

# The Masthead

**"You will never find** a more wretched hive of scum and villainy." So it's said in *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* of Mos Eisley. The spaceport's famous cantina, a dive bar full of thugs and bounty hunters, is soundtracked in the first *Star Wars* film (1977) by an extraterrestrial band, their identical bulbous bald heads glinting in the dim light, playing a turbo-charged version of the 1930s swing of Bennie Goodman or Fletcher Henderson.

Composer John Williams (who is still recycling old ideas in the latest episode) explained in interviews that he was searching for something "both alien and yet familiar at the same time". Which was kind of the problem: imagining American jazz as the soundtrack to drinking dens of the future, and having it played by aliens who all look the same, was kitsch fun with undertones of racism. It not only revealed the queasy prejudices of the film makers regarding the music back home, it also returned to a corrosive cliché of jazz as a soundtrack to iniquity that musicians like Don Byron would still be kicking against 20 years later in *The Wire* 172.

Oddly, that scene has an intriguing and persistent afterlife in music criticism. Tap 'cantina' into the search engine of *The Wire*'s online archive and you find several references to it. Indeed, the episode has become a shorthand for critics looking to evoke a seductive sense of otherworldly distance, or the extraterrestrial exotic, or both (and that bassline was admittedly pretty fat).

This being Hollywood, and with the insatiable fan culture of sci-fi and fantasy films a central cog in the consumer machine, the latest *Star Wars* episode *The Force Awakens* regurgitates the whole scene in almost identical fashion – this time, however, replacing jazz with cod reggae ("see, we know more than one type of black music!"). The alien is again conflated with the merely different, and perceived divisions on Earth are projected into imaginary space.

Commercial representations of the exotic carry the same banal sense of otherness and threat as they did 40 years ago. But meetings with far-flung sounds in the current issue of *The Wire* happen on a more level playing field. Alan and Sir Richard Bishop have spent decades travelling the world in search of music and mythologies, but as they explain to Dave Segal in Seattle, they now want to return the favour. "We're paying back for the inspiration they've given us," Alan declares. "We're trying to present music that is not respected in the overall discussion." Ignoring Western musical canons and opening yourself to information channels beyond the mainstream, they argue, enables genuine encounters and true revelation via unknown sounds. "We're all about DIY," Alan concludes. "A lot of people may thrive on the ego of thinking they invented the wheel, but we certainly didn't invent it. There's nobody alive that did."

This Heat found exotic encounters closer to home. "Charles Hayward was living in the same South London squat as Mario Boyer Diekuuroh, a Ghanaian percussionist who had been touring with the Ghanaian National Troupe Of Dance And Song," writes Mike Barnes in his Primer on This Heat and their members' later projects. In this collaboration, "neither party pretends to be anything they aren't... some of it sounds like they are playing gamelan scales, the resonant gyl fitting in well with this Heat's drums, reedy keyboards and clarinet arabesques". At the grassroots level This Heat operated on, collaborations between disparate musicians find common ground away from the fantasy and fetishism of commercial encounters.

At *The Wire* two colleagues are off on their metaphorical travels: Katie Gibbons and Patrick Ward, also presenters of our radio shows on NTS and Resonance FM, are leaving for pastures new. We wish them the very best.

Derek Walmsley

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