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From the SelectedWorks of Scott Abbott

August, 1997

HOCUS FOCUS: MOSE ALLISON AT THE BIRD

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/scott_abbott/38/
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Seconds after Mose Allison and his sidemen step onto the stage at Snowbird, Mose has thrown off his hat and coat and sparks are flying. Before anyone can catch their breath, the trio is three or four songs into the set. During imperceptible breaks, the long-necked drummer, adam's apple bobbing, and the mustachioed, lightning-fingered bass player have been able to throw off their billed hats, show off their stuff in introductory solos, and settle down to keeping up with the 69-year-old greybeard.

I first heard a record by Mose Allison (why is it that such moments are etched in memory like first kisses?) in the apartment of Yugoslavian friends, Zorka Papadopolous and Žarko Radaković. She, a theoretical physicist, and he, a novelist and translator, spoke no English; but they knew Dylan's lyrics by memory and they were addicted to Mose Allison. I had some stature in their eyes because like Dylan and Allison, I was an American.

"Those songs were mine," Mose says with that flat southern “i” that tends to an “a,” “but this one is not mine.” He sings a Nat Cole tune while I take in his dark glasses, the head that slopes back to where white hair starts to flow down the back of his head, the hawk nose. He thrusts the microphone away to concentrate on the keyboard, then grabs it back at the last moment to continue singing.

The dark glasses come off as he announces a song by “the great blues lyricist Willy Dixon.” It's a fast, hard-driving version of “The Seventh Son,” the antithesis to the delicate rendition I know from the 1958 Creek Bank. When he breaks for a piano solo, furious cascades of chords evoke Rachmaninoff, and then he's the seventh son again: “I can heal the sick, raise the dead, and make little girls talk outa their head, Yes I'm the one, I'm the one, the one they call the seventh son.”

There are songs by Muddy Waters, by John D. Loudermilk, by the former governor of Louisiana, but mostly Mose sings his own songs like “What's Your Movie?” and “If You Come to the City.” One of my favorites is the reflective “Getting There,” with its brave triple choruses -- “I'm not downhearted, I am not downhearted, I'm not downhearted” — and the resigned conclusion -- “but I'm gettin' there.”

It's a lousy audience for reflective music, as demonstrated earlier tonight during the fine, quiet set by Charlie Byrd and the Brazilian Guitar Masters, but Mose sings what ought to be the
antidote, “Your mind is on vacation, your mouth is workin' overtime . . . If you must keep talking, please try to make it rhyme.”

Jazz musicians face this at most of their gigs, and Allison explores an alternative in a song he doesn't sing here, “Top Forty”: “When I make my top 40 big beat rock and roll record everything is gonna be all right. No more philosophic melancholia, just 800 pounds of electric genitalia.”

Mose is the master of philosophic melancholia, and he's funny as hell. “Go ahead and analyze me,” he sings, “I bet you can't surprise me.” I won't surprise him, but I wonder what his magic is. It's his lyrics, I think, and their sung rhythms, the way he makes us wait forever for the payoff at the end of “Ever since the world ended, I face the future . . . . . . . . . with a smile.”

But how to describe the vocal style that, for my taste, is as good as it gets? Intensely diffident? Concentrated relaxation? It's the fierce focus, I think, that makes his laid-back delivery attractive.

Only during the last song, while the long-necked drummer solos, when Mose steals a quick look out across the tent, do I realize that he hasn't looked at the audience during the entire set. Straight ahead. Hocus focus.

Before the encore, I stumble down my row and head for the front to see him at closer range. I stand not far behind him as he sits back down and belts out “Baby please don't go.”

Mose is wearing white tennis shoes; and if his hands are trained bumblebees on the keyboard, his voice an organ of tightly controlled ease, his feet are unfettered -- his white shoes float above the floor, sliding apart like jumpy like-poled magnets, approaching one another like loopy lovers, patting out the rhythms silently, the left foot resting while the right foot hops spastically, then, again, both feet leaping like rabbits. Out of control. While in focus.