

Variations on a Theme: Tell Me Who

written by Guest Contributor | September 30, 2016



"Mr Bukowski!," she called. Annie Chow was backing her van into the hall's parking lot, and greeted the old man. She parked, fought the stiff door, swung her trombone case roughly over her thin shoulders and grunted as she kicked her door shut. ***"How are you today Mr Bukowski?"***

The man nodded, cautiously. ***"Yak lechi,"*** he said softly, ***"Yak lechi, how you do? Ready for practising, yes?"*** ***"Yes,"*** she paused, then sighing and hardening her jaw, ***"I guess."***

A double hoot made them turn as Ibrahim's station wagon swerved into the lot and lurched to a halt facing Annie's bumper. Ibrahim, and John, and Ingrid retrieved their instruments from the back, while Sledge clambered out and jogged up and down, shaking his wrists, impatient.

The steps up to the steel double door of the old Polish social club were spotless, and at Annie's touch the doors swung silently open on oiled hinges. Annie smelled disinfectant and cleaning fluid on Mr Bukowski's overalls and shook her head in appreciation. ***"Don't you ever go to bed Mr Bukowski?"***

Sledge stalked across to a closet and unlocked it to retrieve his sprawling drum kit. Ingrid swung her keyboard's legs down with a double click and plugged its cable into the big adaptor she shared with John's electric bass.

Annie Chow touched the trombone against her neck, and puffed tentatively into the mouthpiece. She and her horn were stiff and cold this morning. She unclenched her teeth and fired a hard, discordant note at the far wall, where a Polish eagle banner hung above a line of memorial portraits. Mr Bukowski paused with his dustpan and looked across at the familiar faces of his people, and at Annie.

Bit by bit the players arranged themselves into their trusted nomadic semicircle around the campfire of Sledge's drums. At the unlit back of the hall, Mr Bukowski abandoned his dustpan and pretended some chairs and tables needed straightening.

In the ensuing pause Ingrid held up an imperious finger in its tattered black glove and they waited; with the other hand she drew a stately five-note

sequence from the electric piano, then repeated it. They followed her into a solemn walk. They rarely strayed from the musical path dictated to them by that fingerless glove, but this morning Annie hesitated, the trombone still as stiff as her heart. One, two, three, four, she blew, and her notes stumbled awkwardly after the stately beat. Finding and fitting her place in the music rubbed splinters in her isolation.

Now Ibrahim's baritone sax was denouncing his homeland's suffering, and the band marched with him down dusty African township streets and across scorching city squares, calling to a people in grief and anger. Ibrahim played for real, and the band knew it. Sad, or laughing, or angry, Ibrahim spoke only the truth, straight from his horn. Bass-fingered John would sometimes throw in joke notes when rehearsals got serious, when a piece touched their hearts too deeply. Ibrahim, never. Last Saturday, here, John had briefly mimicked a cocktail jazz riff after they'd finished a powerful piece, and Ibrahim had blown up.

"You fuckin DOIN' here, John? You fuck about, man you go someplace else!"

But today a quiet morning sun migrated across the old floorboards, and their music followed. From somewhere behind the stage Mr Bukowski could be heard stacking cardboard boxes. Slowly Annie's trombone warmed itself, and her heart began to soften. One sad slide – a dying note at the end of her solo – almost pulled her to her knees.

At noon they broke and opened their flasks and sandwich bags. Ibrahim walked out onto the steps and stretched tall and took in the pale sun. Mr Bukowski joined him for a smoke in mutual silence. Traffic droned quietly behind the line of trees. Annie excused herself past them with hunched shoulders, and walked quickly to her van and back. ***"Left my phone out there,"*** she muttered, avoiding their eyes, and tiptoed back into the hall.

Mr Bukowski looked after her and shook his head. He looked up into Ibrahim's impassive face. Ibrahim looked at the old man and nodded. ***"Somebody ill, somebody die, I think."***

Later the players were working on TELL ME WHO, by Annie's trombonist namesake, over in Britain, but the group's surreptitious glances at the clock showed they had done as much as they could today, without going stale. ***"It'll all come right 'ON THE NIGHT!'"*** boomed Sledge into their common thought, and flipped his drumsticks cart-wheeling into the air.

They looked at Ibrahim for completion. He sat and reached into his case for his cleaning kit, then shook his head. ***"I wanna play one more thing, but we can't play it here. It has to be outside, it has to be"*** he frowned, ***"on the beach."*** He looked at his watch. ***"Fifteen minutes, have you got 15?"*** They looked at each other and shrugged.

"Sure", said Ingrid, ***"but what about the kit?"*** Ibrahim smiled. ***"No kit. Annie and me, we're gonna blow. I want you three to tap and shuffle some rhythm, that's all it need."***

Annie had been on the verge of pulling her trombone apart, and frowned at Ibrahim. His eyes were bottomless: ***"Please Annie, it won't work without you."***

Despite the sun, a cool breeze blew off the sea, and walkers were keeping to the promenade. Ibrahim led them to a sheltered spot among tumbled logs.

"You guys, you don't know this; just improvise. Shuffle, you know, clap, tap, whatever but no stupid stuff okay. Find the mood. Don't mess with me now."

He looked at his sax and wet his lips. ***"I had a sister, in Zimbabwe. In Kwekwe. Older than me, she look after me, when I was a kid. I'm remember her, I'm ask the ancestors to look after her. We do some sounds when we remember someone gone, yeah? Annie, you help me remember my sister."***

Annie threw a terrified look at the others, who were standing awkwardly on the logs. Ingrid scooped some pebbles and cupped them in her hands. Sledge patted softly on his thighs. John found two sticks to tap. Nobody spoke.

Annie turned her back on the promenade and the town, and pressed her rigid face into the wind. Ibrahim choked on a slow hoarse cry and then put the saxophone to his lips. A stream of notes questioned the wind and the sea, as though asking the way, as though calling at a closed door. Then his notes deepened, and they all sensed a slow dance. The back of Annie's neck prickled and she swung up her trombone and fought off the funeral feeling -- it was a grieving dance, and it was calling her while she tried to push it away with high challenging blasts.

Behind her, rocks and sticks clicked softly like desert thorn bushes, as though Ibrahim and Annie were clambering through them, to reach a clearing so that they could dance their sadness. Annie's eyes were wet with the effort of resisting the grief from Ibrahim's saxophone.

Then Ibrahim's tone softened to a lullaby. His eyes were wide but he was not looking here, not at this northern sea. He swivelled his head to send Annie a plea. She gave in and joined him with her own matching lullaby, and through her trombone released what she'd been unable to say.

She emptied everything through the horn, washed the pebbles and the sea, and spoke on behalf of Ibrahim's sister; and now, at long last, for her **own** young sister, whose illness Annie never mentioned, but who now deserved a song of goodbye.

She and Ibrahim played on until they turned slowly to face each other fully, and their shared experience told them when to raise an eyebrow and lower the curtain of sound to a dying breath, and silence. Annie hid her streaming face and kicked a pebble towards the trembling salt waves.

Ibrahim reached out and touched Annie's slide hand. Then he turned and laughed to the others. ***"Thank you guys. You don't need instruments for Monday's gig, I think. How 'bout I jus' bring rocks and sticks for you?"*** He paused and looked shyly at them. ***"I didn't tell you guys 'bout my family before. My sister."***

Sledge picked his way alongside Annie over the pebbles and seaweed until they reached the concrete steps. Sledge glanced sideways at her and stammered.
“Annie. Our Miss Annie; whaddaya know.”

Outside the Polish Hall, Ibrahim’s station wagon was loaded, and Annie climbed slowly up into her van and watched as the big Pontiac reversed clumsily away from her onto the gravel shoulder. Ibrahim paused and raised his sunglasses and stared towards her. Annie returned his gaze, nodded, and raised her hand from the wheel, just a little.

Music can hold enormous power in memories and experiences, transporting us instantly to an age, location, or person. What sonic joys, mysteries, disbelief, and clarity have you experienced? Identify songs of influence in your life and explore them like variations on a theme, melding syntax and song structure, recalling the seriousness or levity that accompanies. Whether it’s an account of when a specific song first entered your life, the process of learning to play a song, teaching someone a song, experiencing the same song in different places as it weaves through your life, unbelievable radio timing, sharing songs with those in need, tracking the passing down of songs, creative song analysis, music as politics, etc, I am interested in those ineffable moments and welcoming submissions of your own variations on a theme, as drawn from your life’s soundtrack. Please email submissions to meganentropy@gmail.com and keep an eye out for others’ [Variations](#).

*** (“song” is a broad phrase: could be a pop song, a traditional tune, a symphony, commercial jingles, a hummed lullaby, 2nd grade recorder class horror stories, etc)***



David Kipling is 70 years old. In the 1960s and 70s he discovered and fell in love with modern Jazz (Coltrane, Stitt, Rollins) and jazz-rock (Soft Machine and their variants). UK-born, he emigrated to Canada in 1978 and is now retired and living on BC’s Sunshine Coast where he attends weekly creative writing classes and drum lessons (“a very poor student,” in his words) and is an announcer at the local drag races.