

## Cosmic Music

By

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“That’s a dead man’s guitar,” Morphy said. “Don’t buy it.”

Manny looked at him sideways, frowned, then turned back to the guitar.

“Everything’s a dead man’s something here, Morphy. It’s a pawnshop.”

It was an odd-looking guitar, like a zebra with broad black and white stripes roaming across its body. Manny slung it over his shoulders, pulled his long hair out of the way, withdrew one of the many picks he kept in the back pocket of his jeans, and strummed a chord: C-sharp minor. It sang sweetly and hung in the air like the dust illuminated by a sunbeam.

“Hey,” Manny said. “It’s in tune. Can you believe it?”

“Probably Jimmy Chesterton’s ghost plays it at night.”

Manny’s eyes widened. “You’re not serious. Do you really think...?”

“You don’t remember Phreakfest 2003? Dude, if he hasn’t reached up from the grave and pulled it out of your hands, the only reason is that he’s a junkie ghost.”

Manny ignored Morphy and went to the counter, where a surly-looking pierced girl was leafing through the free city weekly, *The Other Paper*, and chewing gum.

“Excuse me,” Manny said. “Can you tell me—”

“Thirty dollars,” she said without looking up.

Manny stopped. “Only thirty? This – I mean, I’m not trying to convince you to push the price up – is a really nice instrument. Why is—”

The girl behind the counter looked up with an expression that suggested that saying anything to anyone was like being put in an iron maiden, and deliberately blew a bubble and popped it. “It’s fucking Jimmy Chesterton’s guitar, man. His buddies brought it in when they found him with it. Got fucking dead guy on it. Shit, man.” With a look of queenly boredom, she returned to *The Other Paper*.

That took Manny back. Jimmy Chesterton: he had played with the Tyrannosaurus Lake Band, one of the hottest jam-band acts on the Columbus, Ohio circuit. He thought about the last time he saw Jimmy, outside in a light rain at Phreakfest 2003. Manny stood in the mud, his face and arms tingling with his last joint and the press of a thousand filthy hippies, and Jimmy, gaunt and pale, not in the middle of a blazing twenty-minute workout, but leaning against the bass drum, strumming softly and singing almost inaudibly, his beard stringy and glittering with pearls of sweat, his eyes looking like they were a mile behind his head. He was only singing “Happy Birthday.” But he played it in a minor key, and he sang it without love and without irony but merely as a kind of bitter lament – one more birthday, one more step to death. Two weeks later he

was dead and nobody knew why, though people in the know said it was Colonel Heroin in the parlor with a needle.

Manny's first impulse was to put it back. But then he played another chord, A major. His hands felt warm and the sounds were crisp and thin.

"I'll take it," Manny said, handing the guitar over. The girl shifted over to the cash register, pain all over her face like Chinese writing.

"We've got to do something, after all," he said to Morphy. "The band's going in circles. People are leaving before we play and we're stuck playing in the boonies. I want to play at Little Brother's; hell, I want to play some place where people go!"

"You're in a band?" the girl behind the counter said, still looking as if she was being torn apart by ravenous wolves, but for the first time as if the wolves were only *mildly* ravenous.

Manny nodded. Morphy made drumming motions with his hands. "Camel Commando," he said. "We've got a website."

"Cool," the girl said. She blew another bubble. "What kind of music do you play?"

"Ah...*cosmic music*," Manny said, then started to say something else, but stopped.

You get this question a lot when you're in a band, and if you're in a blues band or a Latin band or a death metal band, it's an easy question to answer. People called Camel Commando a "jam band," which was fair enough, and if somebody asked what that meant, people would say, "you know, Phish, the Dead, Widespread Panic," all of which was also, in its way, fair enough. But Manny preferred the term "cosmic music." That was the title of an album by John Coltrane, one of Manny's favorite records, and it didn't sound much like Widespread Panic, but at its heart was what Manny believed in about music, which for Manny was always searching, always changing, always exploring regions that had never been explored before. Always, when you played cosmic music, you never played a song the same way twice; ideally, you never played it in the same *universe* twice. It was John Coltrane *and* Radiohead, it was Jimi Hendrix *and* Palestrina. Sitar, you say? They've had cosmic music in India for a long time. So Manny didn't say anything else.

The girl went back to her titanicly Byronic grimaces and handed Manny the guitar. Out on High Street, Morphy lit a cigarette and said, "Go ahead. Buy your dead-guy guitar. But if his zombie comes for you in the night, can I look after Glenda? Your woman's going to need some man-love when you're in the ground."

"You're not funny, man." But Manny's thoughts were drifting away already, moving around the sound of the A major, which still seemed to be floating in the air. He couldn't wait to play the guitar again.

Manny hadn't even plugged the guitar in and it already felt warm in his hands, like a big cheesy pizza slice on a Saturday night.

The stage at Oldfield's on High was backed against the wall, bar to the right, pool tables to the left, and a brown streak of floor in front of it. Your goal was to steer your audience through that Scylla-and-Charybdis pathway, to keep them in the middle, dancing and digging, not sucked away by distractions that left you cracked on the rocks. Manny had a good feeling about this night, not least because of the guitar, but also

because Glenda was there. Glenda, lithe and brunette, wearing a black turtleneck, flowered skirt, and one of her trademark floppy hats, sat at the bar with a gin and tonic glittering in her hand.

"Let's start," John Wenke, Camel Commando's vocalist and bassist said. Morphy sat down behind the drum set with a clatter and gave four clicks of the sticks.

Manny started to play. The guitar was in tune – it didn't seem to go out of tune – and his hands felt fresher and faster when he played it, like young butterflies just emerged from their cocoons. He watched Glenda as he played, his mind half in the music, half in thoughts of her. He never quite felt like he really had her, and it worried him.

Then the second chorus cycled through, and Manny started to solo. The first note he hit, though, was misfingered, the wrong note. But Manny suddenly thought, *Let's let that wrong note be the note; let's wave that flag.*

And he played it again, adding swooping arcs of feedback so the note hung in the air with the cigarette smoke until every molecule of air vibrated with ecstatic wrongness. And then Manny piled more notes on top of it, equally wrong in relation to everything else, but perfectly right in relation to that one starting tone. He was totally unconscious of his fingers and totally conscious of the idea of what he was playing. Squeezing his eyes shut, he could see the architecture, shimmering like a tower with spirals chasing each other around the tower, one black, one white.

And he heard a voice at his ear that was definitely not John's: a resonant North Carolina voice. *You've almost got it. Just step forward.*

Manny was terrified and he almost stopped playing. But his hands kept going, and they felt right, and Manny could almost taste the music like sweet wine on his lips. He took a staggering step forward, careful not to fall off the stage, and he smelled desert grass mingled with a strong animal odor, and he thought he heard a distant whinny.

And then he opened his eyes.

Oldfield's was full of people. They were all dancing like madness.

"You never came over the other night," Glenda said. "I waited up for hours. Get high and forget where I live, baby?"

Manny shrugged at sipped at his water. He usually drank beer at gigs but lately it felt too heavy in his stomach. "Just tired, I guess."

His immediate past came to him out of order just then, with dream and reality confused. He had stopped by his place after the last gig at Oldfield's; his intention had been to drop off his gear, grab some clean clothes and go to Glenda's apartment. He had done all that and then gotten an idea, ninth-chords in seven-four time. He sat down on his bed to try it out. The rest of the night was an epic variation on that riff, notes appearing to him as glowing spider webs when he closed his eyes.

"*Quoi que, monsieur,*" she said, pushing her floppy hat backwards and reaching out with a napkin to dab a streak of water from his cheek. Saying that was one of her things; it was a stilted and probably ungrammatical translation of "whatever, mister," and it rhymed, the *que* coming out like "cur."

Morphy came over and draped his arms over Glenda's shoulders. She didn't

frown and she didn't smile. "We're on, dude," he said.

Camel Commando was back at Oldfield's. The air was getting warmer and the Ohio State students were walking the streets in squadrons of corn-fed blonde Midwestern girls in belly shirts and glittering bird-trap earrings, busy shaking the farm out of their hair like so much hay.

Manny waited for just the right moment to send it up. He held back through "Tutankhamen," and he held back through "Blue Cherry Hop," and he held back through "Goin' to Alaska," until he felt like an Indian god achieving Tantric enlightenment on behalf of the cosmos.

The next song was called "Iras Dei." Manny had written it as kind of a Coltrane tribute; he had always thought of it as his attempt at the essence of cosmic music. It had rattling car-crash parts and holy hush parts. As he started the riff that began the song, he relaxed the little knots in his shoulders and let himself go, let himself flow.

Manny played through the song, through the instrumental parts, through the second chorus and the bass breakdown. Then he began his solo. He could see, in his head, all at once, the map of it. It would start very thin and grow thicker until it ended in a big glowing circle. The details themselves were a little fuzzy – he was making them up as he went along – but he knew how the story would end, with a big rich round chord, the likes of which had never been played in this song, maybe in this bar, maybe in the state of Ohio, before.

He looked around as he was playing. Morphy was distracted, looking at something in the audience. But John Wenke, occasionally uttering a cheesy "Yeah, man!" in the microphone, was fixated on him, almost hypnotized. Glenda danced in front of the stage, and plenty of other people, doing that up-and-down chicken dance with their elbows that people did for jam bands. Manny nodded, knowing that they wouldn't believe what was coming. It loomed ahead of him, the glowing disk at the climax of the cone-shaped solo he was playing. In the meantime, the groove behind him rose in intensity, like the clattering skeleton of a thousand-headed Anklyosaur.

And it came. He played the chord.

And everything was light.

He was standing in a plain with an uninterrupted horizon on both sides. The grass came up to his waist and the wind spurred it to caress his legs. He was naked.

*Don't stop playing,* came a voice.

Manny looked around. To his left was a large, tall man with sunken eyes.

"John Coltrane?" he said. As soon as the words came out of his mouth, they seemed to whip sharply away and float off. "You're dead, Trane! Right after the Olantunji concert."

Coltrane smiled. *That old thing. Once I ruled an empire of squeaks and squonks, but it all seems like so many dirty rags now. All my best albums were recorded here.* Coltrane stretched out his hand. *Here comes my producer.*

A giant zebra strolled into sight. Its hooves were the size of dinner tables. It shook its head and whinnied, and sparks flew out of its flapping mane like shooting stars, drifting to the ground.

Manny felt extremely calm. At first, he had assumed that somebody had slipped

him acid, but he easily shook off that fancy.

The zebra snorted and another man came out from behind its towering leg. He had long hair and a dirty blonde beard and at first Manny didn't recognize him. Then the man grinned.

"Jimmy Chesterton! I saw you at PhreakPhest last summer! You guys smoked!"

Jimmy smiled. He looked gaunt still, and his eyes were still unfocused, but he was happy. *Hey, Manny.*

"What happened to you? I heard you died," Manny continued. "I – I bought your guitar." He reached down for it, knowing somehow, with dreamlike certainty, that although he didn't have his clothes he had the guitar. But when he picked it up it had turned into a drum, a long thin one, but with the same black-and-white striped pattern.

Jimmy just smiled again. *You keep it, man. You paid for it. I have my own now.* Jimmy reached down between his legs and brought one out.

Manny blinked several times. There was some sort of optical illusion wherein he couldn't tell where Jimmy's penis ended and where the guitar began. Manny remembered reading a story by Lovecraft, one where all the angles were wrong, and for half a second of panic he thought he might be in the abode of Great Cthulhu, now a zebra Old One. But this was no dreaming R'yleh. The air was too fresh and unpolluted, tangy with desert grass and sea salt.

*I told you to keep playing, Coltrane said. Don't lose the groove. There's a million little gateways to this world of music, and you lucked into one of them. But the trick is to keep the groove up until you don't need your body anymore, and then you can stay here as long as you need to.*

Coltrane had his own saxophone out, which was involved with his phallus in the same sort of illusion as Jimmy's guitar.

Manny saw with fifty-fifty relief and envy that his own was not. He sat down cross-legged and rested the drum on his left thigh, then struck the head experimentally. It played like a drum but it sounded like a guitar, and the precise part of the head he struck corresponded to a string and a fret. It all appeared in his head like a navigator's circular map of the heavens. Coltrane laughed and hopped on one foot as he played, and the spirals on Manny's drums began spinning, like a barbershop pole composed of indescribable bliss.

"Manny? That was hot, man! And we got it on tape!" John Wenke on his left.

"Manny? That was great! That was really great!" Glenda on his right.

"I can't wait to send this to the PhreakPhest committee! We'll get in for sure!"

Manny's right hand was shaking. He pushed it into his pocket.

"Baby, you must be tired. Do you need help packing up?"

Manny heard but didn't hear. Somebody thrust a beer into his left hand.

"Dude, that was the sweetest jam ever. We could move up from Oldfield's...play at Little Brother's or the Newport...."

Shuddering, Manny sat down on the stage. The beer was still in his left hand, untouched.

"Manny? Baby, what is it? What's wrong? Talk to me, baby."

He reached for his guitar. Somebody had unplugged it for him and put it back in

its vinyl over-the-shoulder carrying case. He unzipped it and put it back in his lap and began strumming.

“Manny, talk to me. I’m *serious*.” A pause. “Look, this is not making me *happy*. Are you on something?”

“Oh, he’s okay. He just spaces a little sometimes. Look, I’ll drive you home, okay?” That was Morphy behind him.

Manny’s eyes refused to focus. A Glenda-shaped shape had her arms crossed. Manny kept plucking the strings. There were chords bouncing around in his head like pool balls in a wind chamber. He had to play them to make them stop moving, but each time he looked closely enough to see what one was, it turned out to be three or four balls clustered together, and if you played one of them, you broke the bond and sent them all flying. When the manager of Oldfield’s walked him to the door (gently, because it had been a record-breaking night financially), his beer was still untouched.

In the middle of the night, Manny woke up hungry. He reached over to the other side of the mattress. Glenda wasn’t there. He felt with a hand and found his guitar, and realized that if he played one more note on it – that if he even left his hand there a minute longer – he would throw up. He reached again and found his phone and called her.

He talked for a while until he realized that it was her voice-mail he had heard, and not her voice. With an inner yank he pulled himself up and out of bed, and immediately fell back down. Then he got up again, put on long underwear, t-shirt, jeans, and sandals, and stumbled out the door to walk down High Street to Glenda’s. On the way, he stopped for a bagel, then for a tube of potato chips, then for some French fries, and then for a milkshake. He felt like he hadn’t eaten for days, and when he thought, he realized he hadn’t.

When he got to Glenda’s apartment, he banged on the door and stood there waiting. He banged again. You never really know if you have waited long enough for somebody to come to the door when you are knocking, especially if you are impatient, and every sound started out seeming like her footsteps but then turned into something else.

Finally, after playing a lot of stupid games with the knocker and the doorbell, Manny walked to a phone booth and called her. Again, it went to the voice mail in six rings. On an impulse, he called Morphy’s number. It went to voice mail without ringing. Manny’s shoulders slumped like two sacks of wet grain and he walked home, muttering aloud.

But maybe it didn’t mean anything. Who knew? Anyway, with a little food in his belly and a little exercise pushing his blood around his body, he felt less tense, less liable to blow up. When he got back to his room, he collapsed into bed and put his guitar in his lap and began strumming.

The gig at Little Brother’s was crammed. Hippie chicks in swirling multicolored skirts danced with dreadlocked boys, their eyes closed and their faces tilted slightly downwards and their mouths half open in beautifully vacant concentration on each note. Clouds of marijuana drifted out of the bathroom.

John Wenke said to Morphy and Manny that probably the guy from PhreakPhest

was going to be there and a spot there was Camel Commando's for sure if things went well.

Manny nodded absently; every gig had become PhreakPhest since he had picked up the guitar; every gig had, frankly, become Woodstock on Mars.

This time he didn't hold anything back. With the very first tune he opened up with a chord made out of stars and didn't even let John Wenke finish the first chorus of "All the Green Houses Where Your Sister Lives" before he was off and running. Tall grass grew beneath the feet of all the hippies and the ponderous hooves of the zebra-god appeared behind the bar. The stripes on his guitar streamed out and coated everybody, and Coltrane stood by his side, putting in a fill or a phrase here and there that nobody but Manny could hear, but everyone could feel.

*Coltrane?* Manny asked him during the drum solo as he leaned on his amp. *You know your wife is still here, still alive. Do you miss her?*

Coltrane smiled. *I still see her. Same way I see all these people now.*

*Yeah, but...that's not really the same, don't you think?* Manny was struggling. *What if she's with another man? Does that bother you?*

*This is better,* Coltrane said. *I don't worry about that kind of thing anymore. You shouldn't either. This is better.*

*Maybe,* Manny said with a shrug.

Morphy had gone back into a straight groove. Manny returned to the strings and leaned on the groove until it slowed down a little, and then he began to play. The zebra snorted contemplatively as Manny ignored the white stripes and chose the black ones and began weaving with them. There was tragedy in those stripes and there was tragedy in his notes, leave-taking and mystery and – at the end, just a little – acceptance. His highest notes screamed out as if the fretboard itself was in pain. How long he played he didn't know. In the eyes of the audience he saw the passing of generations; the African grass rose and fell. Finally, he just collapsed onto his amp, his hands on fire but still playing.

"Thanks a lot, everybody," John Wenke said into his mike as soon as the cheering died down, which took a while. "We're going to take like ten minutes and we'll be right back."

Manny didn't leave the stage. He just leaned against the front of the bass drum, his hands compulsively tickling and stroking the strings.

Then he looked out and saw Glenda at the bar, in a purple sweater, her hair falling carelessly over her shoulders. Her eyes met his and she looked a little sad, and then she turned back to her beer.

*It's time,* came a voice from his left. Manny stared over and saw Jimmy Chesterton, strumming his black-and-white guitar-phallus.

*Time for what, Jimmy?*

*Time to sing Happy Birthday. Here, we'll do it together. In G sharp. Happy Birthday to you...*

Glenda took another sip of her beer, sighed, and looked inside her purse. Morphy sat down next to her and signaled the bartender.

*Happy Birthday to you...*

Morphy put his hand on Glenda's shoulder and leaned in to whisper into her ear.

*Happy Birthday, Dear Manny...*

Glenda looked back at Manny for a second. Her eyes were large and a spider web of hair fell down over her nose. Then, she turned back to Morphy, biting her lip. Morphy's mouth grazed her neck.

*Happy Birthday to...*

Manny stepped down off the bandstand and walked over to the bar (it seemed like it was all done in one step) and smashed the guitar against Morphy's face. It broke in half and shards scattered across the floor.

All at once the zebra stepped out from behind the bar. Its nostrils flared and its eyes blinked quickly, and it stamped its hooves as puffs of steam came out of its nostrils.

*You're not making it, man!* Coltrane said. *Uh-oh...closin' the gate!* But his voice was already faint and receding. Manny looked around for Jimmy, but he was gone. All the people in the bar were blurry, underwater, Coltrane's features were unblurred, but he was fading away slowly. His eyes had a million small, sad lines around them.

The zebra seemed larger than ever as it reared up on its back legs, its front hooves extending past the moon. It burst into flame: a tower of fire with light but no heat, flickering snake-tongues of flame caressing Manny's arms and chest like thin cords of silk. And then it, too, was gone.

People rushed in to hold them both back and they snarled across the gap; Manny heard himself yelling at Morphy to stay away from his woman and a dozen other clichés. Somebody broke a bottle and a few bruised hippies later, Manny was standing on the street with a promise that he would never play at Little Brother's again.

John Wenke came up to him and shrugged. "Uh...look, man, you know I respect your chops, but we took a vote and you're out of the band."

"*Quoi que, Monsieur,*" Manny said, putting his hands in his pockets and turning around to walk home. Almost immediately he bumped into Glenda.

"Need a ride?" she asked.

He nodded and nuzzled her shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Me too," she replied, responding by raking her fingernails – lightly, lightly – over his scalp and walking him to her car. Her car was already full of his gear and so he had ample time, while dozing in the front seat, to realize just how hungry he was. He guessed he was always going to be that hungry from now on.