

My Honeysuckle Victory

David Linx

For several decades now I've often been asked to write or to speak about James Baldwin. My time with him, about how and when and where we met, about my relationship with him and the Baldwin family. And then about our project together, the recording of *A Lover's Question*. When *James Baldwin Review* reached out to me to write a piece for the 100th year celebration of JB's birth, I felt things trigger, somewhat forcefully, in my mind. As if the universe was trying to send me a message, a hint, that of being "accurate" about the prodigal son, as some of the family members refer to him. I could not merely write down my recollections and be a tourist guide in the latter part of this prophet of a man's life.

The legacy speaks for itself and it requires precision from a, widely rumoured to be, white man talking about a, widely rumoured to be, Black man, as he liked to put it.

In this piece I will, mostly, refer to James Baldwin as JB, out of respect for boundaries. With time I've grown slightly uncomfortable with the general overuse of "Jimmy" in the public sphere. This diminutive was felt and came, as far as I'm concerned, with unspoken permission, except where family and friends were concerned. Some family members simply refer to him as Uncle James.

Color is a state of mind only if we face ourselves daily, something white people rarely do, simply because we never "had" to. Instead, we tend to blindly create, then (over-) glorify the ideal "other"—when, where and how we see fit. It's a way not to tackle the real problem.

And there lies all the difference. When there's no choice you basically speak truth to power every exhausting, challenging, or joyful moment of every single day. This was my first lesson from the time I forced myself through the gates of JB's amazing property in St.-Paul-de Vence, the destruction of which is the very metaphor for all that's not been dealt with. So much was clear that entering this house I was going to have to deserve my place in it, every single minute of every single day.

I am a 59-year-old jazz singer-composer-lyricist-producer and professor, about the same age Baldwin was when I met him. JB was the product of an intense upbringing, at times profoundly challenging, as he wrote about in his books, but above all he was the receptor of as much, if not more, love as a family can give. From his mother Berdis, down to the love of each one of his sisters and brothers, cousins, nieces, and nephews, some of whom I've grown very close to over the decades, it literally saved him and gave him the strength to write with all the energy he could muster, for this relentless crusade to make this world a better place. And Lord has he done so in many ways.

The journey seemed to have been completely written out. At the hands of fate, close to the mid-eighties. And in regards to this chapter in my life I have almost total recall.

I had met JB at a conference in Amsterdam one year previously. He had given me his phone number after we'd had dinner with David, his brother, after a second conference that day in a gymnasium in the outskirts—and yes we can call them ghettos—of Amsterdam. It was a churchlike experience with David speaking back to JB from the audience. JB sitting on the edge of the stage, leaving behind what felt like a pulpit, and repeatedly insisting the children call him Jimmy.

Although I clung to his phone number, I didn't call him until one year later, just to say that I was on my way to see him the next day. I think I didn't even give him a chance to reply, for fear maybe he might refuse. So off I went to meet my hero. Back in the days of night trains between Brussels and Nice (South of France), I set out on my journey with not one, but two, suitcases. Only youth can excuse such an outrageous act. I was totally ready to move in and the fact that it was clear for me clarified the remainder of that situation, if only in my mind. I arrived in Nice at around 9 or 10 the next morning and looked for a bus to St.-Paul-de-Vence. I arrived around noon and was sweating profusely due to the constant strut and the weight of my suitcases that seemed to hold the entirety of my young life so far. I asked my way around only to find that JB lived on a property on the outskirts of the medieval village. I struggled to get in the right direction and knocked on the doors of several houses; finally, by an instinctive compass, I pushed open the gates to this miracle of a place. I'd made it!

I knocked on the door of the main house and was greeted by a befuddled Bernard Hassell, JB's longtime assistant and friend. Bernard tried to shoo me away, as he must have done so many times before, but I heard a husky voice from inside the house call out: "Leave the boy alone and let him in." JB knew I was coming and I think he was amused and fascinated by my perseverance. He greeted me with his wide generous grin and asked me to join him and Bernard, as I had arrived just in time for lunch. Bernard remained suspicious for a while but warmed up to my presence pretty quickly. After sending his dog, a stray one he had named Josephine, on me a couple of times, but seeing the dog loved me, Bernard gave up the little resistance he had left. One of JB's best friends had been Josephine Baker, so he was often bewildered as to why Bernard could have named his dog after her, something he often, feigning irritation, confronted Bernard with over lunch, just to crack up right after. These lunches seemed premonitory for the way I've operated since, after I've written or composed new material. After dessert, JB would often read to Bernard and me what he had worked on during the night. Not so much for us to give an opinion, but more so to bounce it off and thus anchor it and call it into existence.

I was given a splendid room right off the dining room and I was in heaven. The welcome he gave me was so encompassing that it took away and shook off, at least momentarily, the burdening load of childhood traumas.

The house was immense and to this very day I still remember every nook and cranny, piece of furniture, every painting. Bernard's place was a cute little house at the entrance of the property at the left side of the gates. From his little balcony

Bernard would often have his hifi system blast the voice of Jessye Norman over the entire property, much to both our bewilderment and delight.

My favorite place was down under from around the house where JB's quarters were located. He liked to refer to it as the torture chamber because it was to write and to resource and to call on inspiration. I loved to spend time down there and it was outside from his study that, one night, I asked him to make a record with me, to which he replied with an immediate "Yes." I think one of the reasons he agreed may have been a strange familiarity, because I was somewhat of a mystery to him in that I lived with Kenny Clarke in Paris at that time. Kenny Clarke used to get JB into jazz clubs in Harlem in the days when he was underage. Also, my godfather was Nathan Davis, my middle name is Nathan, who was the dean of the African-American ethnology department of Pitt University in Pittsburgh, where JB gave talks on a pretty regular basis. I remember him asking me one evening, pretty amused: "Who are you?" Me with my kinky hair, highly strung, an unlikely demeanor that gave me a sort of identity that stood out pretty much. One that I played with for many years and that allowed me to venture into many spheres. The very next afternoon, we set out to carefully choose the poems. I insisted that we only use previously unpublished material, to which he reacted, a little bemused, with a heavy rolling of eyes into which I read: you all right.

We would go on to have a more intimate relationship around that time, only to solidify our bond even more. It turned out to be crucial for the recording of our project: *A Lover's Question*. His quarters held a study, a bedroom, and a bathroom with a shower. I often used to sleep in his bed, dozing off to the sound of his typewriter, as he was writing during the night, only to wake up and go back upstairs when he would go to sleep. These times were pure magic. I can still recollect, in detail, the sweet mixed scent of the fireplace—there were fireplaces just about everywhere in the house—cigarettes and whiskey. The record collection included Robert Johnson, John Coltrane, Aretha Franklin, Maria Callas, Roberta Flack, whom he absolutely adored, Ray Charles, and also the music of Beethoven and Brahms, among others.

Many times his brother David would come to stay at the house when he needed a break from the hectic pace in NYC. But more so, I got to stay off and on at David's apartment, 209 W 97th street in NYC, till he passed away in DC in the mid 1990s. I slept in JB's room while he was away on conference tours or teaching at Amherst, as I was finishing up our recording of *A Lover's Question*, him reciting his poetry to music composed by Pierre Van Dormael and me. JB's voice was eventually recorded in Brussels. The recording features many jazz greats such as Steve Coleman, Slide Hampton, Bob Stewart, Toots Thielemans, Jimmy Owens, Byard Lancaster, Youssef Yancy, Deborah Brown, Viktor Lazlo, and others. I managed to have him sing "Precious Lord" after he sang it to me on his terrace late one night in St.-Paul-de-Vence after we listened to Robert Johnson. He expressed a slight hesitation once we were in the studio, but with my youthful vigor I insisted until he gave in. He insisted Tejan, his nephew, sat down on the floor in front of him as he, sitting on a high stool, eyes closed, sang away.

New York was something else and after JB allowed me into his life we can say that part of his family just evidently took me in. David became another father figure, and Gloria has been like a mother figure to me from the day we met almost forty years ago. I would accompany David most every night to Mikkell's, the famous jazz club on 97th Street where he worked.

Miles Davis, whom I met at JB's over lunch in St.-Paul a few years earlier, would be a frequent guest for late night drinks, as well as Roy Ayers, who would, in my mind logically, then play a few tracks on one of my first albums *Hungry Voices* in 1989. That's how fluid it energetically all felt. Mikkell's was *the* jazz spot in the 80s in the Upper West Side of NYC, where a young Whitney Houston made her debut.

At the apartment it was an amazing crowd that would stop by for impromptu evenings. Artists such as Sarah Vaughan, whom I'd met in Belgium in 1976 as a youngster, Billy Eckstine, and of course Roy Ayers, would hang out. I think that even Chaka Khan came by one evening. David's apartment was the place to be for these night birds. And we would go to afterhours joints up in Harlem, sometimes till noon. Oh yes, it was crazy, mind-blowing and intense.

JB would always pop in unannounced and drop off his luggage when he came back from his conference or book tours, and we would go out for dinner at one of his favorite spots: El Faro, the owner of which turned out to have had a similar place in Brussels. It was incredible how people just knew and felt when JB was in New York.

I remember, ambitious as I could be as a 20-some years young man, I'd made an appointment with Alvin Ailey, the choreographer. I met him at his offices around Times Square, if I'm not mistaken. I was determined to ask him to choreograph our project with JB, just that. He ended up having me take a dance class because he thought I moved like a dancer. He invited me to a couple of performances of his company after that. Tejan, Gloria's son, accompanied me once. I'd met TJ a couple of years before in St.-Paul when Gloria sent him over for the summer holidays. We bonded instantly, to JB's delight, relieved I got off his back for a while I presume.

Back at David's apartment after our meeting, Alvin Ailey called as promised. I answered the kitchen phone and handed it to JB as a surprise. They hadn't spoken in over fifteen years. A sweet and wonderful man was Alvin Ailey as well. We stayed in regular touch until his untimely death in 1989.

It was in David's kitchen that I learned to make JB's favorite midnight snack: buttered toast with peanut butter and fried bacon on top. I still cook it up some nights, like a prayer of sorts, whenever I wake up hungry.

I visited the family building, 137 71st Street, several times before JB's passing, and with Gloria Karefa-Smart, JB's sister, it was an immediate connection, a long-lasting bond to this very day. After JB's passing she would put all her energy into saving the house in St.-Paul. I was doing the little I could from over here in Europe to be of some help, at times being a moral support as we often talked over the phone. It was pure exhaustion and twenty years of fierce, draining, time-consuming, and constant battle to save that amazing house that she wanted to turn

into a retreat for young writers on a scholarship. That was decades before the world would wake up to the situation with all sorts of insanity, narcissism, and people claiming to want to save a house the Baldwin estate had lost after twenty years of legal battles.

I think only a few realized the seriousness of JB's condition and I somehow felt that my coming to NYC at that particular moment was sort of a sign of the gravity of the situation. I knew JB felt it as well without actually speaking to it. I remember one night a couple of days after I arrived, being at Sheridan Square, I'd bought a black and white postcard of JB by the photographer Carl Van Vechten and sent it to him by regular mail back in France. These were manifestations of very emotional months to come because we knew time was running out.

One of the most impressive family moments I've witnessed in my life was when I went to 137 for Mother's Day. Berdis was sitting on what, in my mind, looked like a throne. Everybody, nieces, nephews, cousins, brothers, sisters, a few extended family members, sitting on the remaining chairs, couch, but mostly on the floor, as she gave her annual speech about the importance of love. One cannot imagine how I still thrive on this wave of love whenever I feel somewhat diminished or under the weather.

It was at 137 that I equally created a lifetime bond with Aisha and Karim, TJ's brother and sister. The last time I was with Jimmy in NYC, I'd decided to accompany him to JFK airport. He had to fly to London for a speech at, I think, the UNESCO over there. That's where he collapsed to be flown out straight to Nice for immediate surgery. From that moment on the times spent in St.-Paul were precious, calm, reflecting, and peaceful. JB only got a little annoyed when he was forced to drink fresh orange juice or eat breakfast in the morning; it once ended on the wall opposite his bed, much to the dismay of Valérie, the maid and cook. And since he wasn't allowed to smoke anymore, we refrained from doing so as well. That's how I gave up smoking altogether on September 7, 1987. I recall these last months, when I flew down from Brussels, as being times of laughter and reminiscing. I would join him for his afternoon naps in the farthest room of the adjacent part of the main house, the last part that was to be destroyed more than thirty years later.

Last time I flew over was mid-November, and then November 30 I got that much dreaded phone call from David, as I was working on my new album, telling me that JB had joined the heavenly choir. I waited until 1991 to release our record: *A Lover's Question*. I wanted to be sure that things were dealt with in my mind, my heart, and my gut, exactly the three places one needs to operate from.

Back to the morning after I first arrived in St.-Paul-de-Vence a few years earlier. I walked up to the village, leaping for joy, and bought a postcard at the newspaper shop/tabac right off Café de la Place, to send to my mother in Brussels. While heading to the post office, a little up the road from La Colombe d'Or, I came across a small shop and purchased a tiny square glass bottle of honeysuckle essential oil. I felt I held the "victory" entering JB's, James Baldwin's, Jimmy's life, and in that moment it called out for honeysuckle to be its official scent.

Contributor's Biography

Born in Brussels but Parisian by adoption and trained through collaborations with legendary American and European musicians, **David Linx** is one of the most formidable jazz singers to grace the stage. His first international acclaim and breakthrough came with the Label Bleu release of *Up Close* in 1995, as well as the re-release of his album with James Baldwin, *A Lover's Question*, recorded with the writer and others in 1986. Linx has received the Octave d'Honneur lifetime achievement award and the Edison Jazz Award in Holland for best jazz vocal album of the year, among other awards.