

# TAXI FAIRY TALES (an excerpt)

Robert Rigney & Robert Šoko

(...) **Robert Šoko:** I decided to become a cab driver. I don't remember where the first impulse came from. But just the idea of having this Mercedes car was something that your average Yugo would die for.

**Robert Rigney:** When I lived in Istanbul in 2011 I often took the taxi to and from English classes. Istanbul cab drivers were a breed apart from the Berlin cab drivers I was used to. In Berlin, cab drivers were often characters - personalities. For instance, in Berlin we had a family friend who was a taxi driver and a descendant of Moses Mendelssohn, the eighteenth century Jewish philosopher. Not only that, but after the fall of the Wall, the cabbie had been restituted a palatial villa in Potsdam right on the Jungfernsee lake. The deal was he couldn't sell the villa, on account of it was in such bad condition (the Communists had hacked up its imposing rooms into tiny dormitory cells for foreign students, after the Nazis had requisitioned it for their own purposes) - and so - Matheus was his name - drove a cab to make ends meet. It seemed so totally incongruous, and yet it was not uncommon to find such colorful characters behind the wheel of a Berlin cab.

In Istanbul, by contrast - though I can't speak with as much authority - cab drivers appeared to be mostly, so-called *kirols*: chavs, two-bit proles, not a few of them with criminal records, none of whom spoke English, and most only very rudimentary Turkish.

One of my students was a Germanophile Turkish guy who would put down everything Turkish - from Erdoğan's AK Party to grill parties in public parks and Turkish folk music. The thing he hated the most, though, was Istanbul cab drivers, who he would often fulminate against, while maneuvering his sleek BMW through Istanbul traffic, accusing them of "raping the road", as he put it. Cab drivers were the worst breed of people in Istanbul (second to dolmuş drivers), he would say, because as a cab driver, you needed absolutely no education; in many instances cab drivers were fresh out of the clink.

**Robert Šoko:** Over here in Berlin it was different. You had to take classes for half a year and pass an exam in order to get a license. Secondly, you had a lot of intellectuals who would be driving cabs. So, the cab drivers in Berlin were by no means the lowest of the low.

There is something brave about being a cab driver. You have to have balls to drive a cab; to expose your ass out on the street. Being a cab driver is, to my mind, way underrated. You are vulnerable to the mood of the city; to different people every twenty minutes. It's tiring, nerve-wracking work to some extent. You don't just plop down in your seat, turn on the ignition and drive. No, it's quite an undertaking.

Being a cab driver at that time, in 1994, also felt like an upgrade. *Hey, I'm not a forklift operator anymore or somewhere in a chocolate factory or on the BMW assembly line. Now I have a cab.* This meant freedom, mobility in a huge city. It opened up a whole new dimension for me.

Amongst cab drivers you will find many weirdos. Cab drivers are a distinctive species. You are encapsulated in this small space. You are alone with yourself. You talk to yourself. You start becoming a little bit different. It's no wonder that in movies very often cab drivers are used as protagonists. A lot of artists are cab drivers in Berlin, writers and academics. Often you have very educated people driving taxis. For instance, Olaf, who was a colleague of mine and who later became a lawyer.

Cab driving is like a university unto itself. It teaches you unbelievable, unpredictable things. You acquire self-confidence. You achieve insights into human nature. You learn to recognize and to sense people. You become receptive to them. You sit up close to a person you have never seen before, so physically, you are forced to unite with them to some extent. Your sensors are working differently than another person's sensors. You become a confidant with this person sitting beside or behind you, breathing the same air, smelling each other. It's very intimate, and the experiences you gather over time make you understand and feel people way better than someone who never had the taxi driving experience. Being a taxi driver makes you perceptive.

Being a taxi driver is similar to being a DJ. On the one hand being a DJ is about posing and being this good-looking bastard, let me say it like this, who the girls are always casting glances at. But at the same time, you have to feel the people and do something for them. Just like on the dancefloor, you have to make the taxi fare feel at ease, safe and happy.

The cab was my first club, in that I'd play mix-tapes I made - mostly composed of soulful, ambient, jazzy tracks - bouncing the music off my fares, who sometimes commented positively on my selection.

Right now, after not playing for a while, I have a longing for crowds: I really love to feel a mass of dancing people; to feel their energy. In one sense you are there to play all the classics - all the hits. For me, though, this is not the trick. The trick is *when* to use the right weapon in your arsenal. When to stop at the red light. Not to play all the hits at one go, like a CD compilation. This is not the point. The point is to feel the ups and downs. To commune with the dancing crowd, to dance with them in the end and to feel with them. Cab driving is similar.

As on the dancefloor as in a taxicab, you open your soul. This is why I always felt so fucking tired after every taxi shift or every DJ set. You feel somehow sucked dry. You gave part of your soul to the world, to the universe. This is what the people who are dancing to your music feel, but also in the cab - how much you open up determines how much of a tip you are going to get.

I said cab driving was a university. Cab driving was also my university in the sense that I had all the time in the world to read. Nowadays you can fool around on these phones. But I'm talking about the mid-nineties, when I was driving. In addition to reading the *Feral Tribune*, a Croatian satirical weekly from Split, I read books while waiting for my fares, usually books in English. I read a lot of Charles Bukowski.

But most of the time I read the rhythm of the city. I acquired what I call a "street tattoo" in the sense that I was always on the street, soaking up impressions of the city, and so I got tattooed by the Berlin street. In all honesty, I didn't coin this phrase. It was a song. By whom I forget now.

Cab driving was not a waste of time, in my opinion. Actually, I'm quite proud of my seven years behind the wheel. I was all over the streets, like a hunter. Like a little wolf. There are those who lie and wait, and there are those who hunt. I was a hunter. Today it is probably the same. But with these gas prices it is not so easy to be a hunter anymore.

I have learned when to cross on yellow traffic lights. And when to stop. To me this little detail carries with it an essential taste of freedom and creativity. The very moment you decide whether to slow down or speed up is comparable to when you as a DJ determine the subsequent rhythm of your DJ set; you have a second or two to make a decision and deftly create a suitable transition; to step on the gas or to slacken the pace; to chill out or fire up; to make those who are with you feel the beat, be it of the city or the dance floor. Yellow lights had their own philosophy.

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