

# Nathaniel Mackey

w/Royal Hartigan and Hafez Modirzadeh



## Song of the Andoumboulou: 25 (1994)

---

**Nathaniel Mackey:** Text and Vocals

**Royal Hartigan:** drum set and donno.

**Hafez Modirzadeh:** zorna.

Excerpt from Paul Naylor's linear notes to the complete recording *Strick: Song of the Andoumboulou 16-25* (1994):

The work presented here extends the on-going series of poems Mackey began in his first book of poetry, *Eroding Witness* (University of Illinois Press, 1985), and continued in his second, *School of Udhra* (City Lights Books, 1993). The Andoumboulou are mythological beings encountered in the cosmology of the Dogon of West Africa. The Andoumboulou are, as Mackey puts it, "the spirits of an earlier, flawed or failed form of human being – what, given the Dogon emphasis on signs, traces, drawings, 'graphic-ity,' I tend to think of as a rough draft of human being." But Mackey's treatment of the Andoumboulou offers much more than an antiquarian interest in cultural mythology since "the Andoumboulou are in fact us; we're the rough draft." For Mackey, then, the "Song of the Andoumboulou" is also potentially our song – the song of a form of humanity not quite complete, still in the process of becoming more than it presently is.

The word *strick* refers primarily to pieces of fiber or hemp before they are made into rope. "But I hear in the word more than that," Mackey says. "I hear the word stick, I hear the word strike, I hear the word struck, and I hear the word strict. I hear those words which are not really pronounced in that word, but there are overtones or undertones of those words, harmonics of those words. The word *strick*, then, is like a musical chord in which those words which are otherwise not present are present." Both the primary meaning of the word and the overtones Mackey hears suggest a process of bringing together the materials of poetry, sound and sense, into a weave of words and music that resonates with rather than reconciles the multiple possibilities out of which it is made.

Yet Mackey's poems present a weave of cultures and traditions as well. They bring together the traditions of African-American music, Caribbean and Arabic poetry, and West African mythology, among others, with the Western traditions of philosophy, poetry, and music. Although a mix of such disparate materials could result in a multicultural patchwork, Mackey weaves these traditions together into a taut rope united by the fact of song. He does not, however, gather these traditions together for a celebration of universal sameness or harmony; rather, he introduces into this cross-cultural encounter "a discrepant note meant to call attention to the problematics of rubric-making, a caveat meant to make the act of categorization creak." That note signals the discrepancy with which many of the traditions Mackey engages have been treated by the dominant and dominating traditions of the West and causes the categories that authorize that treatment - categories such as "civilized" and "primitive," "Christian" and "heathen" – to creak under the weight of a song "Steeped in memory, bedrock / mischief, misanthropy" in which the "Cries of thousands / cut in on the music" and bear witness to the brutality that more often than not underwrites those categories.

The text of "Song of the Andoumboulou: 25" first appeared in *Sulfur*, #34 (Spring 1994), subsequently appearing in Mackey's book *Whatsaid Serif* (1998)

---

*Presented by Stiftelsen 3,14, PARABOL situates an adjacent ambience and mode of address in dialogue with the gallery's exhibitions.*

*Organised by Johnny Herbert*