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How the Slave Trade and the Shoah Gave Rise to a Musical Marvel
An Interview with Jacques Schwarz-Bart[1]

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Abstract

Four centuries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade bequeathed enduring legacies of pain and suffering from Africa to the Antilles, not to mention the Americas. Four years of the Holocaust (*Shoah*, in Hebrew) compressed millennia of persecutions of the Jewish people, with repercussions from Europe to the Middle East. The shockwaves of those two heinous epochs have fused in a most unexpected and artistically creative way, giving rise to the incomparable jazz composer and saxophonist Jacques Schwarz-Bart. In this interview with William Miles, the son of the 1959 Prix Goncourt laureate André Schwarz-Bart and the award-winning Guadeloupean novelist and playwright Simone Schwarz-Bart reflects on his life, inspirations and career.

William Miles (WM) – Let's start at the beginning: where and when were you born?

Jacques Schwarz-Bart (JS-B): I was born on 22 December 1962, in Guadeloupe, in Les Abîmes, at the Cécile clinic. In fact, I was born inanimate. I was immediately placed in an intensive care unit but they didn't know if I was going to survive. My first contact with life was not with humans. In my birth bed, my first contact was with music – the music of Christmas in the West Indies. It was music that welcomed me, that served as my first parent and guide. From there, I took an indirect path. First of all, I had a good school start. That is to say that I was two years ahead of my classmates. I graduated from high school at the age of sixteen, got my law degree at twenty, and then earned degrees in sociology and political science.

WM – But elementary school? Your education as a child?

JSB – For a long time during my childhood years, we went back and forth between Lausanne in Switzerland and Goyave in Guadeloupe. It was from the age of twelve and a half that our life was more stable, more established in Guadeloupe. And this until the age of 18.

WM – Did your parents provide you with a religious education?

JSB – It was my mother who wanted us to have a religious education. Given my father's background and profile, it was out of the question for us to have a Christian education. So, my

1. A French version of this interview will appear in *Historial. Le journal qui raconte l'histoire de la Caraïbe*, n° 8, February-March 2022.

brother and I received a Jewish one. We often went to celebrate Jewish holidays with friends of my father from the Jewish community in Lausanne.

WM – It is curious, though, that your mother was responsible for your Jewish education and not your father. Your father was not only a Jew and a survivor of the Holocaust, but the author of The Last of the Just, *a book that evokes eight centuries of continuity of a Jewish family up to the Holocaust.*

JSB – That's just the point. After the war, my father – while remaining culturally Jewish – stopped practicing Judaism. He could not believe in a God who allowed the Holocaust to happen. He could not believe in the God of the Shoah.

WM – So it was in Switzerland that you soaked up Jewish culture and religion?

JSB – Yes, and Jewish music. In fact, West Indian music too, because in Switzerland we were very connected to both the West Indian and the Jewish community.

FIG. 1. André Schwarz-Bart with his young son Jacques. Private Collection.

WM – What about your bar mitzvah?

JSB – Unfortunately, I didn't have my bar mitzvah because we moved to Guadeloupe when I was twelve. So, I missed my bar mitzvah by a few months. At the time there was no rabbi in Guadeloupe.

WM – When and under what circumstances did you first read The Last of the Just*? How did it make you feel, and did you talk about it with your father?*

JSB – I read *The Last of the Just* when I was nine years old. It overwhelmed me. My father didn't communicate much with his children, and it gave me insight into the intensity, the weight, the history behind his silence. I understood that he was, and would forever be, in mourning. Later, when I was a young man, I served as his secretary and I took his dictation of several texts, some of which were a continuation of *The Last of the Just*. It was there that we began a real dialogue. We had a rich and full relationship between intellectuals, but we did not get along as father and son. It was only towards the end of his life that we bonded. I simply gave up on getting the paternal love that he just was incapable of providing. It was then that our relationship, artist to artist, took shape, and that we were able to part in peace.

WM – Let's talk about the beginning of your professional career.

JSB – After earning the baccalaureate at the Lycée Baimbridge in Guadeloupe, I studied law at the age of 16, at the University of the French Antilles in Fouilloles. At the age of eighteen, I left for Paris. After my law degree and master's degree at the University of Paris II, I studied sociology at the Sorbonne, and then political science at Sciences Po. After my degree, I did preparatory classes at the École Nationale d'Administration, where I had the best grades. This attracted the attention of the President of the General Council of Guadeloupe at the time, Dominique Larifla. He offered me a position as director of administration. As it was a position as an ENA alum in the French administrative hierarchy, this automatically put me several years ahead. This was a stroke of luck because I was able to change the course of my life three years later, while I still had enough energy and youth to take up an unlikely challenge. I was already wondering about the place of art and creation in my life and was eager to see if I could reconcile an administrative career with a life as an artist.
WM – Why these doubts? Apart from the Christmas music at your birth, you have not mentioned music yet.

JSB – Music has always been my main connection to the world. I started playing the Gwoka drum when I was four years old. I became an obsessive jazz fan from the age of six, and the walls of my room were covered with cassettes. I also played the guitar, thanks to which I was able to explore harmony and the rules of improvisation by ear. But it was in the summer of my 24th birthday that I met what would become my instrument. A friend let me try her tenor

sax. After half an hour, my fingers found their way to the notes, my lips found their way to the sound, and I began to play little *biguine* tunes. My friends didn't want to believe that I had just played my first notes, and invited me to play with their band the next day. That summer, I played several gigs a week. Before I took up my management position in Guadeloupe, I bought a saxophone. So I said to myself: I might as well accept this management position, save two years at ENA and see what happens afterwards.

WM – And then?

JSB – During my 'important' meetings, all spiffed up in suit and tie, I would have in mind the latest solo by Wayne Shorter or John Coltrane that I was trying to play. My passion for jazz and the saxophone gradually took over. The more I became disappointed in the human reality of the world of civil service, the more I embraced my vocation as a musician.

WM – And how did you go from being a civil servant on the General Council of Guadeloupe to being a professor at the Berklee College of Music in Boston?

JSB – In Guadeloupe, while practicing the saxophone as a self-taught musician, I started to compose. After two years, in order to have a little more time for myself, and to be able to decide on the next step in my life, I asked for a transfer to Paris. I had to decide what I wanted from the artistic path that would define my life.

WM – What position were you given for the transfer?

JSB – Assistant to a senator.

WM – And behind this senator's assistant was in fact an accomplished musician?

JSB – Let's say that my story was already well advanced. After two years on the saxophone, I started to play quite well. And in Paris I had the chance to meet two teachers from the Berklee music school, who were playing at the Caveau de la Huchette at the time. At my feet lay my saxophone case. I was clapping in the right places. So they understood that I knew music. Towards the end of their concert, one of the musicians invited me to join them for the last piece of the set. There was no one left in the audience. After it was over, they treated me like a professional: "When is your next tour? What records have you recorded?" I told them, "This is all strange to me – I've only just started playing. I don't know what it's like to be a 'professional'." They said, "Come to Berklee! That's where you belong, if you're really serious about music." That was the moment that really changed my path, precipitating my decision to become a musician for the rest of my life. I went to audition in Boston and was accepted with a half-year scholarship at the beginning in 1990 and, after a semester, a full scholarship.

WM – With which important musicians on the Boston scene did you start playing?

JSB – Danilo Perez, Bob Moses, Giovanni Hidalgo, Ron Savage, Anthony Wonsey, Darren Barrett, Aaron Goldberg, and many other musicians as well. That's how I was really part of the Boston scene at the time.

WM – But you did not stay in Boston.

JSB – By the end of seven years, I had already been around the Boston scene a bit. I was thinking that maybe elsewhere there were even more exciting things to do. So in 1997 I tried my luck in New York.

WM – What was your experience in the 'Big Apple'?

JSB – At the time there were a lot of jam sessions in New York. Today it's much more limited. Live music has shrunk a lot for all sorts of reasons. But in those years, we could play every night with very talented musicians. After a jam session in the Village, my friend Bruce Flowers, who was playing with Betty Carter at the time, invited me to go listen to Roy Hargrove and Chucho Valdés at the famous jazz club Bradley's. When Bruce saw me opening my saxophone case, he said, "You're crazy! Put your sax away right now! You're going to be blacklisted. You've only been here for two weeks – it's crazy, nobody's going to call you anymore." But I had an impulse that I couldn't repress, and I went on stage… I'm swarthy, mixed race, and at the time I had a great afro. Luckily for me, Chucho, who is from Cuba, thought I was a friend of Roy's – an African-American. And because I look like a mixed-race Cuban, Roy thought I was a friend of Chucho's! While Roy was playing his trumpet, I was analyzing the harmonic progression of the piece. At the end of his solo, he gave me a sign, and I played as if my life depended on it… At the end of the piece, which came in the last set of the evening, everyone took my telephone number. Two weeks later, I was on the road with Roy! From then on, I was able to build a career as a sideman, a 'luxury saxophonist', in many high-profile bands that helped create contemporary musical aesthetics, such as RH Factor, Michael d'Angelo, Meshell Ndegeocello, Erykah Badu and many others.

WM – What about your own productions?

JSB – After a number of tours with these giants, I had the increasingly powerful need to create my own music. This is something I had started to do a long time ago, since my first compositions date back to 1990 when I joined Berklee. Over time, my concept of Gwoka Jazz had evolved to the point where I was confident in my ability to turn it into a meaningful concept that would express everything I was, everything I had gained as a musician on the New York scene, and also everything I represented artistically as a West Indian. So I set out to deepen this connection between jazz and Afro-Caribbean music, especially during my

trend-setting period. A number of projects came out of this, such as *Soné Ka La*, *Abyss*, and *Jazz Racine Haïti*, which was about voodoo and jazz. I created the group Creole Spirits with pianist Omar Sosa, around sacred Haitian and Cuban music and jazz. I also recorded the Voodoo Jazz trio – which has not yet been released – with a Haitian priestess as the singer and a Haitian priest as the percussionist. Recently, I released *Soné Ka La 2 / Odyssey*, my tenth CD. I can hardly gauge how far I've come, but it's important to look back every now and then.[2]

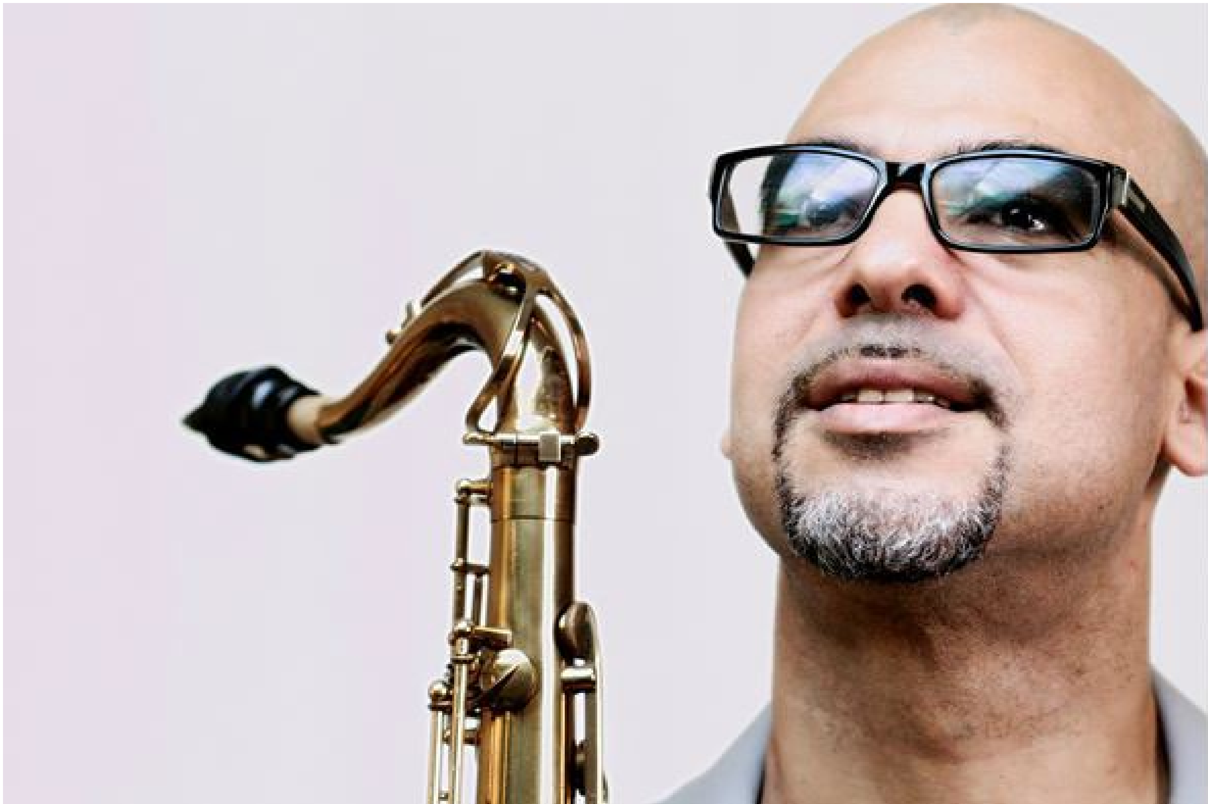

FIG. 2: Jacques Schwarz-Bart. Photo Christian Ducasse.

WM – Let's talk about your previous project, the fusion with Jewish music.

JSB – My father died in 2006. I wanted to pay tribute to him through a record called *Hazzan*. In Hebrew, *hazzan* is the cantor, the one who sings the prayers in the synagogue, when we celebrate different holidays, or sometimes when we get together for a wedding, or pay tribute to someone who has passed away. There are always traditional liturgical songs that are actually sung prayers and it is the role of the *hazzan*, the cantor, to transform these prayers into songs. Many of these songs are actually very old; *Ya'ase Shalom* (May He Make Peace) is at least 3000 years old, and a more recent song like *Ma'oz Tsur* was created by the German rabbis 800 years ago during the Crusades.

2. More information on about Jacques Schwarz-Bart's musical projects can be found at brotherjacques.com.

WM – Better known by the general public, there is also klezmer, right?

JSB – Klezmer music is the secular music that was born in the ghettos of Eastern Europe and dates back to the last two centuries. Jewish liturgical music is much older than that. For me, it is mystical…

WM – That's what inspired Hazzan? The tribute to your father?

JSB – Yes. As an adult, my father, while remaining Jewish, became a man of the world. But he was brought up in the Jewish religion. When I wanted to pay tribute to him, I asked myself, "As a child, what was Jewish music to him?" I quickly concluded that Jewish music was all the songs he heard as a child in the synagogue, sung by his father on various religious holidays. These are the songs that I decided to include in *Hazzan*, which came out two years ago.
WM – Where and when did you first hear these prayers and songs?

JSB – Actually, it was in Switzerland, in my youth.

WM – It's a well-known phenomenon that many survivors of the Shoah did not want to speak to their children about it. Did your father talk to you about it or was it only through his writings that he communicated?

JSB – It was mainly through his writings, because my father didn't communicate much with his children. I think that the idea of having children after having survived the Shoah was in conflict with the fact of having lost all his family, all his people, all his culture. For him, the Jewish culture that disappeared during the Holocaust is not the same as the Jewish culture that survived the Holocaust. I think of the way he describes the *shtetl*, the Jewish ghetto – he describes a culture where the values of support, brotherhood, and also openness of soul did not necessarily survive the Shoah. He often found it difficult to recognize himself in post-war Jewish culture as found either in France, Israel or the United States. For my father, post-war Jewishness is often transmitted more by signposts of recognition, by rituals and community codes, than by an adherence to the values of *shtetl* culture as he knew it.

So he was in a state of permanent mourning, especially when some of his friends, who like him had survived the Holocaust, committed suicide. He felt more and more alone. He was quite fascinated by the book *The Last of the Mohicans*. It is a little bit from there that the idea of *The Last of the Just* came about. To feel like the last survivor in a lineage is a heavy thing, an extremely lonely experience. In this process of homage that he wanted to pay to those who had disappeared, there was a constant connection with death. This made it difficult for him to play the role of a father with young children who represented life.

WM – But you as a child, you didn't understand that!

JSB – As a child I resented him for not being present in my life as a father, or not as present as I needed him to be. Often he was physically present but actually absent, disconnected from us. It was only when I became an artist myself that we were able to communicate. It was not a father-to-son dialogue, but an artist-to-artist dialogue. I was then able to understand what had happened and the reason for his absence. I think he didn't want to share with us his state of permanent mourning, which was a kind of mental pathology. He was aware of the toxic effects, and certainly of the deleterious effects it could have on our personal image and on our ability to develop harmoniously. And as he saw my mother so devoted to giving us values in life, I think he didn't want to interfere with this message.

WM – You mentioned Israel as one of the communities where he no longer found himself as a Jew. Did he talk to you about it? Did he follow its politics?

JSB – Yes, he was very devoted to the idea of a Jewish nation and therefore very attached to the existence of Israel. He traveled there quite regularly. He had several friends there. Myself and my brother, with our mother, we went there with him. During the Six Day War in 1967, he went there as a volunteer. But he came back very, very worried. Israel had annexed the occupied territories and he thought it was a mistake. For him, it could jeopardize not only Israel's long-term security but also the philosophical integrity of this nation. He thought that it would put Israel in an impossible position to defend in the long term. I think that what we have seen over the last thirty, forty years has given a prophetic character to his first impressions from that experience. He came back from his voluntary service sick physically sick, from what he had just seen as a result of the annexation of the West Bank and Gaza. He was following all this closely, and found it difficult to identify with the Israeli culture of the time.

WM – On the subject of identity, in the 1980s, and especially in relation to the politics we've just mentioned, there were incidents and writings that targeted the Jewish community in Martinique. There were, for instance, the Dieudonné and Raphael Confiant cases. Did you follow them?

JSB – I didn't follow them in detail, but I know that it made my father sick to see how anti-Semitism has become commonplace in Martinique and Guadeloupe (although more so in Martinique than in Guadeloupe). Especially because of Confiant and the people who followed him, and of course Dieudonné, who is quite popular among quite a few West Indians. It was shocking for him. My father always felt at ease with the West Indians, but he had a relationship of mistrust with a certain number of intellectuals, while at the same time feeling completely West Indian. It was difficult, not knowing if he was dealing with people who, behind his back, spoke of him as "the Jew", while smiling at him in person. I remember the discussions that followed the publiccation of *La Mulâtresse Solitude*. Some questioned his legitimacy in writing about the Black question, since he was a Jew. Then there was what

happened with Dieudonné and Confiant. All these rebuffs came in the wake of another polemic which had put him at odds with part of his own community in France… After the publication of *The Last of the Just*, he was accused by many 'pundits', including in the Jewish community, of plagiarism. Since he had no formal education, no one wanted to believe that he, a former laborer, was capable of creating such a work.

WM – How did he cope with that?

JSB – That's what brought us to Guadeloupe, then to Switzerland, and then in-between. So he already had one foot out of the world at the time. With the cold shower he received from certain West Indian intellectuals following the publication of *La Mulâtresse Solitude*, he put both feet outside the world! All this was expressed through silence. He stopped publishing. I think that after having been burned from both sides, he continued to write, but only for himself. Maybe he hoped that his manuscripts would be published after his death, so that he wouldn't have to discuss them while he was alive. Neither in his West Indian community nor in the Jewish community…

This silence was a way to remain faithful to his original values, to maintain both his personal dignity and his intellectual integrity. A way to avoid howling with the wolves and submitting to the fads of a particular moment in time. I also believe that there is something constant in the very theme of *The Last of the Just*. This vision of the vastness of time. I won't say timelessness, since it doesn't really exist – we exist in space-time – but this awareness of a long view of time. My father never wanted to be a slave to time. I think that's something I completely inherited from him. I don't try to create my music for my contemporaries. Of course, I always hope that people will appreciate my music, but I create for a timeless vision of artistic greatness.

WM – Regarding this 'vastness of time'… After thirty years in the United States, you have an intimate experience in this country. As a French-Caribbean Jew living in America – and especially in this historical period of Black Lives Matter – what are your observations?

JSB – What strikes me is the persistence of many of the original sins of the American nation. Discrimination, racialization, the importance of Christianity and religious beliefs in public life. Federalism and this mistrust of the central government. This spirit of rejection of government policies and social actions that could greatly improve the living conditions of so many people (especially among people who complain about government). There persists what I would call obscurantism, both in terms of race and social values. It creates a gulf between those progresssives who are willing to adopt cosmopolitan values and others who are still buried in 18th century values, with the Puritans and slaveholders.

What is so terrible is that, despite the fact that the majority has clearly indicated its progressive leanings, the system of electors means that the minority can dictate its law to the majority, or appoint judges to the Supreme Court who impose dogmas rejected by the

vast majority of the population. It is quite terrible that what claims to be the most democratic nation in the world should be enslaved by its obscurantist minority at a time when we are facing challenges of a scientific nature. Challenges that require a factual apprehension of things, not pulled out of the Bible. We need to face the pandemic. We need to face global warming. We need to ally ourselves with the rest of the world powers in order to create a common front on these two issues, matters of life and death. But there is still a mythology from the depths of the cave that haunts us and is an active force in the political decision-making process.

Will these obscurantist forces manage in the long term to stymie the advance of progressive values in this country? It's a legitimate question. At the same time, if demographics transform Southern states such as Georgia into democratic bastions, the electoral system will render conservative Republicanism completely obsolete. I believe we are at a crossroads. Trump and Trumpism were final salvos of this movement from an olden time. I hope that with this Biden administration, we have entered the modern era.

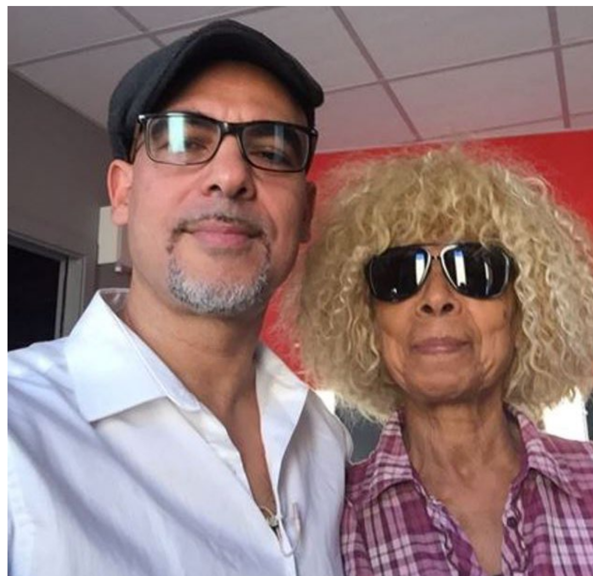

FIG. 3: Jacques Schwarz-Bart with his mother Simone.
Private Collection.

WM – How do you identify yourself at this stage of life and history?

JSB – On the one hand, I have a great deal of gratitude for my cultures of origin. The Afro-Caribbean culture. The Jewish culture. On the other hand, I have acquired a healthy distance, I would say, from the very notion of identity. What matters to me above all as an artist, but also as a human being, is forging my own values. To be a free man with a critical spirit. Anyone who identifies completely with one identity, or with several particular identities, necessarily has difficulty distancing himself from what he has learned and inherited. For me,

the most important thing at this stage of my life is to *un*learn. To rebuild. To be able to look at another person not because he or she belongs to the same community as I do, but with respect to their human values of integrity, of intelligence, of wisdom. Their ability to criticize and self-criticize. Their sense of humor eventually. These are things that I privilege above signs of communal belonging.

WM – Let's conclude with your son, Ezra. He was born in the United States and goes to an American school. What do you hope for in terms of his identity?

JSB – I just wish him to be a free man. If he decides that his true identity is to be Colombian, then I wish him well in becoming Colombian. If he wishes to go back to the West Indies and become Guadeloupean, I'll be very happy. If he identifies more with French culture, that's fine too. But if I had to express a personal wish, it would be that he have the capacity to transcend this question of identity. On the one hand, to appreciate all that he has received but then go beyond it in order to be part of a new humanity. A humanity oriented towards knowledge and solidarity, one emphasizing more what brings us closer together rather than what separates us.

WM – What about the legacy of your father André Schwarz-Bart for your son Ezra?

JSB – My father's legacy is just that – enlightened universalism.