

## A Memory: The Avant-Garde Stayed in Europe: Sunny Murray in Paris

Scott Cashman, July 6, 2021

### Why this story?

Sunny Murray is a towering figure in the history of African American music. He doesn't have books written about him as one of the creators of innovative music, but he was there with the creators. The avant-garde that emerged in the 1960s was brought in by Sun Ra and Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor and Archie Shepp and Albert Ayler and John Coltrane. Sunny was playing and recording with them. He spoke about innovating a new form of drumming to support the avant-garde, or as some call it free jazz, or as Sunny called it creative music. He was probably right about that. What drummer was really engaging in collective improvisation before him?



*Isabell Soumerrard, Scott Cashman, Sunny Murray  
– Paris 1997*

The racism that was brought clearly into focus and rejected during the Civil Rights Movement was infused in the music. Some of the musicians talked about it more overtly than others. Archie Shepp put social commentary directly into his music. Social commentary and innovation. Sunny was a bit less direct but no less revolutionary.

The movement of critical African American artists to Europe is a deep topic that can't get a full treatment here but suffice it to say that Sunny's story in Europe is an important one. Here you get a slice of what life was like for Sunny in Paris, and specifically at the Studio des Islettes, at the point I encountered him beginning in 1997. Like most American musicians there at the time, Sunny was living there illegally. It wasn't a glamorous life, but for him it was better than what he left behind.

### Meeting Sunny - January 31, 1997

For Americans navigating the community of American musicians in Paris it's all about connections. When I first arrived in January 1997, I only knew one person – Archie Shepp. I went with him to a concert that he was doing at the New Morning and met six people that I would end up interviewing later. Some became close friends. As I watched other Americans arrive in Paris, I saw the same kind of thing happen. For me, Fred Clayton quickly became a friend and mentor. He was building a reputation around Paris with his International Rhythm Connexion. Made up of American, English, and French musicians it was an exciting blues band, ready to make their first self-produced album. Early on I accepted an invitation to join Fred at the Houdon Jazz Club on a Friday. Before heading to the Houdon, we stopped by the Studio des

Islettes so that Fred could talk to the manager about an upcoming gig.

Then it happened. Turning, I walked straight into a large man. My initial reaction was to be a bit embarrassed. Then Fred introduced me to Sunny Murray. I was stunned. I didn't know Sunny Murray was in Paris.

I had listened to Sunny's music for at least 15 years. His work with Albert Ayler was legendary and personally affecting. His work with Cecil Taylor was part of the revolution in African American music that emerged along with the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960s. I'd immersed myself in his work with Archie Shepp. Black Gypsy was one of his most gripping works. I'd discovered it on late night radio and there was Chicago Beau (Lincoln Beauchamp) reciting, even shouting, his poetry with Sunny fueling the rhythmic fire and Shepp's soprano soaring above it all. And now, I'd almost knocked right into the legendary drummer.



*Studio des Islettes - Paris 1997*

Sunny was one of about eight people in the Studio. A tall man in a very good mood, he was laughing, drinking a cognac. He hadn't slept the night before.

Sunny grew up in Philadelphia at the same time as Archie Shepp. They are the same age. So, they have a boyhood link that survived to the end of Sunny's life. They occasionally played together in various projects throughout the 1960's and in the 1990's started performing together again, primarily in a trio with Richard Davis on bass.

Sunny was very pleasant, smiling as we shook hands. I told him that I was a friend of Shepp's and had taught Prof. Shepp's class for him when he was on tour or in the studio. "Oh, you're the guy that is looking out for him."

Sunny was a storyteller. He was traveling out of Paris for a weekend concert. He talked about preferring to travel on a train rather than a plane. He found it more relaxing. He said that when he gets a sleeping car in France it was not uncommon for him to have it to himself because the French generally didn't want to share a car with "a big black man." In Germany though, "they don't care."

With his commentary on travel complete, Sunny declared that he was leaving, again shaking my hand on his way out.



*Door to the Courtyard for the Studio des Islettes - Paris 1997*

## Studio des Islettes

In the heart of the Barbes neighborhood of Paris, near the foot of Montmartre, was the Studio des Islettes. It's closed now, meeting it's end in 2005. To understand Sunny Murray's life in Paris you must understand something about the Studio des Islettes.

The American term for the Studio was "dive," but they had some exceptional music there, well, qualify that because some nights the music was

not too good and on other's, it was great. It was the only non-profit association (an official status) in Paris that presented jazz. It was loosely run. The musicians mostly played for the "door" and the cover charge was 25F (about \$4 at 1997 conversion rates) for jam sessions and 50F (\$8) for concerts. If completely packed it would hold about 50 people.

I never really knew who was officially part of the organization, except for the Vice President who also acted as the manager and even he was not always in control of what was happening. One night a guy who was there every night, and seemed to have some affiliation with the association, met me at the door and said something to the effect of "Vous ne payez pas, vous êtes dans la famille (*you don't pay, you are part of the family*)."

Sometimes I got charged to go to concerts, sometimes I was charged ½ price, sometimes it was free beer and soda. Nothing was ever consistent or firm at the Studio and that reflected the kind of community these musicians, including American musicians, built at the Studio. They fought all the time - who is going to be in what band. They jealously guarded gigs and got mad if someone was looking for one in a place they were playing. There was even a fistfight in the club over the collection of cover charges one night. No musicians were involved, just "concerned parties". A lot of people didn't pay to get in, many couldn't pay, and so the musicians playing there didn't make much.

Most of the "regulars" were friendly with each other, used the place as a social center, a rehearsal space, a place to experiment, a place to blow off steam, and perhaps most importantly, a place to make connections. It wasn't just Americans (though there were a lot of Americans) but French musicians, an Italian and a British musician were regulars.

Some of the Americans had been in Paris for more than 20 years, some 6 months. There were all levels of musical competence. It was also the place some of the less well-connected Americans, who were on tour or were in Paris for a short time, went to find out what was going on. For Americans it was a social center. People made connections. It had a reputation as a place that had an American community.

The Studio des Islettes was not well maintained. It was dark, even during the day. Even when it was clean, it was worn. It was in a poor neighborhood and the people that frequented it didn't always treat it with respect. But, it was Sunny Murray's base. He was there every day around 1 pm. He taught lessons there. He practiced there. He rehearsed there. Sunny was the center of the Studio's community.

Like other Parisian clubs, the Studio had been the recipient of funds from the city. These grants were part of their arts initiative to reduce the cost of attending events and concerts. It allowed the Studio to pay some of the musicians that played there at least a minimum amount.

There was a lot of tension between white French and African French. The manager, being African French took a lot of heat. Sunny told me that he'd actually become violent in this position, though he was gentle by nature. French musicians came in looking for a gig and guaranteed money. Patrick would say "no". He'd tell them that he was just giving the guaranteed money to African Americans. They called him a racist. Sunny told him to call back and give them the guarantee. Patrick's justification was that the African Americans were playing the real music and the French quality was less. At Sunny's urging, he finally agreed to give them the guarantee. The political reality prevailed.

### A Concert or a Jam Session?

Sunny had a concert at the Studio. Clearly, he was not doing it for the money. He used the Studio to practice and to give lessons, so he felt that once in a while he should play a concert there.

The concert was on a Sunday evening in February. The cover charge was 50F. There were probably 30 people there. On Monday Fred and I talked about this concert and his reaction to the 30 people was, "that's pretty good. If they would keep the place clean and do the proper advertising, they might start to get some people to come up from the Châtelet area. That place is too expensive for people. 40F for a beer." At the concert were a lot of musicians and the "regulars" to the Studio, so, I don't think the band made much money. I guessed that they collected 20 cover charges which would make 1000F (\$172) to be split for the trio. Not a great night from a financial perspective.

The audience though knows that Sunny Murray was one of the legendary free jazz drummers. It was a thrill to sit in this small room (the concert room it was maybe 25'X25') which had 23 seats set up and a bar area that could seat another 10.

I expected a night of free jazz from the Sunny Murray Trio (with bassist Sebastien Gastine and pianist Guillaume Maud). That was not to be. They played all standards and to my ear Sunny played well during the 3 sets of 45-60 minutes each. You can hear the free jazz influence in his playing, but he also was adept at keeping time.

Sunny was a big man and towered over the drums. While playing he maintained a contorted

look on his face and was likely to audibly hum along with his playing. He chose some of the tunes and sometimes he just called for a tempo and Sebastien selected the actual composition from a book which had the chord changes. They didn't play anything that wasn't in the book. In fact, one of Sunny's suggestions was rejected because it wasn't in the book.



*Studio des Islettes, Paris 1997*

said anything.

On the last song of the 2nd set Sunny called an up-tempo blues (no name). They went into it and were generating some energy. A trumpet player had come in and was watching from the side of the bar. I had previously seen him in the Studio but hadn't been introduced. I didn't notice him talking to anyone. When the piano player ended a pretty good solo, this trumpeter just started playing. I don't believe he asked anyone if it was ok. He played an entire solo, and not a short one, in the wrong key and didn't seem to know it because he just kept going on. Nobody

Just prior to his playing another musician came in and got his flugelhorn out. When the trumpeter finally finished, this American - Rasul Siddik, who is well known in free jazz circles and plays in David Murray's big band - played a solo, and he could play! In fact, though not a household name, he is one of the best trumpeters playing African American music anywhere in the world. Now, I don't think he was asked to sit in either, but after the set was over it was clear that he was friends with Sunny.

Sunny invited him to play "Miles Ahead" by Miles Davis, to start the second set and the other trumpeter jumped right in. Though billed as a concert this was quickly turning into a jam session. A French pianist started off the third set by sitting in. Sunny called "Stella by Starlight" which he said he knew, and he wanted his female companion to sing. Sunny told him, "One thing at a time. We are going to play a couple of compositions first." She never did sing. The pianist started playing something, but it wasn't "Stella" and after about a minute of Sunny looking at him and saying "Stella" the whole thing ground to a halt. Then, they talked about playing "Stella by Starlight" again. He said he knew it, and promptly launched into Monk's "Epistrophy."

They played it through, and the pianist actually did a decent enough solo. It was just in the nature of the Studio des Islettes to have musicians join in. Not officially a jam session but not respected as a concert either.

Sunny later told me that he sometimes played these kinds of gigs at the Studio so that people could sit in with him. While the particulars of who and when may not have been worked out, at

least Sunny was expecting it! Apparently uninvited guests getting on stage and playing happens all over France according to Sunny and Fred.

Sunny has been a catalyst for jam sessions at the Studio. He found that the young French musicians who went to jams at the Studio were all from the same school program. They played well but had the same style, which they picked up from their professor. They didn't go to other jams. They didn't work their way through the scene the way Americans do. An American would go to a jam session every day to show people what they can do and to become known. Then, when someone has a gig, they might call them. That's how a career starts. The French musicians don't do that. Sunny said that they, "get caught up in the American crisis. They say Americans are pushing them out. I tell them that it's not that. They are putting themselves in a bad spot by not working the scene."

In the past, more Americans were involved in educating French musicians. Kenny Clarke had a school, but it no longer exists. Alan Silva was teaching in Paris, but he relocated. Sunny thought that many of the good young French musicians sound the same because of the education they are getting in the French system.

"I've been talking to Shepp about setting up a school. We'd look for a subsidy from the government but that won't happen fast. Students get support from the government, and it would work that way for us. We can already use the Studio for the space. The big room upstairs can be for group things, and we can clean this small room up for private lessons. It would be good for the Association because we'd give them money every month. We'd look for 50 registrations at 6000F each. We could bring in guests like Milford Graves to work with the students and have concerts.

French musicians are very good technicians. They are aggressive learners, but they miss the social aspects and historical aspects that go into developing a voice. I've had to develop a teaching style to reach these musicians. The focus is on technique which is necessary as the foundation from which you become a musician. I don't keep a student for more than a year. I teach them technique. Then they can develop their own thing. After three months of lessons, I make them go to the jam session [indicating the room upstairs] to test out their skills. Some of them are a little shy about it but eventually they play.

Last year we had the first "American Jazz Festival" at the Studio. I say American but it wasn't just Americans. Americans were leaders and had some French musicians in the band. Some Americans, who are usually sidemen, got a chance to lead their own group. We had Steve Potts, I played, Bobby Few and some others. We did this to combat this whole 'Jazz is European' kick."



*Sunny Murray's ensemble workshop, Greenfield, Massachusetts 1998*

A lot of people are surprised to find that Sunny is a composer. On a visit to the States in June of 1998 he taught a workshop that I organized in Greenfield, Massachusetts. He had written out parts for all of the instruments. He has compositions that combine “in” and “out”. It adds more to his teaching and can create

other opportunities. “I’m working on applying for one of these DAAD Grants for composers. Cecil Taylor and Steve Lacy got them. It’s a residency in Germany. You get an apartment and stipend for a year.”

Sunny Murray September 21, 1936 – December 7, 2017. He died in Paris at the age of 81.

The full article is published in the journal Spandana, Edited by Lincoln Beauchamp.

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