

THE *SUNDAY TIMES* MUSIC BOOK OF THE YEAR

'INTOXICATING'  
*SUNDAY TIMES*

'FABULOUS'  
*VOGUE*



'ENTHRALLING'  
BERNARDINE  
EVARISTO

'NENEH IS  
A LEGEND'  
ZADIE  
SMITH

# NENEH CHERRY

A THOUSAND THREADS

## Praise for *A Thousand Threads*

Shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Non-Fiction 2025

*A Sunday Times, Guardian, New Statesman,  
Evening Standard, Uncut and Rough Trade  
Book of the Year 2024*

'Seductive . . . Intoxicating . . . Bears witness to  
life's messy complexities, going beyond platitudes  
to ask questions about the choices and mistakes  
a person makes across the years, as well as  
the endless search for joy and beauty'  
*Sunday Times*

'A living testament to artistic invention . . . A  
vibrant read, peppered with both delight  
and moments of darkness'  
*Observer*

'Rich in atmosphere and detail . . . A vivid tale  
of love, family, chaos and a creative spirit  
passed through the generations'  
*Guardian*

'Fabulous'  
*Vogue*

'Very moving . . . Both a love letter to her mother,  
Moki, and testament to grabbing life with both  
hands and throwing yourself at it'

*Evening Standard*  
**Copyrighted Material**

‘A vivid, pulsating account . . . Cherry writes with a sensual clarity where we taste the exotic flavours and soak up the surroundings, her wisdom shining through when tragedy strikes, as it often does’

*Record Collector*

‘[A] vibrant autobiography’

*Uncut*

‘Inspiring. It made me want to dance harder, turn the volume up, cook a meal for all my friends and hold my family close. It’s a book about culture, creativity, friendships, mothering and the pursuit of an artful life’

Annie Macmanus

‘Neneh Cherry works just like a traditional storyteller, like a griot, preserving a little bit of cultural history for us all. *A Thousand Threads* is the intimate story of a truly epic life’

Zadie Smith

‘Enthralling . . . An extraordinary mix of abundant creativity and never-ending travel, always with the changing seasons of her music-making, soulful friendships and devotion to family at the heart of it’

Bernardine Evaristo, *New Statesman*

‘A lyrical journey through pain and joy.  
The answer is always music. And love’

Rose Boyt

## NENEH CHERRY

Neneh Cherry is a Swedish singer-songwriter, rapper and producer who first achieved global success in 1988 with 'Buffalo Stance', her sound a groundbreaking mix of music genres. She has released six critically acclaimed studio albums and won two Brit Awards, an MTV Europe Music Award and was nominated for the Grammy Award for Best New Artist. She has collaborated with artists including Gorillaz, Gang Starr, Michael Stipe, Cher and Four Tet. *The Versions*, an album consisting of reworked songs from her back catalogue by artists such as Sia and Robyn, was released in 2022. This is her first book.

**Copyrighted Material**

**Copyrighted Material**

NENEH CHERRY

# A Thousand Threads

Copyrighted Material  
VINTAGE

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Vintage is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies

Vintage, Penguin Random House UK,  
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

[penguin.co.uk/vintage](http://penguin.co.uk/vintage)  
[global.penguinrandomhouse.com](http://global.penguinrandomhouse.com)



Penguin  
Random House  
UK

First published in Vintage in 2025  
First published in hardback by Fern Press in 2024

Copyright © Neneh Cherry 2024

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for purchasing an authorised edition of this book and for respecting intellectual property laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,  
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781529924954

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future  
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made  
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



Copyrighted Material

This long song is for my family, from our inner sanctum to the edges of its extended threads, and to the memory of my brother David Cherry, who went in search of his next riff (1958–2022).

**Copyrighted Material**

**Copyrighted Material**

I want to live the rest of my life, however long or short, with as much sweetness as I can decently manage, loving all the people

I love, and doing as much as I can of the work I still have to do. I am going to write fire until it comes out of my ears, my eyes, my noseholes – everywhere. Until it's every breath I breathe. I'm going to go out like a fucking meteor!

Audre Lorde

**Copyrighted Material**

**Copyrighted Material**

# CONTENTS

Prologue	1
----------	---

## **PART ONE**

My Mother and Her People	5
My Two Fathers	12
An Unconventional Childhood	24
Movement Incorporated	28
To Turkey and Paris in the 'Bus'	39
Hazy Days in the USA	43
The Schoolhouse	47
Organic Music	57
Haven, Heaven, Heroin	65
Heading West	77
First Love	84

**Copyrighted Material**

## CONTENTS

### **PART TWO**

London	93
The Loft	100
New York Punk	105
Africa	111
Simply What's Happening	120
Hip Hop Before the Hip	123
Teenagers Off On a Tangent	126
Part-time Slit	134
After the Ritzy	136
Rip Rig + Panic	140
Eversleigh Road	147
Bruce and a Baby	151
Andrea	159
DJ Battles at the Hot Sty	165
Flight to Tokyo	172

**Copyrighted Material**

## CONTENTS

### **PART THREE**

We Write the Songs	179
Looking Good Diving with the Wild Bunch	184
The Baton Is Passed	188
Judy Blame	193
Buffalo Stance	197
Raw Like Sushi	207
Nights I'll Never Forget	225
A Second Wedding	230
Homebrew	237
Seven Seconds and a Hold-up in Brooklyn	243
It Is Now That Matters	251
Home Life	264
Stockholm, My Love	273
This Is Where My Life Will Never Be the Same	277
Breakdown and Rebuilding	283
Back to Life Through Music	289
Going Home	294
Coming Full Circle	299
Epilogue: Navigation Notes	309
Acknowledgements	317
Credits	319

**Copyrighted Material**

**Copyrighted Material**

# PROLOGUE

I am standing in my kitchen. John Coltrane's 'A Love Supreme' is playing. I've been listening to these songs since before I can remember. The melodies are in my blood. The fight and the freedom of the music is in me. I let it soothe me, speak to me in a language I understand. A rebellion is happening in the sound. I feel it. I hear it. *Change had to come. Have faith, soldiers.*

I had three parents – I guess that's what we call a gift. Moki, Don, Ahmadu: givers of life. My parents were rebels, all three bound in a history so long and painful it hurts. I've always been a rebel. My children and grandchildren have it, too. Those same creative channels I was brought up in have carried me all the way here. What they made is how we lived, how *I've* lived as I forged my own life. The music tells me that here is now.

Africa opens up under a sky shadowed by Swedish pine trees dressed in silks. Now, west London thrums on.

Last night I soaked a bowl of pinto beans. Today I wash them until the water runs clear, just as my mother taught me. Boil them hard for ten minutes, remove the froth. A sweet smell circulates through the house and, for a second, I'm climbing the stairs of a Lower East Side tenement building, a memory of boiling beans and hair grease like another song in another life.

I cut a head of garlic, drop the two halves into the pot, a whole Scotch bonnet pepper, a chopped onion and a handful of thyme on its stem. Memory, familiarity, doing things that we know; this rhythm of life I return to again and again. I understand how to do this, and it brings security in a world spinning out of my control. I need to create these small gifts, offerings to life, for my sanity and

for the people I love. I tip a can of coconut milk into the pot, stir and trust those pintos to do what they do. The beans want to be left alone, just a stir every now and then, with a wooden spoon that belonged to my grandmother, one of its corners worn away from a lifetime in the turn of her hand.

I live for love and music. These elements make life bigger, deeper, richer – but I know I cannot do it all on my own. I have always been a collaborator. To trust and to love is a strong survival instinct. I will not betray the trust of those I love, who helped me to become who I am today. But, with grace and respect, I also want to express some of the things that have happened. They are part of the journey.

# **PART ONE**

**Copyrighted Material**

**Copyrighted Material**

## MY MOTHER AND HER PEOPLE

One day, many moons ago in Norrland, or ‘northland’ – a large province in the very far north of Sweden – my great-grandmother Ida found a needle in a haystack. The family lived in a tiny hamlet called Bjurå in Norrbotten, the northernmost county of this northern province, just below the Arctic Circle. To the east lies the border with Finland; to the west is Swedish Lapland. Norrland stays black and white in the persistent winter darkness; in the summer months, it’s flooded by endless sunshine. This pitiless environment gives its people a resilience and freedom of spirit. Even today, this remote northland feels quite separate from the rest of the country. There is a natural magic in the landscape. So few people live there, but it is home to many millions of trees. It is a place of legends. The forest whispers, deep and dark and knowing. Its hushed tones weave enchantment into the stories of my ancestors.

Ida’s house is quiet with the hush of her five small sleeping children, my grandmother Marianne among them. It is time to go check on her cows and settle them in safely for the night. Ida walks across the yard to the summer barn. Inside are the six cows that are her livelihood. More than that, they are like beloved members of the family. The winter barn has a fireplace burning bright to keep them warm through the freezing nights. Now, though, in the summer barn, Ida needs to draw the dark heavy curtains to shield her resting herd not only from mosquitoes but also the relentless midnight sun.

She steps inside and softly pulls closed the curtains, casting a blue shade across the backs of the sleepy beasts. The swallows, nesting in the dark of the eaves, are also at rest. Every year, they leave

behind the sweltering West African heat, an intuition telling them that it is time to fly north. Straight up from Sierra Leone to Norrland, the swallow flies over 8,000 kilometres. The birds navigate the skies, sometimes covering more than 300 kilometres a day, never once touching the ground until, at last, they arrive with the light and promise of summer to nest in Ida's barn. I imagine them swooping low over her head in celebration and reunion, worms dangling from beaks.

Ida spreads some fresh hay on the barn floor, then slips out through the curtains and closes the door behind her. When she looks down at her pinafore, she sees that the needle she always keeps pinned there is gone.

Dread rushes through her. In the farmyard, flooded in the bright night sun, you could hear a pin drop, yet she had not heard her needle fall. Did she lose it when she bent over to pick up hay? She is in despair at the thought of what might happen to any one of her cows who finds it with their soft mouth. Hurriedly she retraces her steps, and long into the night that is an endless day she searches the barn. How many hours did she spend looking? Nobody knows. But in the end, and as the story goes, Ida found her needle in the haystack.

I like to imagine Ida with the warm breath of the resting cows on her face, carefully picking through the hay with meticulous determination, each strand like the filament of a life, or a death, as all around the forest whispers loudly.

•

My mother, Monika Marianne Karlsson, known as Moki, was born on 8 February 1943 in Koler, Norrbotten. Her father, Werner, my *morfar*, was one of nine children. He grew up on a farm at the opposite end of the country, in Finja, in the Gräsabygget, literally the 'grasslands', near Hässleholm, Skåne, the southernmost county in Sweden.

**Copyrighted Material**

## MY MOTHER AND HER PEOPLE

At sixteen, Morfar left home. After a spell as a farm labourer and then in the merchant navy, he took a qualification to work as a stationmaster on the railways. At twenty-five he was posted to Norrland, where he met and fell in love with my *mormor*, Marianne, Ida's daughter. A year later, when she was just nineteen, they married.

My grandparents moved often as my grandfather took up posts in different parts of the country. In Koler, the first place that Moki lived in was a beautiful black stationhouse with a red ochre trim. The plates rattled in their old oak dresser when the long cargo trains rumbled by. At night in bed, she would pretend she was in a sleeper car.



Copyrighted Material

My mother, Moki,  
and me, *circa* 1966.

When she was barely two, her mother gave Moki her first pair of scissors, made of steel, small and very sharp. Marianne showed her how to hold them to a sheet of paper so that she wouldn't cut her fingers. By the heat of the wood-burning stove, the smell of the birch-bark kindling on fire, porridge and cinnamon in the air, Moki would sit shredding paper in the kitchen. It was like magic, seeing the paper separate, slicing a beautiful line: instant love. Next, she was handed a mail-order catalogue from which she cut out tiny household objects such as pots and pans, beds and chairs. She began to craft miniature domestic worlds.

In another time, in another kitchen with Mormor Marianne, I did the same thing. By then my grandparents were living in Rinkaby, Skåne, not far from Morfar Werner's family, in what had also been a stationhouse. The former waiting room was now a post office, run by my grandmother. I spent a lot of time in this red-brick house with the train tracks at the back. Mormor would settle me down with an old mail-order catalogue and some scissors and then go to work behind the post office counter on the other side of the wall. I was happy, lost in my own world, cutting out whole households, putting tiny paper kettles and toys, cups and tables, inside an empty box to make a home.

When Moki was four, she taught herself to read by cutting out letters and words from newspapers and gluing them next to the household objects from the catalogues. She never lost her fascination with and passion for words. Later in life she would sometimes spend all day in bed reading, eating peanut butter from a jar, with me and my little brother, Eagle-Eye, content beside her.

It was Moki's Aunt Gertrud who introduced her to the world of fabrics, threads and sewing machines. Gertrud worked as a dress-maker and would order the Paris fashion magazines to copy the latest modes, and she also created her own designs. In her parlour, Moki could delve into baskets full of fabric scraps from which she would make dolls and wonderful creatures.

Just before Moki turned five, my grandfather's work brought

## MY MOTHER AND HER PEOPLE



Me and my brother Eagle-Eye playing at our grandparents' former station-house in Rinkaby. Moki and Mormor sit behind us, with Tipp the poodle.

the family south to Södervidinge, on the west coast of Skåne. Again, they lived upstairs in a stationhouse. It was the happiest era of Moki's childhood. Her mother would tell her not to leave their yard, but as soon as she could Moki would escape and go exploring in the village, knocking on people's doors and asking to visit. She discovered three old sisters in an old house, singing quietly and making exquisite gloves from the softest kidskin for the aristocracy; the blacksmith hammering horseshoes and the blacksmith's wife who gave her coffee, forbidden at home and which she loved; a man who made sundials and astronomical clocks; a chicken farm where two women from Japan sorted the newly hatched chicks. She went round the houses asking for old magazines, which she brought home and cut up with her scissors. Then she returned and sold her collages to the villagers. One time, someone came to the house and told my grandfather that they had bought 'such a lovely collage' from Moki. He went berserk. The idea that people might think



A young Moki with her cousin in Norrland.

they needed the money made him angrier than Moki had ever seen him. Much later she said it was probably the anxiety from this experience that made it hard for her to engage with selling her work.

In 1950, when she was seven, Disney's *Cinderella* was released. Watching the famous scene where, as Cinderella sleeps, the birds and the mice get busy with scissors, tape measure and needle and thread to fix up her mother's old dress, transforming it with pink ribbons and bows so that she might, after all, go to the ball, Moki was transfixed. She knew this was what she wanted to do. A dream began to form.

After the magical discovery of reading, Moki found school a disappointment. She was more interested in snails and butterflies than in humans. She spent most of her days after class on her own, outdoors in the forest. Dressed in dungarees, she would go out riding on her bike, a shoebox attached to the pannier rack to collect insects. For a while she had a pet hedgehog called Totte.

In 1962, when she was nineteen, Moki moved to Stockholm to attend classes in cutting, patternmaking and drapery. The haute couturier Rune Ullhammar had offered her a design apprenticeship, but when she got into Beckmans Designhögskola, an alternative art and design college in Stockholm, she moved on.

Young, talented and passionate, Moki was having the time of her life. In the early sixties, Stockholm was a hub of cultural innovation. She and her artist friends made things happen. She went to see all the musical greats, the young kings, masters of jazz, mostly at the city's Golden Circle, a club that hosted experimental players including Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor and, later, Don Cherry's group. There she hung out with people like Albert Ayler, a young horn player who, Don said, sometimes played so deep that he spat blood. Moki and Albert became friends, and he often came to her studio to practise while she worked. People gravitated to Moki's apartment for vibes and for music. Mostly, though, they came for her.

I love hearing her friends talk about her: fun, creative, central. She had a great record collection, and she always looked fabulous. She cut her hair very short. She did it one night herself. She made a short leather skirt the colour of red wine, with a matching short top that buttoned at the back. Moki was cool, so people wanted to be around her. She had her own little circle.

Then, she met my father, Ahmadu Jah.

## MY TWO FATHERS

Moki and Ahmadu found each other at a student party, a week after his arrival in Stockholm, in autumn 1962. She had just started at Beckmans College. He was in his early twenties, on a scholarship to complete his engineering studies at KTH Royal Institute of Technology. As she told it, he was magnificent, beautiful, elegant in a Savile Row suit that she would later discover had been bought for him by a wealthy London lady friend. The plan was that when he finished his postgraduate degree, he would return to an independent Sierra Leone and use his knowledge to make things better back home. They say you should never tell God your plans. Before long, Moki and Ahmadu were living together in an apartment in the centre of the city, on Birger Jarlsgatan.

Ahmadu and six other young men had boarded a liner in Freetown two years previously. They were the first students from Sierra Leone to go to university overseas on scholarships; my father was probably the only Muslim. They made the front page of the Freetown newspaper – young, beautiful pioneers in fine new suits and hats, photographed on the gangway of the ship. They had no idea how the cold would bite, how hard and unforgiving the Western world could be.

Our ancestors were nomads of the Fulani tribe. My great-great-grandfather Cherno Abass had walked south through the bush with his two wives and ten cows from Senegal to Sierra Leone. They paused at Labe in the north of Guinea, until finally they reached a village settlement called Gbinti. Here they stopped. They sold some of the cows and bought a hut out of mud and grass. Some of it

## MY TWO FATHERS



The only photo I have of my mother and father together.

still stands. And now, all these years later, we are scattered across the world, but Gbinti is still our Jah family headquarters.

Ahmadu's mother – and my namesake, Haja Neneh – married her first husband, my grandfather Cherno Abass Sere Jah, in her teens. She was one of two wives. She bore him four children, all sons, my father Ahmadu among them. When Ahmadu was two years old, his father died young and suddenly from fever. The tradition was that if the brother-in-law next in line wanted to inherit the wives of his dead older brother, he could. Haja Neneh was young, beautiful and had borne four strong sons. Her husband's brother wanted her. All at once my father had a whole new set of siblings. One of them, his uncle Lamin Sadiki, was like a father to him.

When Ahmadu was six, Haja Neneh sent him to live with his uncle outside a big town called Port Loko, so that he could attend a local school. Every morning the call to prayer would pull him out of his dreams – that, and the squawking chickens running loose in

every yard. His little bare feet on the dirt track, walking to class in the growing light, the bunion on his right foot just starting to push through the bone on the side near his big toe. (I have one, too, in the very same place.) My father did well at junior school and won a boarding scholarship to the Prince of Wales School in Freetown. Sierra Leone in the late forties was still a British colony, and this prestigious school catered primarily for the children of the white expat British governing class, those of the Sierra Leonean Krios (Creoles), often the country's upper-middle class, and the kids of the wealthy Lebanese. Ahmadu always told me that he was the first Muslim student to attend his school, and the other kids bullied him relentlessly. But Ahmadu was smart. He graduated with outstanding grades, after which Haja Neneh put him forward for the scholarship to study in the West.

Those scholarship boys left home as the chosen ones, but they arrived on the East Coast of America as second-class citizens. The labels 'Black' and 'African' stripped them of all their grace and beauty and made them barely human. The United States of America? Rosa Parks had not yet boarded that bus. It was brutal. While some of his fellow Sierra Leoneans stayed, Ahmadu did not want to settle there. Instead, he sailed to London to study civil engineering. He rented a room in a boarding house run by a respectable English widow. 'My African boy has very good manners,' she would say if anyone asked. She was nice enough, he said. At some point on this journey, Ahmadu discovered jazz. He spent most of his spare time in record stores or hanging out at the various clubs in the West End. Dancing and listening, he found expression through the music.

When Ahmadu arrived in Stockholm, he brought with him all this extraordinary African music, new sounds and levels that Moki had not heard before. He also showed her how to make the food of his childhood: peanut stew, pepper soup and fufu (stews were Ahmadu's speciality). I picture them at home, Ahmadu's furniture draped in fabrics, the tables covered with wooden bowls and calabash instruments from Africa, the steam and the warmth of the

kitchen, something fragrantly spicy bubbling on the stove, the music on the record player.

Before long, my mother was pregnant with me. When she told Ahmadu the news, he was initially unsure. He suggested that the child – me – should be sent to Sierra Leone for his mother to bring up. Ahmadu's response shocked Moki. It had never entered her head that they would not raise this child together. She spent the weekend in bed with me inside her. She was craving the sweet, sticky flesh, so she bought a whole box of oranges and then lay in bed, reading and peeling the fruit, eating them one after the other, throwing the peel on the floor. And then, on the Monday, she knew what she was going to do. She was going to keep me and bring me up. That weekend, we had our first conversation.

In November 1963, when she was five months pregnant with me, Moki was on her way home from a jazz club when she saw my father in the street with another woman. She knew of others, too. Ahmadu found it impossible to be monogamous. (As the family tree attests, his branch is heavy!) And while it cut Moki to the core, she was never bitter about his infidelities. She knew who he was, this breathtakingly beautiful young man who sent the women in Stockholm crazy. She was able to focus on the love they shared, which was bigger than the hurt. She said that they never had a single fight.

•

I was born in Stockholm on 10 March 1964. Whenever Moki talked about my birth, it came with its own soundtrack. I like how romantic it is.

'You were born at midday exactly,' she would tell me. 'The church bells were ringing over Södermalm as you exited me and entered the world.'

She would speak of me sitting, with a little support, straight back, steady and strong on her lap at the table, just one month old. Firm flesh, chubby but solid. She always said that the children in



Moki holding newborn me,  
Stockholm, 1964.

our family have perfectly round heads. I loved hearing her tell the story, with a single-minded devotion to what she saw as my perfection. I love that it was me she was talking about – what she saw and felt when she held me.

Though they never met, my grandmothers, Mormor Marianne and Haja Neneh, were connected the moment I was born. My new blood made them family. A vast landmass between them, their cultures so far apart they might as well have been on different planets, yet they were bound in the sisterhood of women. The motions in which they loved and held their children, stroked a feverish forehead, hummed at the stir of a pot, cussed at the men when they interfered with their daily rhythm, were the same. Over 8,000 kilometres apart and still connected.

When Moki arrived home from the hospital with me, she found blonde hairpins in the bed. Three months later, she told my father they were done, and she packed up his stuff. She did not back down. She stayed in the apartment, Ahmadu moved out. She knew he was

not able to change. The time they shared had been magical and, despite everything, they had never fallen out of love, but still she chose to end it. I did not see Ahmadu again until I was nine.

•

Moki met Don Cherry on 17 January 1963, a year before I was born. He was on tour with the Sonny Rollins Quartet. It was the first time that Don had travelled beyond North America, and half of Stockholm's inhabitants, it seemed, had flocked to the concert house to listen to Sonny Rollins, Don Cherry, Henry Grimes and Billy Higgins. That night in January, Moki and Ahmadu had joined the excited crowd. Moki later wrote: 'There was a fire in the subway below the building. Smoke was seeping through the floor, but no one moved. When Don Cherry's sound appeared, it reminded me of the magic I had found by myself in nature while growing up.'

After the concert, Moki went with some friends down the street to the smaller Golden Circle, where Johnny Griffin's group were playing. Sonny Rollins's band was already there, sitting in with them. At one point, Moki and Don noticed each other. 'I saw this woman wearing bamboo glasses, short hair and amazing clothes,' Don would say about the moment he first saw Moki. He came over and spoke with her. Moki wrote, 'We stood in the floor-to-ceiling window on the second storey looking out at the snowy street, talking about love on some other elevated plane – music. I was nineteen. My motto was: to help make a more beautiful world.'

Ten months later, in November 1963, when Moki was pregnant with me, she went with Ahmadu to see Don performing at the Golden Circle with Archie Shepp and the New York Contemporary Five. She was tired afterwards, but Ahmadu didn't want to go home, so Moki took a taxi with a friend. That was the night she saw him in the street with another woman. She asked the driver to turn around and headed back into the club. Don was there. That was their beginning. **Copyrighted Material**

When they parted that night, Don told Moki that he would return and see her. And he did. In October 1964, Don was back in Stockholm, on tour with Albert Ayler. By then I was six months old, and Ahmadu and Moki had broken up. After the tour ended, Don travelled to Africa, visiting the Rif Mountains in Morocco where he met with the Master Musicians of Joujouka. On his return to Europe in December, he went once more to Stockholm, just to see Moki and me. It was then that they decided, in Moki's words, 'to find a way to share our lives together'.

Don was a very special, unusual man. With his lean, graceful frame, he was beautiful. As a father, musician, collaborator and teacher, he had a gift for inspiring others to see their own untapped potential. He was a leader and a lifelong learner.

Don was born into a musical family in Oklahoma City in 1936. When he was four, like so many other 'Okies', his family moved to Los Angeles. There Don's father, Ulysses, ran the bar at the Plantation Club, a leading jazz venue in Watts, where local musicians of the LA bebop scene played with visiting stars like Billy Eckstine and Erskine Hawkins.

When Don was fourteen, his mother Daisy bought him his first trumpet. Although Ulysses did not approve – he did not want his son getting mixed up with musicians, fearful that he would fall prey to 'the dope thing' – the trumpet took over Don's life. He skipped classes to roller-skate to a neighbouring school, where he snuck into the lessons of the legendary music teacher Samuel Browne. Mr Browne encouraged his brass-band students to play music by Dizzy Gillespie and Stan Kenton. It was exciting, until Don's actual school cottoned on to his 'playing hooky' and he was sent to an all-boys disciplinary school. There he met and started to play with the drummer Billy Higgins.

Don and Billy would roller-skate far out of the Watts neighbourhood to the other side of the city to catch the music coming from basement jazz clubs, manoeuvring clumsily on their skates to peer down through the window slats, straining their eyes to