

The dress rehearsal for the first OCG XII performance, in Tepoztlan, Mexico, Friday February 26, 2016, was toward the end of what had been, for me, a very difficult course. This, because of an asthma attack that had come out of nowhere in the middle of the second night, more severe than any I'd experienced in over 20 years. Sandra had met with me, given me a life-saving exercise which taught me how to breathe. "Every minute you're away from the guitar you should be in here doing this". So I did.

I was a fragile wreck during the course, felt like a wraith floating around all these vivacious people. I wondered if, physically, I was going to make it. More than on any previous occasion, I felt that the most intelligent course of action would be to leave. I felt like a burden on everyone I came into contact with. But leaving would be far from easy, very expensive, and I would have been ashamed.

The previous night, Thursday the 25th, Robert had posted his Completion of GC notice on the board. My (relatively few) GC experiences, and what I have learned from them, continue to be an essential and nourishing part of my musical and inner life, and include practices which I hope to continue indefinitely. However, because I was never a member of a local circle, never entered into any kind of structural level/responsibility higher than "student", I have also always had what I imagine is a very common, feeling among students: the dual sense that (a) this is as close to a musical society I belong in as I'll ever find -- which I believe is true -- and (b) the sense that, in the end, I'm a permanent outsider and will never fully belong there.

I read Robert's post and thought it sounded like a very good idea. I remembered being in my bunk at the Hope, New Jersey course a year before, and thinking, (my current paraphrase) what would all this potential musical energy, aspiration, focus, commitment, group attention, and group dynamics be like if it weren't inextricably tied to the structural organization and formulations of GC?

I loved GC from my first contact with it (at a LCG gig 13 years before I made real contact with GC), knew that most of it was for me, except for one, crucial, unavoidable thing: the conformist aspects. Reading Robert's post, I felt a sense of release.

Of course, it was easy for me to feel this way because my connection to the GC organizations was so peripheral. My sense, the next morning at breakfast in Tepoztlan, after staying up late discussing it with Greg and Steve, was that a lot of people were very upset.

That afternoon, one of the few days I didn't have kitchen or Level T work. After a personal meeting with Robert, I met with Sandra, who gave me one more exercise, concerning sitting up. We sat on the porch, talked about sleep, and about Orchestral Manuevers. I felt myself beginning to, maybe, relax.

Went out in the vast back yard/soccer field to practice, surrounded by high walls on which were climbing vines, flowers, and behind which were tall trees. I had heard

Ricardo, a highly skilled young guitarist with Leo's ensemble, practicing a very simple primary that afternoon, very slow. I thought, I'll try that for awhile. Then moved on to other things. Lost track of time. At one point felt the breeze die down, looked up at flowers on the wall, and realized my chest felt free, my breathing was full and relaxed, as far as I could tell, my asthma was gone.

I thought, as I have at similar times before: "Now that I learned this painful lesson, that I prayed, promised I would change if the illness was cured -- am I gonna act like it never happened and forget it?"

The Dress Rehearsal that night, the group procession around the entire courtyard before entering the Chapel...first:

Of all the 7 GC Courses I attended, the OCG ones were far and away the most grueling.

Of all my unrepeatable and treasured GC experiences, the OCG performances -- the opportunity to be a moving particle in that giant, swimming, hilarious, scary, mesmerising unpredictable organism -- may be what I will miss the most.

What the OCG, overall, was like for me:

The Whirlwind.

Make any move you like, knowing that isolation is impossible, reaction is inevitable, everything begun will break down, change, or (at the very least) shift.

Impossible to be "off in my own world" -- I might crash into someone, or be stabbed by a guitar headstock.

Musically: every note, every sound has consequences, dependent on your/my/one's level of attention.

Personally: Likes/dislikes, resentments, personal discomforts from the course all become irrelevant. And it is likely you will make at least brief and poignant musical contact with people from the course whom you don't know and may never see again.

Metaphorically: A theatrical microcosm of human societies. Improvised, as life is.

Enthusiastic crazes emerge, attract a following, and dissipate. A fashion shows up that I want to join, seems so important -- but wait, no, I wanna be different, the hell with that. Solitary wanderers watch from a distance, then decide to join in, or make tiny bands amidst the bedlam. Nomads walk, then run between groups, ducking down below guitars. One wall of noise is countered by another. Rules generated and broken. Interests attracted in a frenzy, bees around a hive, which generate a different counter weather-explosion across the room. And then what was

previously fascinating grows dull and cliched and everything breaks apart.

Yes, we at times go along with something cool or funny or interesting that the crowd is doing. On the other hand, the most unlikely idea from the most unlikely source can become a "movement". And the most powerful "movement" will mutate unrecognizably.

On every OCG course: the sense that daily life on the course (and, by implication, away from it), was a continuation, at a vastly lower level of overall intensity and over a vastly longer time span, of what we did in the OCG.

Also, soon after the course, strange OCG dreams. One, of the group running up and down ramps in the near dark, circling a brightly illuminated ice skating rink.

Specific memories from the Dress Rehearsal, some of them frantically scribbled in my journal, 10:00 pm:

Circulating Mariana's spoken "Tchuk!" into the guitar sound hole, and whistles.

The waves of singing (this I first experienced in Sandra's OM/AT work). In a singing group with 3 or 4 others -- John, Eduardo -- a beautiful slow short-lived cirrus cloud, in the midst of the flurry of madness.

Running like crazy with, and opposite to, Greg, in and out of valleys and tunnels of people and guitars.

I notice myself going towards the groups led by women, but I'm by no means always able to join.

A "Tower" with Leo at the center, brief other "towers" surrounded by circles of guitars raising and lowering, some instigated by groups of women, one surrounding another person, a long term Crafty (sorry I forget his name) who had been ill for much of the course.

Curt's blues riff. This lasted, as I remember, through several permutations and I was happy to take part.

In the middle of the rehearsal, one of the few repertoire pieces: The first time I was able to play Driving Force in a GC group, at (Leo's tempo!) more than full speed, and feel relaxed and confident. I remember Curt moving out from the circle into wandering during the middle section, which many of us followed, returning for the end.

The swell at the end, with me in a wide circle on the outside, an inner group running in circles around a center of people. The sound of this, and the drama of it, at the very end, for some reason almost brought me to tears.

The two subsequent Mexico City gigs -- on Saturday night at Salon Los Angeles, and Sunday at Bajo Circuito -- were fantastic and unmissable. The Dress Rehearsal, however, was one of the peak musical experiences of my life.

This was not the first time I was struck by the truth in that House Rule,

If you decide to stay, you are asked to stay for the duration.

A few final last minute thoughts, as part of a wistful and heartfelt goodbye. I hope they're not too excessive.

Among many other things, GC taught me:

The importance and power of being Put On The Spot.

The experience of being, in a seemingly unlikely context, being Taken Seriously, and how to Take Everyone Else in a Group Seriously.

In the midst of being taken out of my comfort zone, being immersed in music-as-an-energy that goes far beyond my or anyone's one individual lifespan, and having my gut level intuitions of music as an interacting presence, and of music as a friend, validated.

GC encouraged me to continue to engage with these questions:

What does any group do to incorporate the inherently unpredictable and changing nature of music as an art form?

What does any group do to remember that we're all part of a continuum, to avoid excessive hierarchy and drowning others out?

(Germaine Greer, 1992 I think: "As if life was anything *but* change.")

How does a group stay on course? How does an individual stay on course? And how does it/one know when the best thing to do is go off course?!

How does one stay able to "lead" and yet be fully capable of disappearing into the background in a group, to be able to practice this as often as any other musical work, and to understand how essential this is?

How to stay open and avoid becoming rigid and orthodox? How to keep practicing letting go of attempting to judge what is really play?!

(A much later meeting with Robert, at the Hope New Jersey Course in 2015, his

comment relating to this: "When you see children playing on a playground, you don't sit back and critique how they're doing".)

Maybe the work of "music education" is creating situations where these things can be explored, where things can happen, and maybe that's all we can ever do, all we ever need to do?

What is improvisation? What is soloing (in fact, is it really "solo"?)? What is a group? What is music? From where?

Finally:

I loved and respected the insistence on putting women in the center of things and in musical decision-making places as much as possible.

I honor and realize the necessity of the discouraging of small talk.

I realize that it took me, and everyone else, far outside of myself/ourselves and allowed contact with something that transcends one finite lifespan.

I loved, and felt very at home with, the constant sharing of the dirty work/drudgery (kitchen, toilets).

I got regular glimpses of GC, and the OCG, as possible models for a just society.

I still consistently fall on the floor laughing to remember the ever-pervasive surreal humor from most of the long-term participants. At the time, I kept thinking: "How do they do it?"

very best wishes to everyone,

Michael K. Henderson