

MUSIC, AND ART

MY PARTNERSHIP WITH MOLLY BARKER

Ben Goldberg

I met Molly Barker in 1986. My brother Adam, who like Molly was studying in the Art Department at the University of California in Santa Cruz, where I had just graduated, introduced us. Molly was then beginning her series of handmade books, like *Deep Belly Rumble*, *Buried Veins*, and *Talk To A Live Nude Girl*. At first glance those books just looked like picture books to me, but when I began reading them, I knew something was up.

The pictures were eloquently plain-spoken, balanced atop a few words, between which all the reality of the sad world clamored for attention. It gave me the same feeling as when I was a kid hearing *Resolution*, the second movement of *A Love Supreme*, for the first time, with that amazing asymmetrical phrase pointing towards a deeper level of resolution, and being pinned by a stupefying question: “does he even know what he’s doing?” Can a human being speak that level of truth on purpose? Where does intention meet surrender? (In other words, that itchy feeling of real art.)

How, I asked myself, did Molly know to open *Secret Language*, her deep meditation on loss and grief, with the offhand “Hey remember that squirrel –”? It was more perfect than perfect, and gave me a feeling of “I wish I had written that,” combined with “I could have written that” – if I was tuned into my reality as plainly as this person is to hers.

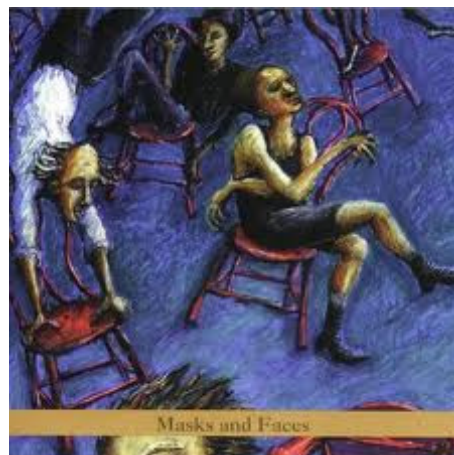


HEY REMEMBER THAT SQUIRREL -

Plainspoken, direct, open-hearted without being self-consciously naïve – Molly’s books contained qualities that I wanted to bring to my music.

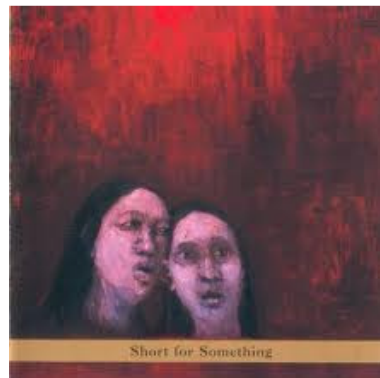
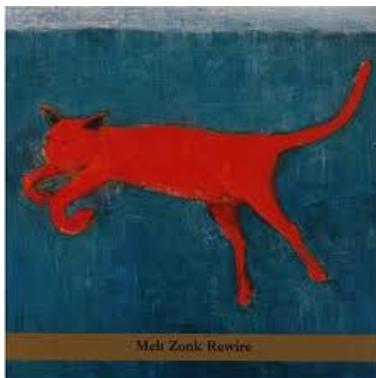
Molly was also working in oil paints and had some ideas about combining painting and music. Kenny Wollesen and I had New Klezmer Trio going by then, and we played duets at Molly's senior art show at UCSC in 1990. (Over the years, Molly has presented slide shows of her books with live music by Butch Morris, Gina Leishman, Jenny Scheinman, the Wollesonics, Carla Kihlstedt, etc.)

In 1990 New Klezmer Trio made our first record, and I asked Molly to do the cover art. I told her the title would be *Masks and Faces* and gave her a tape of the music. I guess in some way I was expecting an image focused on either masks or faces; Molly's painting of people flying off chairs was both surprise and revelation, my first lesson in the power of a strong artistic vision to complement and augment the musical vision. The painting was a counterweight to the music in an entirely different dimension; it spoke as strongly as the music, and combined to offer something larger than both.



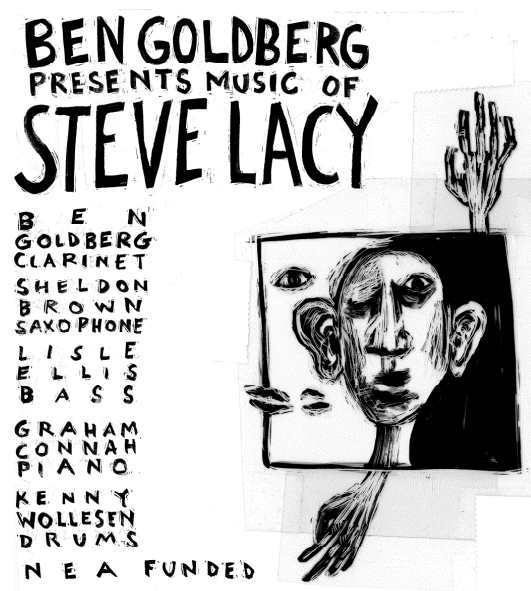
Masks and Faces was released in 1991. It was my artistic breakthrough and the first record to take a freely improvised approach to traditional klezmer, the record that "kicked open the door for radical experiments with Ashkenazi roots music" (San Francisco Chronicle) (For more on New Klezmer Trio, see my essay *New Klezmer Trio and The Origins of "Radical Jewish Culture"* on my website at <http://bengoldberg.net/media>) It was also the beginning of a long and rewarding artistic partnership with Molly Barker.

Molly's paintings appeared on all subsequent New Klezmer Trio records: leaping red cat on *Melt Zonk Rewire* (1995); whispering friends on *Short for Something* (2000); grazing zebras on 2009's follow-up to NKT, *Speech Communication*.

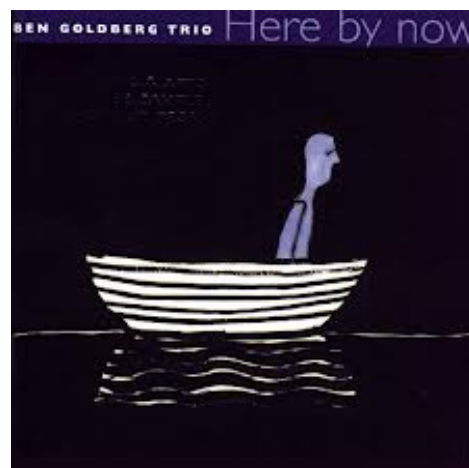
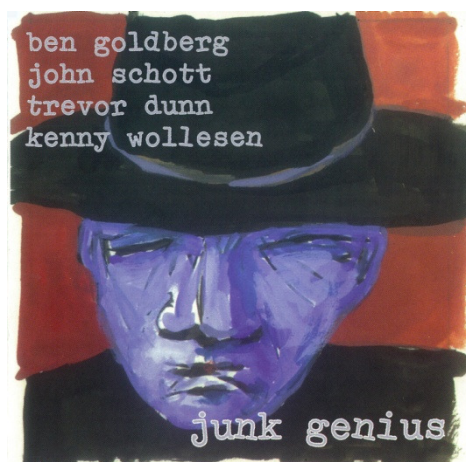


During this time, Molly and I didn't see much of each other. I got married and began raising a family in Oakland; Molly travelled for a while and eventually moved to Brooklyn. We collaborated from a distance: Molly painted *Masks and Faces* while on a cross-country trip with her best friend Lynda Nakashima (also a fine artist, and the graphic designer for BAG Production); *Melt Zonk Rewire* at the Vermont Studio Center; *Short For Something* in her new studio in Carroll Gardens.

Our work together continued to deepen. When I got an NEA grant in 1994 for a series of concerts in which I played music by important American composers (Thelonious Monk, Andrew Hill, Steve Lacy, John Carter/Bobby Bradford, Herbie Nichols) Molly created posters, including a memorable image conjured up by Steve Lacy's music that later appeared on the back of my memorial to Lacy, *the door, the hat, the chair, the fact*.



In 1995 John Schott and I pounced on music of the bebop era, and Molly painted the enigmatic purple-faced man (menacing? depressed?) for the cover of *Junk Genius* ("I like the music; I do not like the title" - Steve Lacy!). In 1998 when I tried to capture something of the austere melancholy of Molly's books with my trio recording *Here By Now*, she responded with a solitary figure in a boat, bravely leaning into the future.

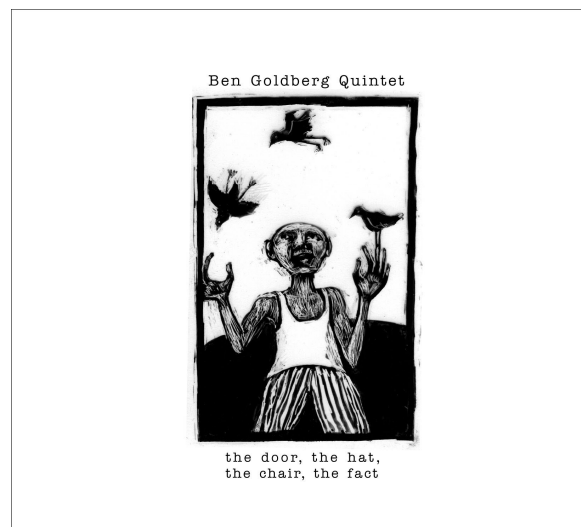


Meanwhile, my life was beginning to darken. Around 1999, my musical career pretty much came to a standstill – I wasn’t writing much, or playing, and I couldn’t figure out why. Toward the end of 2002 I began to see some troubling, deep-seated problems in my marriage – for me this was the culmination of forces set in motion in my childhood that had finally led to a dead end. Upon confronting this I knew I had to do something, and for the sake of my two children and myself I set up a new house and obtained a divorce.

Somehow I had not anticipated that taking steps to untangle my emotional predicament would create a powerful blossoming of music all around me. In 2003 I began composing again, my playing started bursting out in new directions, I began several new musical inquiries, and got involved in many projects of my own devising as well as at the invitation of composers and musicians who were beginning to notice my renewed enthusiasm. I recorded *the door, the hat, the chair, the fact*, and *Subatomic Particle Homesick Blues* (though the latter is just now being released), and I think you can hear in both of them my astonished joy at having gained new life.

In April, 2005, while on my first tour with Tin Hat, I visited Molly in New York and we spent an afternoon in deep conversation. Molly told me she was coming to California in May, and I suggested we present a slideshow of her book *Cowboy* with new music that I composed for a kind of double-trio of my group Plays Monk and Carla Kihlstedt’s Two Foot Yard.

During that visit a spark was kindled, and a little while later Molly and I opened a new dimension in our relationship, as life partners. (Bobby Bradford: “I know. One day you look over and say ‘oh I see, you’re a girl.’”) The cover of *the door, the hat, the chair, the fact* (2006) features Molly’s amazing scratchboard of a man juggling birds, from her series of circus images (many can be found on my website, bengoldberg.net). In the dedication for that record I quoted Bob Dylan from *Blood on the Tracks*: “Molly Barker. I’m learning it these days.” (actually Bob Dylan didn’t say the “Molly Barker” part.)



Shortly after we got together Molly gave me a picture she had made at the age of six as a way of memorializing her first recorder lesson. In the drawing Molly illustrates a proper embouchure and **B A G B A G**, the sequence of notes for playing Hot Cross Buns or Three Blind Mice. **BAG** – those are my initials.

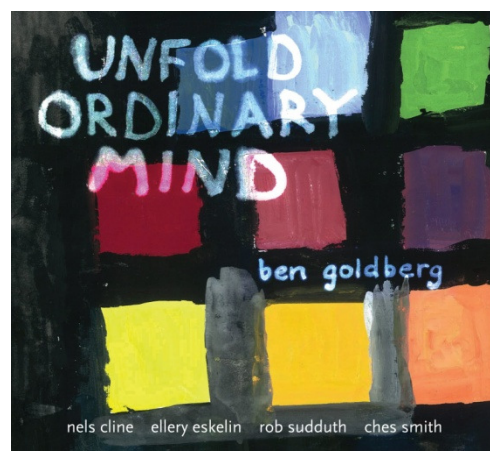
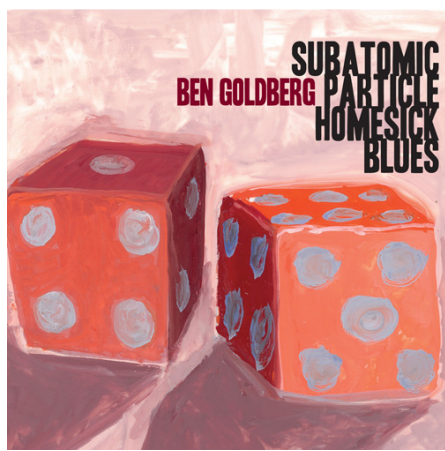


Now I knew we were onto something. So in 2009, when I made *Go Home*, and it became clear to me that I needed to create a label to release my own records, how could I resist calling the label BAG Production – named after my initials, Molly's painting, and of course the lyric from Come Together on *Abbey Road*. For *Go Home* Molly created a photographed sidewalk chalk-drawing.



Molly and I have now been together for seven years, and our personal connection and artistic partnership continues to grow and deepen. More and more I have the sense that the artistic statement is not so much a record with cover art, but rather Music, and Art – that is what we are giving people.

Our most recent collaborations are the two cd's coming out on BAG Production on February 19, 2013: *Subatomic Particle Homesick Blues*, and *Unfold Ordinary Mind*. Molly painted the cover art for both.



For *Unfold Ordinary Mind* Molly told me she had in mind to create an accordion-fold booklet to be included with the music. Looking all the way back to *Masks and Faces*, I knew that I had no idea what was coming (I still don't know whether the idea for the unfolding booklet was derived from the title of the record or not.) But just like the surprise, nearly twenty five years ago, of *Masks and Faces*, when I first saw Molly's unfolding painting of multi-colored horses in a moonlit landscape, I knew it as another beautiful and mysterious way that art, and love, reach out into the world.

