

BOBBY AVEY

DRINKING FROM THE SOURCE

By Phillip Lutz

On the night of Jan. 10, 2012, Bobby Avey found himself in rural Haiti, an incongruously placid figure among a clutch of ecstatic locals caught up in a vodou ceremony for accessing the “gateway” between the world of the living and the parallel world inhabited by the spirits of the dead.

Avey, a probing pianist from Mount Pocono, Pa., was there to conduct ambitious fieldwork. Having secured a highly sought-after grant at home, Avey, then 27 years old, hoped to complete a phase in the project of a young lifetime—a look at Haitian history through the prism of its drum culture, filtered through his own aesthetic.

“My idea,” he said, while nibbling orange slices in his Brooklyn apartment in June, “was to drink from the source, approach it with as much attention to detail as I could and then draw from it as inspiration.”

His effort paid off. After spending more than four hours at the ceremony, he had absorbed enough to inspire a striking suite titled *Authority Melts From Me*. Documented in a 2014 Whirlwind CD that earned a 4½-star review in *DownBeat*, the suite has been played in such venues as Symphony Space in Manhattan and will be performed by the same personnel—Avey’s working trio plus alto saxophonist Miguel Zenón and guitarist Ben Monder—in Europe starting in December.

The project’s spark was lit in June 2009, when Avey, visiting an American friend in the Dominican Republic, witnessed the difficulties of Haitian migrant laborers. Avey—who was on a personal quest two years after graduating from the Purchase Conservatory in



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Purchase, N.Y.—began studying Haiti's colonial legacy and the role played by ceremonial drumming in a late-18th century slave uprising.

"That eventually gave me the idea to make a musical project based around Haiti's revolution," he said.

Even before he became interested in Haiti, Avey had applied to Chamber Music America for a grant under its division of New Jazz Works: Commissioning and Ensemble Development. Submitted at the urging of bassist Thomas Kneeland, the application included work samples and basic information about Avey's trio with Kneeland and drummer Jordan Perlson. It was rejected.

A second application included a pitch for the Haiti project, noting Avey's intention to celebrate the slave rebellion and referring, in broad terms, to a piece that would have multiple movements and instrumentation providing melodic enhancement and compositional layering. It, too, was turned down. But a third application in 2011 was accepted.

"I'm fortunate that whoever was judging that year understood that composition on this type of scale is a process that will come together as you're doing it," Avey said.

The award, for \$21,000, came with some strings attached, among them a requirement that Avey take part in conferences to improve his business acumen. At the same time, it provided money he could use for travel. He contacted his friend in the Dominican Republic, who connected him with another American who knew a Haitian who could offer Avey entrée to a vodou ceremony. The pianist was on his way.

On the day of the ceremony, Avey, who had been staying in a commune in Port-au-Prince, joined his American friend and their Haitian contact in a four-hour bus ride past slums, tent camps and garbage-filled canals. For the last leg of the trip, they transferred to motorcycles, finally reaching a verdant spot in Soukri, near the town of Gonaives. It was 7:30 p.m. and the sun had set, but a vodou ceremony had been under way for seven hours.

Avey turned on his audio recorder as he and his companions joined the assembled crowd: younger women bedecked in red dresses, an older woman holding a lit candle and an older man, in his role as priest, singing and shaking a maraca-like instrument. The crowd sang back, and three percussionists—two playing hand drums and one wielding a cowbell-like metal plate with a stick—kicked into high gear.

Fueled by the rhythm—and rum—the members of the crowd gyrated well into the night, some to the point of collapse. Near midnight, Avey and company slipped away.

Eleven months later—six of which, off and on, he spent writing—Avey and his four associates were gathered in the Sear Sound studio on West 48th Street in New York. The rhythm section, which provided the structural framework for Avey's suite, had already been through a dozen rehearsals. Zenón and Monder had been rehearsing on their own; all the musicians were given digital play-along files that Avey had created for practice.

"A lot of the music he's written is some of the most complex and challenging I've ever played," Zenón said in a phone interview, "but in a very good way. It's very well put together."

Among the suite's three movements, the second, "Louverture," named after a leader of the slave rebellion, had grown directly out of the field-work transcriptions. The first and third movements—"Kalfou" ("crossroads," in Creole) and "Cost"—drew on tracks from the album *Voodoo Drums*, featuring the Haitian Drummers of the Société Absolutement Guinin.

Most of the Haitians' drumming was clear enough on Avey's field recordings to be transcribed in standard notation. The rest became digitized representations of sound waves on which Avey estimated the positions of beats and drummers' hits. In Perlson's hands, those representations became a rough map with which he worked to create the drum interlude between the second and third movements.

"I said, 'Put on your headphones and see what you can do,'" Avey explained.

No formula was set for how the transcribed drum lines were to be used by the quintet. Because the vodou drumming tended to be repetitive, even trancelike, the lines would sometimes be absorbed within the larger soundscape in the interest of maintaining balance or creating tension and release. Sometimes they would be superseded by Zenón's sax sweeping over the rhythmic churn. At other times, the drum lines would simply disappear, as in Avey's solo interlude inserted after the intense first movement.

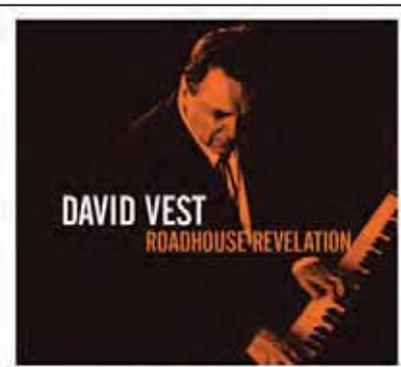
"I needed to chill out, take a breath," he said.

Throughout the album, recorded in November 2012, Avey's piano creates a canvas of contrasting colors where delicate strands of notes skate lightly over and around dense clusters that skirt the borders of functional harmony. In live performance—with saxophonist Dave Liebman's quintet Expansions at Smalls in June 2013 and with bassist Michael Bates' quartet at the Cornelia Street Café in June of this year—the colors have become noticeably more vivid.

Avey said there are other social causes—besides Haitian oppression—on which he'd like his music to shine a light. Wrapped in a complex yet swinging rhythmic approach, his artistic signature is becoming more clearly drawn and widely recognized. The Chamber Music of America grant was not an isolated award.

Avey won the 2011 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Composers Competition for his piece "Late November." The composition appeared on *A New Face* (JayDell), which featured Liebman, a mentor for the past dozen years and a recording partner—starting with the duo's 2006 release *Vienna Dialogues* (Zoho) and continuing with the planned September release of the new Expansions album *Samsara* (Whaling City Sound). In Avey, who's not yet 30, Liebman hears a voice to be nurtured.

"It is to be commended and to be worked out over the next 50 years," Liebman said. **DB**



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