

## EXPERIENCE—MIKE CLARK, NEW YORK CITY REALIZING MY DREAMS BY EMBRACING MY BUDDHA NATURE

For as long as I can remember, music has been the center of my life. Both my mother and father had a deep love for music and placed my crib right next to the phonograph. When I was 4, my father brought his drum set down from the attic and sat me down. They were stunned when I began playing. I seemed to have an inherent talent for putting together rhythm combinations, and a highly developed sense of coordination with my hands and feet.

The very next night my father brought me along to a nightclub to sit in with some of his musician friends. I played a long drum solo and the crowd went wild. After that, I came in twice a week as a featured guest artist.

When I was 7, my parents went through an extremely nasty divorce. I lived with my mother and as time went by watched her go through a tremendous struggle as a single mother. I renounced my faith in God, started hanging out with a bad crowd, and my grades went from straight A's to failing. I stayed in my room and played my drums all day, every day.

My father began to drink heavily. The police were called on more than one occasion, because he would become very violent. Lying on his behalf and trips to jail to bail him out were common occurrences. By the time I was 13, I was drinking with him.

As soon as I graduated from high school, I went on the road with a band and started playing music professionally full-time. I was in several African-American bands that traveled throughout the south playing jazz and the blues. I witnessed brutal acts of violence and incidents of discrimination against my band mates and other people of color. I began to question my right to play the music that I loved so much. This imprinted on me a legacy of shame for my country and my race.

My best friend, Paul Jackson, with whom I was sharing an apartment, came home one day chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo. He told me he had just been hired to play bass with Herbie Hancock. He said if I chant, I could have anything I want. So I immediately started to chant for a gig with Herbie or Miles Davis. After all I had experienced, though, I knew this was impossible. Herbie hired me three weeks later to play with his band The Headhunters.

Within a year, the record *Head Hunters* went gold. Over the next four years, we traveled around the world, chanted thousands of hours of daimoku, introduced hundreds of people to Buddhism, had discussion meetings in our dressing and hotel rooms and received personal guidance from SGI President Ikeda. I prayed to be immortalized in jazz history, and I was credited with a drumming innovation on a song Herbie wrote that subsequent books claim changed jazz drumming history. The name of the song was "Actual Proof."

It seemed like all my dreams were coming true. But in the midst of all this, I continued becoming involved in unhealthy relationships. By the time I was 27, I was in my third marriage. My first wife, my high school sweetheart, had been killed in an automobile accident. I walked out on my second marriage, and my third wife was murdered in a drug-related gang execution. Every time I met a woman who might have been good for my life, I ran in the other direction or broke up with her.

Meanwhile, during my tenure with the Headhunters, I consistently encountered racist attitudes that left me feeling incapable, stupid and unworthy. I doubted my humanity, my Buddha nature, my very right to be on earth. I felt totally powerless at this injustice, based

on an external like the color of my skin. I could understand where others' anger came from, but it did not help my pain. I eventually left the band, and with my new girlfriend, moved to New York to be a serious jazz player.

I played \$25 gigs in after-hours clubs that were violent dens of iniquity. We lived in a small room with a view of a wall with no sunlight. No kitchen, just a refrigerator and a hot plate.

Record companies told me outright that because I was a white drummer, there was no market for me unless I played a fusion hybrid form of the music. But my dream was to play acoustic jazz music.

I fought desperately to overcome these circumstances. I kept chanting abundant daimoku, taking part in SGI-USA activities and getting regular guidance from my seniors in faith. But my karma would not budge. It seemed truly immutable.

Much of what I was experiencing was the continuous residue of racial profiling, so to speak. I came to play jazz music, but I found the jazz music scene in New York to be overwhelmingly segregated along black and white divisions. The situation appeared hopeless.

I was plagued with a deep anger and mounting frustration that my career was entirely out of my control. I began looking for trouble so I could release the rage inside.

I used to hang out in Central Park at night, armed and counting large sums of money, baiting someone to mug me. Another time, a gun was pointed at my head and the trigger pulled three times, but the gun did not go off. That I survived this period in my life and was not killed or imprisoned for killing someone else is testament to the power of my Buddhist practice.

Years passed. I got very sick with chronic fatigue syndrome and became completely incapacitated. I entered into yet another terribly unhappy and inappropriate marriage that ended in divorce.

I was later asked to participate in a Headhunters reunion recording and tour. Unfortunately, the same conflicts reappeared, and the tour was not a good experience. Afterward, I received guidance to try to understand all of my problems.

It was suggested that because I saw myself as a "white jazz musician" who could never penetrate the wall of racism in the jazz music industry, the universe was simply reflecting that perception. In other words, my feeling had become my prayer, and my prayer was reflected in my reality. I knew this was not just about music; it was about me.

I returned to the Gohonzon with an attitude that I was a Buddha and worthy of respect from myself and for myself. I let this sink into my prayer and allowed it to be my attitude in faith even while not in front of the Gohonzon. I made a decision to be happy and accepted that I had the right to be. Acknowledging my Buddha nature, I was learning about self-love.

I soon saw results with this change in attitude. A record company invited me to do my own solo project, entitled *Actual Proof*, the name of the song that brought me fame many years earlier, and I got a manager and an agent. I am on the road with my own band, playing to sold-out houses. I recently finished a recording with some of my fellow Headhunters alumni. We have all realized tremendous growth in our individual and joint struggles. Now the music we play reflects the love, mutual respect and joy we experience with one another. The wounds have healed.

President Ikeda once wrote: "It is important that we always maintain a seeking spirit toward Buddhism. We must always have the desire to improve ourselves, never coming to a

standstill and stagnating in our present situation” (Feb. 19, 1999, *World Tribune*, p. 1). After years of struggling with my own demons, I am now living a life for the sake of peace. If there is anger, it is at the tragic injustices I witness. If there is rage, it is channeled into fighting for kosen-rufu on a higher level. My life has finally begun to reflect the fortune of embracing the Mystic Law.

From this point on, I am determined to create value with my music, close the gaps filled with the delusions of differences and dedicate myself to fostering bonds of humanity and mutual respect between all people.

—As told to Linda Reynolds