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Carlos Castaneda and don Juan—Lessons in Sonic Awareness

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CARLOS CASTANEDA REPORTS MANY ASTONISHING EVENTS he experienced while studying with don Juan, a Yaqui Indian sorcerer.¹ During the time of Carlos' tutelage his ordinary perceptual skills were sharpened and transformed to such an extent that he was able to realize "the sorcerer's description," a dichotic perception of the world which placed great emphasis upon sonic awareness, the ability to notice both environmental and musical sound.

As a musician I have been impressed by Carlos' developing acoustical sense. In fact, tracing the changes in his response and sensitivity to sound seems to indicate for me that Castaneda's work is not fiction but a direct reporting of facts.² Musicians spend many years training themselves to obtain the type of clairaudience or clean hearing that Carlos finally exhibited.³

¹Castaneda describes these events in the following works: Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: a Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), *A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with Don Juan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), *Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan* (*Idem*, 1972), *Tales of Power* (*Idem*, 1974), *The Second Ring of Power* (*Idem*, 1977).

²For a collection of reviews, correspondence and controversy over Castaneda's work see Daniel Noel, *Seeing Castaneda: Reactions to the "Don Juan" Writings of Carlos Castaneda* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1976). Also Robert Ornstein includes a chapter titled "A Lesson of Carlos Castaneda" in *Mind Fields* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978).

³R. Murray Schafer discusses his concept of clairaudience in *The Tuning of the World* (New York: Knopf, 1977), p. 208. His definition of the term as listed in the "Glossary of Soundscape Terms," p. 272, is "Clairaudience: Literally, 'clear hearing.' The way I use the terms there is nothing mystical about it; it simply refers to exceptional hearing ability, particularly with regard to environmental sound. Hearing ability may be trained to the clairaudient state by means of EAR CLEANING exercises."

My own hearing sense has been influenced by the work of Pauline Oliveros⁴ and R. Murray Schafer.⁵ Environmental sound heard in a musical context, city soundscapes as sonic drones, attention to the myriad sonic subtleties of nature, and a concern about the devastating and ubiquitous presence of the sixty-cycle hum have encouraged me to seek new sonic potentials. Interest in the sonic qualities of world myths and the use of sound for religious purposes strengthens my viewpoint that sound is sacred and powerful.⁶

Many of my interests are discernible in the way don Juan worked with Carlos. I can identify both with don Juan as a teacher of aural skills and with Carlos as a student in quest of knowledge. This triggered me to study Castaneda's works by using a research technique that R. Murray Schafer calls "acoustic reading."⁷ I carefully examined all five texts of Castaneda for references to sound and then catalogued these notations in areas of natural sounds, human sounds, warrior sounds, musical sounds, and sounds experienced in non-ordinary states of reality.⁸ Upon examining these categories it soon became evident to me that don Juan's attention to sonic details revealed him as a master of sonic awareness and power and that many of his teachings were directly applicable to musicians. Therefore, I abandoned my original categories of sound and began to consider don Juan's lessons as studies in sonic awareness.

In the summer of 1960 Carlos, an anthropology doctoral candidate at UCLA, went to Arizona to meet don Juan and discuss with him ques-

⁴Pauline Oliveros is well known for her musical compositions titled *Sonic Meditations* (Baltimore: Smith Publications, 1975).

⁵R. Murray Schafer has done exceptional work in creative music education and is involved with a "World Soundscape Project" where he studies, collects, and documents sonic signals and keynotes that are characteristic of given locales.

⁶I highly recommend that the interested reader consult Jerome Rothenberg and George Quasha, *America a Prophecy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) and Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred* (New York: Doubleday, 1968) for collections of poetries that contain many acoustic images. Also consult any of Mircea Eliade's research, such as *From Primitives to Zen* (San Francisco: Harper, 1977).

⁷Schafer, *op. cit.*, continually quotes literature in which the author authentically reports sonic events. He mentions Thoreau's *Walden*, Hesiod's *Works and Days*, and Pound's *Canto II* as examples of works in which sound is vividly portrayed. Schafer mentions that Jonathan Swift's description of Niagara Falls as making a "terrible squash" is a counterfeit description and an obvious illustration that Swift had never actually heard the sounds.

⁸In the introduction to *Journey to Ixtlan* Castaneda describes his basic assumption that the ingestion of psychotropic plants produced states of nonordinary reality in which his perception of the world was accomplished by drugs. However, by 1971 he began to realize his ordinary state of reality was the description of the world that he was constantly telling himself and that it was possible to obtain a nonordinary state of reality by stopping those descriptions.

tions concerning medicinal plants. The Indian was known to be an expert in the area of hallucinogenic plants, especially peyote, and Carlos intended to collect information for his dissertation. Although he did take drugs during the early stages of his apprenticeship, Carlos began to realize that don Juan was trying to teach him more than just knowledge about plants. From 1960 till 1971 don Juan led Carlos through many carefully planned sensory experiences designed to help his student perceive the world in terms of the *tonal* and *nagual*, a sorcerer's or warrior's dichotic perception of reality.⁹

The results of my research show that hearing and reproducing sounds were two of the more important techniques that don Juan used in his teaching. Even though Carlos witnessed extraordinary visions, many of his lessons took place in the dark, so he was forced to develop a sensitivity to sound.

During their first meeting don Juan subtly taught Carlos a lesson about sonic awareness. A nervous and compulsive talker and notetaker, Carlos noticed that don Juan sat in tight silence and when the Indian did speak he accused Carlos of not really listening. Although Carlos was frustrated with this initial experience, he decided to pursue his contact with the Indian. Don Juan continued the lesson of learning to listen in their next meeting, and this time Carlos was taught how to distinguish between sounds of agreement and sounds of omens. A gusty wind and gurgling coffee percolator provided material for don Juan's observation.

"Plants are very peculiar things," he [don Juan] said without looking at me. "They are alive and they feel."

At the very moment he made that statement a strong gust of wind shook the desert chaparral around us. The bushes made a rattling noise.

"Do you hear that?" he asked me, putting his right hand to his ear as if he were aiding his hearing. "The leaves and the wind are agreeing with me."

. . . He repeated the statement [that perhaps there is nothing to say about plants] and then the whole area was shaken by the roar of an Air Force jet flying low.

"There! The world has just agreed with me," he said, putting his left hand to his ear. . . .

"Hear that!" don Juan exclaimed with a shine in his eyes. "The boiling water agrees with me. . . . A man can get agreements from everything around him."

⁹Castaneda describes don Juan's teachings about the *tonal* and *nagual* in *Tales of Power*.

At that crucial instant the coffee percolator made a truly obscene gurgling sound.

He looked at the percolator and softly said, "Thank you," nodded his head, and then broke into a roaring laughter.¹⁰

Thus don Juan revealed himself as a person not wanting to talk about plants but rather as a sorcerer who listened to sounds and was able to detect messages and omens from what he heard. His attitude was that sounds were in tune with him and that even though Carlos was most anxious to learn about plants, he must begin to notice sound.

Don Juan insisted that Carlos' next assignment was to speak to plants and develop a fluency in talking and listening to animals, especially coyotes and lizards. Carlos failed this lesson miserably and admitted he was too embarrassed. Don Juan suggested that perhaps pride was prohibiting Carlos' voice, and reminded him that vocal freedom and flexibility was an ability that a sorcerer must acquire. Later, as a warrior, Carlos would become proficient in identifying and reproducing animal and bird calls.

One of don Juan's early techniques for moulding his student was to learn the war cry. Carlos was to yell "Ahiiii!" while throwing a stone so as to produce a powerful and direct hit. Fortunately he was successful in sounding the cry and often used it when taking drugs and during terrifying experiences such as chasing away evil spirits. Don Juan insisted that every warrior must possess a war cry and he was very serious about its use, so much so that Carlos wrote in his notes:

. . . the outcry or war cry was something that remained with a man for the duration of his life; thus it had to be good from the very beginning. And the only way to start it correctly was by holding back one's natural fear and haste until one was absolutely filled with power, and then the yell would burst out with direction and power. (TDJ, p. 188)

Later Carlos would sound the cry when entering between the *tonal* and *nagual* since a warrior used his cry to break the skin that separates the worlds.

At this stage of his apprenticeship Carlos seemed to be more successful with making sound than listening to it. Therefore don Juan's next lesson seemed attractive, for Carlos was to receive his own peyote song. It was very important for him to acquire this personal song as a source of

¹⁰Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan*, pp. 24-25.

Hereafter quotations will be acknowledged in the text by the initials of the book and the page number; for example this quotation is from JTI, pp. 24-25.

power and don Juan said that a sorcerer could tell a phony by his songs. Learning the song took place in a ritual ceremony containing communal and solo singing. The following passage reveals the pressure that Carlos felt about acquiring his song.

I was the only [one] who did not have a song. They all seemed to look at me questioningly, especially the young men. I grew embarrassed and closed my eyes. . . .

While the men sang I asked Mescalito [a name for peyote] in a loud voice, to teach me a song. My pleading mingled with the men's loud singing. Immediately I heard a song in my ears. I turned around and sat with my back to the group and listened. I heard the words and the tune over and over, and I repeated them until I had learned the whole song. It was a long song in Spanish. Then I sang it to the group several times. And soon afterward a new song came to my ears. By morning I had sung both songs countless times. I felt I had been renewed, fortified. (TDJ, pp. 149-151)

Nowhere in the texts is there any indication that Carlos was at all musical or liked to perform. His embarrassment at talking to plants and animals seem to portray him as sonically shy. Therefore **I consider his peyote songs to be an extraordinary achievement.** They were unique individual songs and Carlos did not forget them, so much so that years later he could still sing these songs.

Frequently don Juan's lessons were about silence. At times Carlos was told to keep perfect silence; he was not to move or say anything. It was not long before Carlos noticed that don Juan never spoke while he walked; he always stopped if it was necessary to converse and often after a long hike don Juan and Carlos would sit in complete silence. Refraining from speaking was a terrible discipline for Carlos since his academic training stressed questioning as a means of obtaining the rational explanation of events. Carlos never could master don Juan's first lesson about compulsive talking and was frequently teased about it.

All of don Juan's previous lessons were a preparation for the task of seeing. This confused Carlos. **He thought that don Juan meant seeing in the visual sense,** when actually he was trying to teach Carlos a "sorcerer's description of the world" and **seeing was a synesthetic experience using all of the senses.** In order to reach this state Carlos had to learn to turn off his interior voices so that he could stop the world and *see*. Don Juan explained that Carlos maintained his personal description of the world by constantly talking to himself, constantly reinforcing his image of the world. Don Juan made it clear that Carlos could not make further progress until he mastered this lesson. The Indian's advice was that Carlos should listen to

the sounds of the world and use his ears to take some of the burden from his eyes. Don Juan said:

We have been using our eyes to judge the world since the time we were born. We talk to others and to ourselves mainly about what we see. A warrior is aware of that and listens to the world; he listens to the sounds of the world . . . and that listening to the sounds of the world had to be done harmoniously and with great patience. (SR, p. 263)

So Carlos left don Juan and went to Los Angeles for several months and practiced stopping his interior voices and listening to the sounds of the world. Actually this was the content of the first lesson concerning sounds of agreement and omens. Listening seemed to be such a simple assignment but such a difficult task for Carlos!

Upon returning for further instruction, Carlos' next lesson was to focus his attention on listening to sounds and trying to find the holes between them. During this time Carlos was still using drugs to aid his perception, since he maintained that the emphasis of his study was to learn about plants. However, the following experience shows that Carlos was making steady progress **in his lessons of sonic awareness.**

I experienced a mild numbness. Don Juan warned me against closing my eyes. I began to listen and I could distinguish the whistling of birds, the wind rustling the leaves, the buzzing of insects. As I placed my undivided attention on those sounds, I could actually make out *four different types of birds whistlings*. I could distinguish the *speeds of the wind*, in terms of slow or fast; I could also hear the *different rustling of three types of leaves*. The *buzzings of insects* were dazzling. There were so many that I could not count them or correctly differentiate them.

I was immersed in a strange world of sound, as I had never been in my life. . . . The wind rustled the leaves. The wind came high above the trees and then it dropped into the valley where we were. Upon dropping, it touched the leaves of the tall trees first; they made a peculiar sound which I fancied to be a sort of *rich, raspy, lush sound*. Then the wind hit the bushes and their leaves sounded like a crowd of small things; it was an almost *melodious sound*, very engulfing and quite demanding; it seemed capable of drowning everything else. . . . Listening to the sound the wind was making, I realized that *all three of them happened at once*. I was wondering how I been capable of isolating each of them, when I again became aware of the whistling birds and the buzzing of insects. . . . I was convinced that I was listening to *each separate sound as it was produced*. Together they created a *most extraordinary order*. I cannot call it anything but "order." It was an order of sounds that had a pattern; that is, *every sound happened in sequence*. . . . After a moment of attentive listening I thought I understood don Juan's recommendation to watch for the holes between the sounds. *The pattern of noises had*

spaces in between sounds! . . . My mind was capable of distinguishing and discriminating among enormous numbers of individual sounds. I could actually keep track of all the sounds, thus each pause between sounds was a definite hole. At a given moment the pauses became crystalized in my mind and formed a sort of solid grid, a structure. I was not seeing or hearing it. I was feeling it with some unknown part of myself. (ASR, pp. 267-270)¹¹

Apparently Carlos had mastered some of the previous lessons. He wanted to listen and was able to maintain “divided attention” and as a result could distinguish various wind timbres and speeds, a variety of bird whistles and insect buzzes, simultaneous sounds, patterning, and ordering. This was certainly a big improvement over the lesson of sounds of agreements and omens, and furthermore Carlos heard these sounds without direction from don Juan. His only assignment was to listen for the holes between the sounds. Carlos entered the strange world of sound and found that he could perceive sequential order.

Soon after this experience Carlos realized that drugs were not the main content of don Juan’s lessons and that the Indian was really trying to help him acquire extraordinary abilities. Carlos’ quest was more serious and as he advanced in his fifteen-year struggle to become a warrior, he even exhibited more discrimination in his sense of hearing. In 1971 he was no longer dependent upon help from drugs to effect changes in his perception. Instead, a special sudden noise called the “moth’s call” became a powerful trigger that would effect changes in his sensory experiences. When Carlos first heard the sound he remarked that it was a “strange deep sound, like tapping on wood.” (TOP, p. 26) Don Juan required that Carlos listen carefully and “try to hear a soft rustling, the gentle muffled steps of a moth on the dry leaves and branches on the ground.” (TOP, p. 33) This was Carlos’ sonic omen, his special sound that would help him. Don Juan explained that ordinarily one can not hear moths, but as Carlos concentrated on the sound of the moth he heard

. . . a muffled creaking of a branch rubbing against another. . . . the sputtering of a small motor heard from a distance. . . . scales, like a musical tone, eerie rhythm. . . . tones [that] were produced in a low key, others in a high one. . . . a single unit of sound; others were short and happened in a cluster, like the staccato sound of a machine gun. (TOP, p. 35)¹²

This time Carlos’ report almost resembles a musical analysis. Rhythm, tone, scales, keys, cluster, and staccato attacks seemed to have en-

¹¹The italics are mine.

¹²The italics are mine.

tered his sonic awareness. And this sound possessed personal power, for the immediate effects of hearing the “moth’s call” were that Carlos was able to recall vividly the laughter of a little boy whom he once knew, and then he experienced the sensation of being in his room in Los Angeles and hearing his do-it-yourself window sills rattling. Carlos even insinuates that for a moment he was actually transported back to the time when he knew the little boy and then he seemed to be physically present in Los Angeles. Actually the moth was an ally for Carlos. Don Juan said that if Carlos were an impeccable warrior he would be able to identify the “moth’s call” for the rest of his life. All that was required was that Carlos stop his internal dialogue and concentrate on the sound of the “moth’s call.” In *Second Ring of Power* Castaneda reports many times that he used this call to invoke allies as a means of protection. Apparently he even became more proficient in producing the sound and after years of practice Carlos reported:

I found that in a matter of seconds I had given my maximum concentration to producing the sound. I modulated its outflow and controlled the air being expelled from my lungs in order to produce the longest possible tappings. It sounded very melodious. (SRP, p. 193)

Having examined don Juan’s teachings, **let us consider what we might learn about sonic awareness.** An important lesson is that one must pay attention to the sounds of the world and develop a serious attitude about the importance of sounds in general. The fact that we do perceive sonic signals as omens and agreements is an interesting consideration for musicians.

Next, the voice is a powerful and personal instrument. Finding one’s voice and being able to use it in loud outcries and animal calls as well as private conversations with plants and animals is a tool that can be traced in many shamanistic societies. It is interesting to consider how a well-modulated voice is a sign of a cultured person in our contemporary world, yet vocal power is necessary to project images of authority and strength, hence the use of a microphone as the extension of the voice.

Associated with vocal power is Carlos’ acquisition of his peyote song. The idea that some unknown power taught him this personal song continues the age old thread that music is a mysterious phenomenon and a gift from the gods. One’s personal song is valuable and is sought after much trial and error, plus this song is perceived as a true expression of serious intent and not just an imitation or copy.