Resting in the Wake: Listening to the Echoes of Ancestral Time

In the world of James Allister Sprang, to listen is not passive; it is a discipline, a ritual, a surrender to the reverberations of history. As the son of Caribbean immigrants, Sprang navigates the diasporic wake—the enduring residues of history—as both inheritance and instrument, a frequency that guides his practice toward radical stillness and sensory awakening. Listening becomes an act of remembrance and transformation, a way of inhabiting history through sound. His 50-minute orchestral jazz composition, Rest Within the Wake, does more than present music—it invites us into a space of somatic listening, attuning us to the textures of Black life. This is not music as background noise, nor rhythm to move past; it is an insistence to slow down, to feel the breath of our ancestors, to experience the spaces between notes.

This insistence on listening as a mode of presence finds resonance in Christina Sharpe's In the Wake, a text that illuminates the afterlives of slavery and the ways Black existence resists the ripples of historical violence. To live in the wake, Sharpe writes, is to remain attuned to both the past and the future, continuously shaped by what has come before. Sprang extends this idea into sound, transforming the wake into a sensory field where joy, pain, longing, and liberation coexist. Yet, Rest Within the Wake is not merely a reflection on the past; it is a call to the present—to the urgent need for ritual in a world of constant dislocation and speed. Sprang refuses to let the ear be colonized by noise that numbs rather than awakens. Instead, he offers a sanctuary for deep listening—a space where sound becomes a site of return, of reawakening the listening body.

His practice spans multiple modalities—text, visual works, advanced spatial audio—all converging in what might be called rhizomatic listening. This approach recalls Pauline Oliveros's concept of "Deep Listening," an intentional, meditative engagement with sound that extends beyond conventional hearing. Oliveros emphasizes listening in three ways: to outward sound (the environment), inward sound (bodily vibrations), and the temporal dimensions of sound (past, present, future). Similarly, Sprang composes in a field of echoes. He is not merely orchestrating sound but listening to the wake—the undulating pulse of diasporic lineage, the resonance of submerged bodies resurfacing.

This is most palpable in the origins of Rest Within the Wake. Composed "60 feet beneath the surface of the Caribbean Sea," the piece is literally born of descent—an immersion into the deep, into ancestral waters that hold both trauma and transcendence. Written while Sprang was earning his scuba certification off the coast

of Belize, Rest Within the Wake emerges from a place of bodily surrender, of attunement to the physical, metaphysical, and historical currents shaping Black experience. To descend is to trust, to let the body be held by the water, to listen in ways that air-bound listening cannot perceive. It is about the conditions under which we listen. How do we arrive at a moment of listening? How do our bodies, heavy with cultural history and shaped by forces both seen and unseen, inhabit this act of attunement?

Sprang invites us to reconsider presence: What does it mean to listen across time, across geographies, across the boundaries between the personal and the collective? His work offers a bed for listening—a space where we might settle into the resonance of our own histories, dreams, and inheritances. He reminds us that in the wake, there is still movement, still possibility. And within that movement, within that deep, resonant listening, lies the potential for healing, for joy, and for the sacred act of being fully, unshakably embodied.

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