still providing a space, an opportunity, for musicians to perform. I may not be able to do a whole lot more than that on any given day, but at least that's something.

RW: You're facing some uncertainty in the future, because Robbin is leaving the art center this year.

MS: Yes. But my future is uncertain no matter what. In fact that's probably one of the underlying beliefs in everything I do, really. Someone asked me recently, does this bother you not having any money? I said, well, at least I have a goal every day, with the music. A focus. To me that's a lot. So yes, it's uncertain, the future here. But that's just part of the uncertainty I've lived with all my life. So I don't know. Whatever happens, happens. You

know, Richard, sometimes I feel that one of these days I may be one of these bums you see walking by on the streets mumbling to themselves. That may be the future that I face. Who knows? I heard someone say that once you're homeless, you're always homeless. In a way, I've always sort of kept one foot there. I don't want to get too far away from it so it wouldn't be too traumatic if it should happen again. To this day, I sleep with all my windows open at home. I've got to have air. When you're homeless you get used to the openness. But most likely that won't happen. I've got a sister I could go live with. Since 1994 I've been in touch with her. I got married then. I'm still married, in fact.

RW: Are you still together?

MS: No. She moved to New York. She's a dancer. We lived together for a good seven or eight years. I really have a lot respect and admiration for what she does, but [laughs] I'm still an unrealistic romanticist. Life is still fascinating to me. As long as that's happening, things are not too bad, right? It could be an exciting time. If I have my way, it will be.