

# AMERICAN MUSIC REVIEW

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## Cecil Taylor's Posthumanistic Musical Score

Jessie Cox

"He would play the line, and we would repeat it. That way we got a more natural feeling for the tune and we got to understand what Cecil wanted."<sup>1</sup> Archie Shepp's recount of working with Cecil Taylor in 1959 sparked my inquiry into Taylor's use of musical scores. The music exists, it is written, not on a sheet of paper that is handed to the interpreter, but as a score that is communicated through Taylor demonstrating the piece on the piano.<sup>2</sup> I will read this practice of musical scoring alongside Taylor's own writing; specifically, "Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture," the liner notes to the record *Unit Structures*.<sup>3</sup> These scores, which are taught via playing the music for the interpreters, are aura-visual as well as embodied through/in the act of piano playing. Taylor writes that "Western notation" is a "blocking" of "total absorption in the 'action' playing,"<sup>4</sup> where he conceives of "action" as both internal and external—as the interactivity between the musicians.<sup>5</sup> I propose to hear this via intra-action<sup>6</sup> (Barad's term for the co-making of differences [subjects/objects, concepts, instruments, etc.]), elaborated via Glissantian *créolité*,<sup>7</sup> which relies on opacity and the unforeseeable.<sup>8</sup> This approach to composition problematizes the location and function of musical scores and at the same time, of course, also interpretation. By using an aura-visual-embodied-score the idea of the musical material, process, and performance is completely altered—*re-sonating* the embodiment of the mental/psychic. ("Would then define the pelvis as cathartic region prime undulation, ultimate communion, internal while life is becoming visible physical conversation between all body's limbs: Rhythm is life the space of time danced thru."<sup>9</sup>) These scores transgress the aural, visual, and physical and become a *sonance* of Taylor himself—his self being performatively enacted through process, through improvisation, through the creation/manifestation of the score. As he mentions: "Practice is speech



*Cecil Taylor in New Orleans, 1995*  
Photo by Michael Wilderman

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## Posthumanistic Musical Score (cont.)

to one's self out of that self metamorphosing life's 'act' a musical symbol having become 'which' that has placement in creation language arrived at."<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the notion of the musical score can be transposed, can be read posthumanistically, can be diffracted onto other bodies.<sup>11</sup> The reading of texts can be transposed onto bodies (both "human" and not) and movement. This type of textuality is enacted in Taylor's thought-writing-sounding-gesturing via three main steps:

- The improvisational composition, or practicing, of self.
- A conception of self, and other wholes, as creole, that is arrived at with instruments/bodies.
- Opaque intra-action with others, both human and not.

Note that these individualized steps are not clearly delineable, nor are they ordered; they are in complex and quasi-causal relations not reducible to spatial or temporal linearity. These markings aid in our performative extrapolation of the seemingly unlocatable posthumanistic musical score—a score that negates itself through its (un)scorability (after all scoring means to measure and to cut). The scoring of anything, is the cut (or break) that marks, that makes things matter, that brings to matter.<sup>12</sup> In this way the score/delineation becomes the very mechanism, or technology, which through its (re)sounding opens the possibility for the gap—"measurement of sound is its silence."<sup>13</sup>

### Score

Taylor's score is the non-place of a conjunction of instrument, body, and being. Self is articulated and scored via practicing ("Practice is speech to one's self ...")<sup>14</sup> as well as via further intra-actions with others, which include not just human agents but also histories, instruments, bodies, (musical) knowledges, etc. By intra-action is meant an interaction that is formative to the agents involved. Taylor notes that "the player advances to the area, an unknown totality, made whole thru self analysis (improvisation)."<sup>15</sup> This improvisation is the performance of (creole) *being*, brought forth by scoring, cutting. This unknown totality I hear via, and with, Glissantian *créolité* that relies on opacity and a poetics of relation, as well as the unpredictability of encounters. An unknown

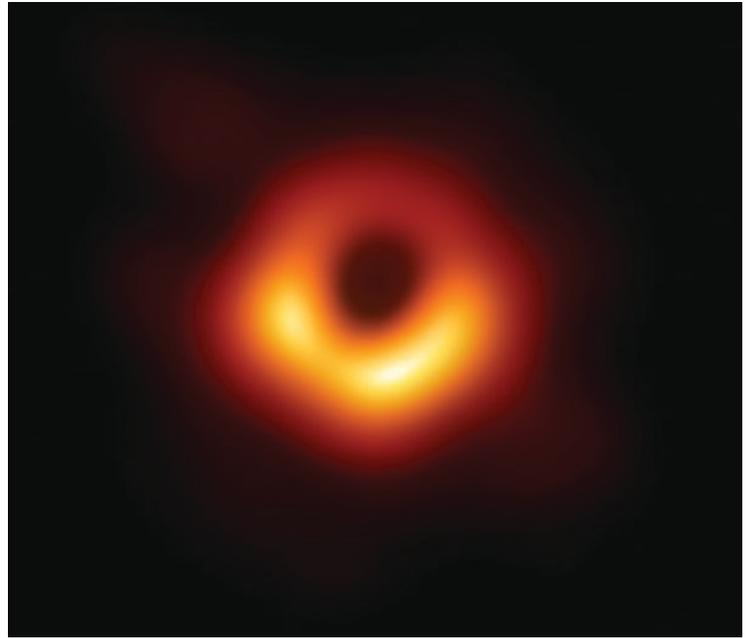
totality, or open totality, allows for the possibility of not being while being, of a becoming within being itself. If practicing is the creation of the self via acting then we can see a conception of self-existence as contingent, as dependent on the environment, which includes other and more/less, which is itself contingent on the act of the subject as well—an intra-active account of how this opaque totality comes to matter. This outside-inside entanglement becomes via Taylor the "act;" it is gesturing, it is technology and technique, an intra-action with technologies/instruments that are themselves to be understood as being entangled in a complex network of intra-actions. To intra-act with an instrument (or any body, even one's own) is to improvisationally compose oneself and the world. To elaborate, the instrument and the musical material, and/or the technique, as well as the composers' musical ideas, are related.<sup>16</sup> There is a coupling between the instrument's affordances and the performer, listener, and composer's body and mind. The instrument's affordances are themselves entangled with its history and the musicians that interacted with it. This account of instruments is akin to Barad's development of the notion of intra-action via/in quantum mechanics, which speaks to the interconnectedness and co-making of instruments, the instrument-handler, and the probed. What is, in my view, crucial to note in relation to and with intra-action, and what becomes even clearer here, is the importance of Glissant's poetics of relation, which relies on, and demands, opacity and the unforeseeable: an intra-active creole mattering, improvisational possibility of blackened being and becoming together-a-part. In other words, an instrumental interaction, in Taylor's case, can be found between him and his own body, which happens via the piano, but also between himself and the piano, himself and the musical material, and, eventually, himself, his environment, and his others (as in "action playing" where band member's interaction is of utmost importance to the improvisational composition of self). Interestingly, this complex network of scoring is not fixed in one time-space position, since, for example, a (possible or actual) future act can affect the conception of self/other, environment, and object in the present (or the past) through practicing or improvisational making whole, as it is an unknown, or open, totality. Hear their close similarities: An open totality points to how something can be added in the future, or that it is ambiguous in its boundaries in space; whereas

## Posthumanistic Musical Score (cont.)

the unknown totality points to how not all can be known in a moment about such totality, which is, if conceived with improvisation, as Taylor does, or as Glissant does via the unforeseeable, outside the indeterminate or determinate, a possibility for futures, and/or alter-destinies. In the same manner, practices of other band-members affect Cecil Taylor's wholeness, which involves a sort of space-time multi-locality. This spooky action at a distance that defies time-space in many ways becomes apparent due to the musical scoring that is enacted in Taylor's practice. This scoring is not fixed onto a piece of paper—i.e. one place. This multi-localizability (in both time and space) changes what we can consider part of the music(al work). Maybe this whole, that Cecil Taylor mentioned is a (w)hole<sup>17</sup>— its hole is what allows its wholeness, and its wholeness is marked by being holed. Of course, a musical work can not only be marked through fixation on a sheet of paper, but also through other kinds of recordings. Alessandro Arbo mentions that different musical recordings have different relations to the musical work: some document and others constitute.<sup>18</sup> But it becomes clear that it is even more complex than that because the very act of documentation has an influence on *what is* and *what can be* (a constituent of the musical work). This means that the marking that makes something a work of art might not be as easily to discern from scoring as a form of documenting since documenting means to prove something exists and so involves measuring and marking. If this is heard in relation to Barad's work on apparatuses, measuring, the measured, and the measurer, then the scoring of something is an intra-action, which would mean that there is no "objective" and non-constituting documenting. In other words, the measuring or scoring of something is a defining agent in the creation of it: via intra-action it is conceived not through sameness nor independence, but a *différance that is not of/from singular wholes, but from black (w)holes—opaque and open totalities*. What is this unit structure that documents Taylor's work (of art/music)? And, if his (musical) work can be theorized, can we then hear, or find, his music?

### Music

To answer the question of the work of art in relation to Cecil Taylor's musical score, we'll have to confront his conception of wholeness, or what Cecil Taylor calls unit structures: both a unit made



A [supermassive black hole](#) image taken by [Event Horizon Telescope](#)

of structures as well as structures made of units. The unit structure is a whole and a part, and also holed as it can only be in relation—there is no unit without structures nor a structure without units. This (w) hole is a scoring, a marking, that does not reduce the complexity, it allows for Glissantian opacity; it is blackened. Cecil Taylor's music, written onto paper, and onto bodies, and sounded in various ways, allows, through its opaqueness, that self can manifest within sounding. There is a difficulty in locating black (w)holes as they are, as mentioned above, multi-local and they have, of course, no measurable center. They are Cecil Taylor, Cecil Taylor and his piano, the ensemble, and more. At the same time, black (w) holes are also placed in space-time. They are not nowhere; they are materially quasi there/here.

If the score is redefined in this fashion then what, and where, is the music? If the locality of the musical work is multi, then how does that relate to the music itself? Is this music localizable? How does it score (mark, define) itself? In "Sound Structure" Taylor does not explicitly state a definition of music, but one can nonetheless gain an opaque understanding of his conception of music. There is a brief definition of at least "a" music, which is: "as gesture Jazz became." Guerino Mazzola and Paul B. Cherlin mention that "originally, scores encoded the gestural hints in the graphemes of Medieval

## Posthumanistic Musical Score (cont.)

neumes."<sup>19</sup> Thus, one can ask whether the music can be found in the gestures since they are the origin and the outcome of musical notation. Here I want to *re-turn* to scoring, but this time the scoring of gesture as a medium for music, or sound. The scoring of sound is mentioned by Taylor in relation to silence (silence as the measurement of sound itself); but, in relation to this scoring of sound by silence, he also offers another dimensional thinking of such rhythmic markings namely rhythm-sound: "rhythm-sound energy found in the amplitude of each time unit."<sup>20</sup> This concept of the rhythm-sound seems to be the notion of unit structures at work. There is a rhythm within rhythm—the amplitude—that translates to rhythm also being, like the amplitude, made of both a sound and a silence. The rhythm-sound is not measured by the silence of sound, nor the absence of sound, but the very silence that makes rhythm, which is also sound. Ergo, sound is silence as well as sound. Furthermore, it is felt in the body, in the "undulation of the pelvis," as a dancing through time, and through such dancing time is marked, and made in relation. Here I want to ask again the question of what/where is the music? Rhythm and sound involve bodily actions and/or activations (motions), but there is also a sort of spookiness (or spectrality) to the contours, or localities, of such bodies in/with motion.

"The paths of harmonic and melodic light, give architecture sound structures acts creating flight. Each instrument has strata. Physiognomy, inherent matter-calling-stretched existing bodies of sound."

"Emotion being aggressive participation defines the 'acts' particularity the root of rhythm is its central unit of change eye acting upon motor responses directing motions internal movement (wave)."<sup>21</sup>

These two passages out of Cecil Taylor's "Sound Structure" extend our inquiry of scoring further into multi-dimensional space and bent time. This scoring is unit structures at work, it is a black (w)hole. So where/what is the music? Music is at the horizon, and also evaporating (flying) away, is what comes to the observer and what escapes at the same time, and so it is also the core/center, since what appears at the horizon is what fell into the center of the black hole. Then it must be in-between. But, since there is nothing to be in-between of, except (not-)

itself and (not-)itself, while also being the black (w) hole, it is *not-in-between*.<sup>22</sup> As Fred Moten, points to CLR James' critical thought as a dialecticism that refuses it at the same time, or, more accurately, bends it,<sup>23</sup> so too am I here projecting this Black radical tradition out from Cecil Taylor's scoring. Hegel's (or "the") concrete universal, which is also a whole with a gap, is refused, or resisted, in the black (w) hole through affirmation of what it is "not" (namely a non-historical abstract concept without socio-economic and ideological basis), through that which is absent and abject in it, and that which marks its own phantasmagoric origin and end—the Black, and a particular kind of relation to such (othering). Black (w)holes are the sound of an intra-active creole *articulation* of worlding: a kind of *tout-monde/creole* that does not abject something but sits with this (quasi-)opacity of space, this spookiness of places/traces, this (quasi-)scoring that misses and at the same time marks and makes. As such it remains with the unknown through the known by being open for improvisational practicing through rhythm-sound, which is that which can close and open, and open and close: oscillating *polyrhythmia* in multi-dimensional-superpositions. The music of coming to matter and disappearing into/out-from black (w)holes.

### Notes

1. Archie Shepp quoted in Alfred Bennett Spellman, *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* (Limelight Edition, 1966, 1992), 43. (This does, of course, not mean Cecil Taylor did not also write music in other ways, including but not limited to, sheet music.)

2. Of course it is up to further inquiry as to what happens to such scores once someone besides Taylor demonstrates them, or when they're demonstrated on a different instrument. Here I also point to the relation of this conception of writing, as in/with orality, to Jacques Derrida's work. Fred Moten elaborates my concern poignantly: "The complex interplay between speech and writing (rather than the simple reversal of the valorization of speech over writing to which that interplay is often reduced) that animates [Derrida's] *Of Grammatology* touches on issues fundamental to the black radical tradition that [C.L.R.] James explores and embodies." "Not In Between," 3–4.

3. This piece was first presented at *Unit Structures: The Art of Cecil Taylor*, one and a half years after his passing,

## Posthumanistic Musical Score (cont.)

organized by Michelle Yom. To Michelle, I'd like to extend my gratitude for making this piece come to life.

4. Cecil Taylor, "Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture." Liner notes for *Unit Structures* by Cecil Taylor. Blue Note BLP 4237, LP.

5. Ibid.

6. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Duke University Press, 2007).

7. As Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant mention: "Our history is a braid of histories... Creoleness is 'the world diffracted but recomposed,' a maelstrom of signifieds in a single signifier: a Totality." *Éloge de la créolité*, translated by Mohamed Bouya Taleb-Khyar (Gallimard, 1993), 88. Glissant, specifically, roots creoleness in a poetics of relation, a relational making that relies on opacity that has to take power structures into account so as to not reproduce them. For an elaboration specifically in relation to improvisation see Jessie Cox and Sam Yulsman, "Listening through Webs for/of Creole Improvisation." *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* 14, no. 2–3 (2021).

8. See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (University of Michigan Press, 1997), and *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity* (Liverpool University Press, 2020), 8.

9. Taylor, "Sound Structure."

10. Ibid.

11. Posthumanism is the critical rethinking and reworking of humanism and a redrawing of who/what gets to have agency. As Neil Badmington points out: "the 'post-' of posthumanism does not (and, moreover, cannot) mark or make an absolute break from the legacy of humanism. 'Post-'s speak (to) ghosts, and cultural criticism must not forget that it cannot simply forget the past." In "Theorizing posthumanism," *Cultural Critique* 53 (2003), 21–22. As important as it is to note that posthumanism does not break with humanism in a manner that forgets the past, there is at the same time the danger in this view of posthumanism to continue humanism's colonial and racist legacy, for it continues to locate theory as coming from inside humanism alone. In other words, if posthumanism sees its own postness as emerging from only humanism disregarding the conditions of its existence (again), then post- ends up being just a reperformance of humanism's ideologies. In this essay I practice an intervention into this historiography and genealogies of posthumanism. Thinkers who have critically dismantled the human, including by thinking through the not-quite-human—how Black life has been functioning as sub-human along with the brutality

of global colonialism that has served as the foundation of humanism—, and whose own status as human is challenged because of the color of their skin, articulate discourses that dismantle and rework the human.

12. Playing here on Karen Barad's conception of mattering: "Mattering is a matter of what comes to matter and what doesn't." "Diffracting diffraction: Cutting together-apart," *Parallax* 20, no. 3 (2014), 175. This coupling of physical matter and mattering as in meaning making is rooted in Barad's rethinking of what difference is.

13. Taylor, "Sound Structure."

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Jonathan De Souza, *Music at Hand: Instruments, Bodies, and Cognition* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

17. A term I borrow from Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

18. Alessandro Arbo, "From the document to the work: Ontological reflections on the preservation and restoration of musical artefacts," *Journal of New Music Research* 47, no. 4 (2018), 300–8.

19. Guerino Mazzola and Paul B. Cherlin, *Flow, Gesture, and Spaces in Free Jazz: Towards a Theory of Collaboration* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2008), 66.

20. Taylor, "Sound Structure."

21. Ibid.

22. Referencing here Fred Moten's term from *Black and Blur* (Duke University Press, 2017).

23. Ibid., 9.

## Institute News

From coup d'état in January to COVID openings in June, the Spring 2021 academic semester challenged each one of us in new and hitherto unexpected ways. At Brooklyn College, the activities of the Hitchcock Institute continued remotely for the third semester since the start of the pandemic in Spring 2020, as did nearly all academic courses and musical performances. In spite of the ongoing complexities of the digital climate, the HISAM team assembled a memorable four-event, online Music in Polycultural America speaker series that not only brought out some of the most current research in the field of American music studies, but also highlighted the interdisciplinarity of our field. With that in mind, I am thrilled to announce that the Hitchcock Institute is now an affiliate of [The Barry S. Brook Center for Music Research and Documentation](#) (at the CUNY Graduate Center), host to a panoply of scholarly projects across disciplines. What's more, in the spirit of dismantling the notion that single authors/presenters create the best work, you might notice that the speaker series has become increasingly collaborative.

### Music in Polycultural America Speaker Series

Our first speaker of the semester, **Stefan Sunandan Honisch**, joined us from his position as a Banting Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of British Columbia to [share his research](#) on musical settings of Helen Keller's poetry. Specifically, Honisch introduced us to Keller's poem "A Chant of Darkness," set by Italian composer Cesare Sodero as "Canto dall'Oscurità" for a premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1919. Honisch contrasted this setting with one by Philip Greeley from 1939, performing close readings of both scores, while delicately disrupting pervasive narratives about Keller's multiple disabilities as vehicles for overcoming and inspiration.

With a meticulously coordinated ten-minute DJ set, **Will Fulton** (BC/GC Musicology Alumni) opened [Donna Lee Granville's talk](#), "A Great White Hope? Interrogating the Place of White Rappers in the Hip Hop Hierarchy." Drawing on her expertise as a sociologist who studies race, immigration, and culture, Granville utilized organizational theory to regard "rapper" and "DJ" as professions with specific qualifications, complicating this analysis

with an understanding of whiteness as a hegemonic power.

Continuing the spirit of collaboration set forth by Granville and Fulton, **Yoko Suzuki's** scholarship on midcentury virtuosa vibraphone player Terry Pollard inspired [a rollicking Zoom performance](#), connecting Suzuki with MM Global Jazz candidate **Victor Solano** and his ensemble. Suzuki brought out details of Pollard's career as both a jazz pianist and vibraphonist of extraordinary skill and charisma who toured and performed with her white male duo partner, Terry Gibbs. The spectacle of a Black woman and a white man playing in such close proximity on TV, and with such obvious passion, angered southern audiences while upending 1950s dynamics gender and race.

### "A Legacy of Feminist Musicology"

The final event in our speaker series celebrated the "Legacy of Feminist Musicology" at the Hitchcock Institute. The afternoon of talks centered on three converging anniversaries: the twentieth anniversary of former HISAM director **Ellie Hisama's** groundbreaking monograph *Gendering Musical Modernism: Music of Marion Bauer, Miriam Gideon, and Ruth Crawford* (Cambridge, 2001); the twentieth anniversary of the Institute's conference, "Ruth Crawford Seeger's Worlds," (Brooklyn College, 2001) which brought together into one space Crawford's art music compositions and folk music transcriptions; and the fifteenth anniversary of the collection of



Dr. Ellie Hisama  
Photo by Hana Hisama-Vishio

## Institute News (cont.)

essays inspired by the Crawford conference, *Ruth Crawford Seeger's Worlds: Innovation and Tradition in Twentieth-Century American Music* edited by Ellie M. Hisama and Ray Allen (Rochester, 2007).

Hisama, the impetus behind these acts of scholarly production, also represents a link between the formational days of the Institute in the 1970s and 1980s, when H. Wiley Hitchcock was director and Judith Tick and Carol Oja—both Hitchcock mentees during their PhD work at the CUNY Graduate Center—were lecturing on American music at Brooklyn College. Hisama followed Oja as the third director of the Institute when she arrived at Brooklyn College in 1999, joining jazz historian Jeffrey Taylor and ethnomusicologist Ray Allen.

The “Legacy” event, originally designed as a Keynote address by Hisama on her work as a scholar, mentor, and feminist activist in her fields, quickly expanded into an afternoon of panel talks and a performance. As one attendee noted afterwards, it’s not unusual to find an academic event or conference where a seminal book or scholar receives accolades and an assessment of their impact on the field. What is unusual is to find an event where that scholar is a woman. In the first panel session, Hisama discussed the influence of *Gendering Musical Modernism* with two of her former PhD advisees: **Mary Robb**, who works in the creative industries, and yours truly, the author of this HISAM newsletter! Both of us had written dissertations on New York composer Miriam Gideon thanks to Hisama’s book, and we reflected on how her mentorship has impacted our respective lives and careers.

The second panel session connected **Ray Allen** and Hisama to discuss the Ruth Crawford Seeger (RCS) Conference and subsequent collection with chapter contributor **Nancy Rao** (Rutgers University). Rao’s piece in the collection won the prestigious Irving Lowen’s award at the Society for American Music in 2008. Ruth Crawford’s own legacy brings together American folklore, ultramodern composition, and midcentury music education practice. Indeed, Crawford wrote her praxis across the fields of American music as broadly and deeply as humanly possible during her brief life. I had the pleasure of recording a brief statement from **Judith Tick** about the RCS conference, which we aired just before the session. But an even more spontaneous

moment came in the form of a surprise appearance by **Peggy Seeger**. After Ray Allen recognized her attendance, she spoke about the moment of realization she felt when upon first hearing her mother’s compositions. She and her siblings had no idea that her mother was more than a teacher and folk song arranger, and Peggy related her anger at her father, Charles Seeger, for keeping that side of her mother from them. Nevertheless, she concluded with a twinkle in her eye (and here I paraphrase) that while men may compose phallic skyscrapers that explode out the top with one big bang, women tend to compose many, many less obvious yet equally climactic works throughout their lives. And we’re here to pay tribute to those many works.

Hisama’s keynote address, “A Life in American Music: Ruth Crawford, Julius Eastman, and Me,” found inspiration in Susan McClary’s article “Stradella and Me” from the Lives in Musicology series found in *Acta Musicologica*. As McClary traced her extraordinary career path via her scholarship on Stradella, Hisama narrated her remarkable journey by recognizing Crawford and Eastman as the intellectual touchstones of her work. In her first moments as a music theory MM student working with Joseph Straus at Queens College, she encountered Crawford’s *String Quartet 1931*, a work that would haunt her until she had written about it in her dissertation, and finally, in *Gendering Musical Modernism*. Along that road, Hisama developed a fierce feminist pedagogy and approach to research, which allowed her to consider Julius Eastman not only as an undersung post-minimalist composer, but also as the “gay guerilla” who was made to feel deeply abject within his social context. Hisama wound all of these details into the interdisciplinary trajectory that has led her to this moment, when she will step into her position as Dean of the Faculty of the Arts at the University of Toronto in August 2021.

The afternoon ended with a screening of Miriam Gideon’s 1958 opera, *Fortunato: An Opera in Three Scenes*, fully orchestrated by composer/conductor Whitney George and semi-staged in 2019 by The Curiosity Cabinet. Gideon left only a piano-vocal score and one fully-orchestrated scene among her papers, and George discussed the project of orchestrating the two remaining scenes based on the style of the first. Listening to vocal music by Gideon ended the conference on a suitably high note.

## Institute News (cont.)



Andy Dwan performing in *Fortunato*  
Photo by Jonathan Levin

### In This Issue: Conversation and Collaboration

Recalling *Unit Structures*, the recent conference organized by Michelle Yom on Cecil Taylor, Jessie Cox offers a posthumanistic interpretation of Taylor's musical "scores," arguing that they are less scores than resonances of embodiment, or collaborative entities of improvisation. Alana Murphy contributes a fascinating interview with Jonathan Zalben, composer and music supervisor for the Winter 2020 Disney series *On Pointe*. The series takes us inside the world of the American Ballet Theater's 2019–20 season, including their production of the *Nutcracker*. Murphy and Zalben's conversation brings out the Americanness of Balanchine ballet, how to score the streets of New York City, and the politics of representation. And Ray Allen reviews *Can't be Faded: Twenty Years in the New Orleans Brass Band Game* (Mississippi 2020), co-written by ethnomusicologist Kyle DeCoste and the Stooges Brass Band themselves. In addition to reading the text with an eye to the musical and cultural content, Allen unpacks the "conscious collaboration" between the Stooges and DeCoste.

### Staff News

We're pleased to introduce a new member of the Hitchcock Institute team this year: **Michelle Yom**, flutist and PhD candidate at the Graduate Center in Musicology, has joined us as a contributing editor. You may recognize her as the organizer of the [conference on Cecil Taylor](#) that took place in October 2019. Welcome, Michelle!

Managing Editor **Lindsey Eckenroth** defended her dissertation, "Listen Like This: Audiovisual Argument in Rockumentary," which was nominated for the Barry S. Brook Dissertation Award. She's excited to begin her new research on Lydia Lunch, the voice, and trauma in documentary film. Additionally, her article "Cars and Guitars, or, Detroit and the MC5: On Representations of Music and Place in MC5: A True Testimonial" was published in the collection *Mapping the Rockumentary: Images of Sound and Fury*, edited by Gunnar Iversen and Scott MacKenzie (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), and she gave a talk on this same topic at the virtual IASPM-US conference in late May. In flute news, Lindsey performed at the second annual Ukrainian Contemporary Music Festival in March, and she recorded two pieces from Whitney George's *Solitude & Secrecy* set, to be released on Pinch Records. Congratulations, Lindsey!

Hitchcock Institute Assistant **Whitney George** successfully defended her dissertation in December 2020, and was selected as a Pinch Records artist with two recordings of chamber works (*For You* and *Solitude & Secrecy*), to be released in 2021. She had two original songs commissioned by Marty Jevon commemorating the life of his daughter; these will be performed by Lucas Bouk later this year. George's music and the moving image lecture series with ThinkOlio continues to receive excellent reviews. Congratulations, Whitney!



Lindsey Eckenroth (flute), Adam von Housen (violin), Edward Forstman (piano), and Whitney George (composer) at Pinch Recording

## Institute News (cont.)

Jeff Taylor continues his work on Earl Hines and the Chicago pianists, even as current events and academic discussions serve to shape the monograph's narrative structure and content. He looks forward to reviving a long-planned project on the history of jazz in Brooklyn.

I had an extraordinarily busy semester, giving six public talks and turning in final drafts of two book chapters. Two highlights: At the "Music, Sound, and Trauma" conference held in February, I presented work from my forthcoming edited collection, *Better Be Good to Me: Narratives of Domestic Violence in American Popular Music*, along with four chapter contributors; and I had a rare chance to speak with film composer Laura Karpman about my new curriculum based on her score for the series *Lovecraft Country*.

Ray Allen took Travia leave during the Spring 2021 semester to work on his new book project and try retirement out for size. On a personal note, Ray has never hesitated to put on his "mentoring hat" when I asked for advice; never quailed at a letter, article, or review request; and in general, has been a driving force in bringing local and global music into the Conservatory at Brooklyn College. He will be sorely missed, but I will hold him to his promise to be an "active member of the advisory board." (And don't worry, Ray. I'm only going to wait a semester or two before I call on you to guest edit!) Thank you for everything.

In solidarity,  
Stephanie Jensen-Moulton

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# Sounding Movement, with a Light Touch: An Interview with Jonathan Zalben

Alana Murphy

This April, I sat down with Jonathan Zalben on Zoom to discuss his experience as composer and music supervisor for the Disney+ docuseries *On Pointe*, which chronicles a season at the School of American Ballet (official school of the New York City Ballet) through the eyes of several talented and dedicated young dancers. Zalben and I talked about embodiment and interdisciplinarity, nostalgia for our own conservatory days, diegesis vs. underscore, the unique challenges of making collaborative recordings in lockdown, George Balanchine's beloved cat Mourka, and much more.



*In rehearsal at the School of American Ballet, as seen in On Pointe*

Alana Murphy: So let me just say, to start off, that I loved *On Pointe*. I had been meaning to watch it even before Stephanie [Jensen-Moulton] had approached me about interviewing you.

Jonathan Zalben: Glad to hear.

AM: It's funny, my partner had really wanted to get a Disney+ account to watch *The Mandalorian*. I said, "We have too many streaming services already." But then I heard about *On Pointe* and thought, that is tempting. And then Stephanie reached out, and I told my boyfriend, "okay, you're in luck—now I have to watch a Disney+ show for an official assignment, so I suppose we can subscribe to the platform." By the way, are there any video clips of the show that I could use when we publish this interview? Or is that verboten?

JZ: From the actual show? No, it's all copyrighted, but you can certainly include [the trailer](#).

AM: Actually, one of the first things I wanted to ask you about was the trailer. Did you write the music for it?

JZ: I did not! It's interesting—with most shows, the trailer is done separately from the film because it's considered advertising, so very often there's a

whole other production team that's dealing with the promotional content for the show. And so sometimes that goes to a trailer house, or sometimes it's done internally by either the distributor or whoever is producing the project, but it's usually not done with the entire team. Sometimes they will end up using my music, but not it's not the default. It's just one of those quirks.

AM: An "industry thing!" I see. I asked this because I watched the trailer before I watched this series, and the trailer presented the show as this very high-stakes drama. There was a techno remix of the main theme from *Swan Lake* that made it seem like a reality show—"only the toughest will rise through the ranks!" And, I mean, I would watch that show. Absolutely. But the actual series had a very different tone, much more dignified and restrained, so I was almost certain that there were different composers behind the trailer and the show.

JZ: Yeah, there's definitely an "art of the trailer," in a way, because you want to try to capture the essence of a show and entice the audience to watch it. Sometimes the trailer feels different from the show itself and then sometimes it feels like, oh okay, I essentially watched the film already. So for *On Pointe* it's a case where the series itself maybe feels a little bit different from the trailer.

## Sounding Movement (cont.)

AM: Different in a good way, I think! I mean, I would be there for a juicy bunhead drama with knives out and backbiting. But it's also been done before. In *On Pointe* I was impressed with the School of American Ballet [SAB] kids and teens who got profiled. They were so articulate and dedicated. The series felt like an ode to ballet as an art form, and to the discipline and passion that young people are bringing to it.

JZ: Oh, 200%. That's one of the things I think is so powerful about the documentary: it shows the hard work that these students do to hone their craft on a day-to-day basis over many, many years, because it's what they love. And I think that kind of work ethic can apply to any discipline, whether it's music or dance, sculpture, painting, or whatever else. That level of dedication at that age is obviously unique and unusual, and the series captured it with such a light touch. I feel that the kids spoke for themselves. The rehearsal footage speaks for itself; you see everybody lining up and following directions but also constantly reflecting and growing.



Nutcracker rehearsal, as seen in *On Pointe*

AM: The whole thing brought back so many memories for me. I didn't go to SAB, but I was pretty serious about ballet as a kid and a teen. Lots of hours logged in the dance studio.

JZ: Oh really, where did you train?

AM: I grew up in California and started dancing at a local studio, then eventually did some summer intensives in the Bay Area and took classes in the pre-professional division at Santa Cruz Ballet. But eventually I got more serious about piano and had to make a choice. So I went to music school, and then I actually ended up becoming a dance accompanist as a side hustle, which really sustained me through some lean times in NYC! It also became an academic interest of mine, this relationship between music and dance and how artists collaborate. On that note: how did you get involved with *On Pointe*?

JZ: I had worked with the team [Matthew O'Neill and Larissa Bills] on their previous film, a documentary for HBO called *Finding the Way Home*.

AM: Tell me about the HBO documentary.

JZ: That movie was about former orphans in various countries around the world. So it takes place in six different countries and those kids were in orphanages and then got adopted, or some of them had been trafficked and then returned to their birth parents. So it got into the issue of orphanages and of kids finding their own homes around the world. I did the score and the music supervision for that film.

AM: And obviously made a good impression! So this creative team—do they tend to do youth-focused features? I mean, obviously the subject matter is quite different on these two projects, but...

JZ: That's a great question. You know, I never actually made that specific link before about the youth aspect but both projects were produced by Downtown Community Television, or DCTV. And there's a huge youth focus there. It's a community-based organization started by Jon Alpert, who's a really big director and filmmaker. He was also a producer on *Finding the Way Home*. And Matt O'Neill and Jon have worked together for many years. They do youth education classes, they have internships. Some of the students who go through their mentorship program end up working at DCTV. I've worked with some of the former mentees in DCTV who are now assistant editors or cinematographers. There's definitely a big

## Sounding Movement (cont.)

youth, community, and social justice component to DCTV. And my colleagues, they're all great to work with; they're just super collaborative and interested in storytelling. Very detailed and just have an amazing vision. It's great to find your "people."

AM: Amen. So I was wondering, actually—was the original plan for the series to go longer than six episodes? It ends (spoiler alert!) with COVID and lockdown, and they close SAB for the first time in the history of the school, and the kids go home and we see them doing barre from their living rooms over Zoom.

JZ: Yeah, the idea was to film them through to their graduation, but I believe there wasn't a ton of footage that still had to be shot at that point. I think it was always planned for six episodes, and they had sort of gotten most of the material together for five-and-a-half episodes.

AM: COVID becomes part of the narrative structure.

JZ: Yeah, it was definitely done out of necessity, but I think it ended up working out well for the show and then we were in post-production for almost a year, from March through November 2020.

AM: No Spring Workshop for the older students, though.

JZ: Exactly, that was the thing that didn't end up happening. So instead we got to hear from the older students about their career aspirations and how they're dealing with the pandemic and coordinating with each other. Watching the pre-professional students was also especially interesting for me because I had gone to Juilliard Pre-College from 7th to 12th grade, which is right next door.

AM: Right, I saw Juilliard in your bio and was going to ask if you'd had any crossover with SAB or City Ballet back in the day.

JZ: You know, I always saw the kids, but we didn't really interact much with them. It's interesting for me now

to see their experience through the lens of what I consider to be somewhat equivalent musical experience, just in terms of how you're laser-focused on what you want to do with your life. It was cool to see that and then also to be able to participate creatively. It's definitely very inspirational to watch the kids and hear their stories and then think back to my youth. Actually, some of the musicians that played on the score I had gone to Juilliard Pre-College with.

AM: A Lincoln Center reunion!

JZ: I mean, they're people that I still know and now work with professionally. So there's a trajectory there. And they talk about this in the documentary too; there's this legacy of teacher to company dancer to SAB student. There's this through-line, in a way, and I think something similar exists with music.

AM: Yes, that lineage and that oral tradition makes me think of George Balanchine, the upholding of the Balanchine aesthetic at SAB that they mention in the doc. If you want to stage a Balanchine ballet anywhere you have to get permission from the Balanchine Trust and have it coached by someone who either received the choreography straight from the man himself, or maybe a second-generation disciple. And that's how they maintain the purity of this very idiosyncratic style.

JZ: True, with some art forms, pedagogy has to happen through example. I think there's some stuff that you can learn from YouTube, but learning



*SAB faculty member Arch Higgins backstage with student Kai Misra-Stone, who is trying on a Nutcracker headpiece*

## Sounding Movement (cont.)

firsthand from someone and being able to have that passed down to you, and then hopefully you eventually get to pass that on to someone else—that's a really powerful thing.

AM: So even though you didn't mix with SAB when you were at Juilliard Pre-College, did you end up working with dancers later on in your compositional career? Before *On Pointe*, I mean?

JZ: I've done some collaborations with choreographers. And I love that—it's actually one of my favorite things to do. It's very much to me like writing music for a film. It's somewhere between a film and a theatrical performance because there's that live element, but then it's very visual because you've got the movement on screen or on stage. I love the lighting and the set design, and how the rhythm of the dance goes along with the rhythm of the music, or sometimes they're in counterpoint with one another.

AM: Yes! I sort of coined this term at one point, "kinesthetic counterpoint," to try to get at the idea of that unique audio-visual relationship. I know someone who's developing a notational system for music-dance polyrhythms. There are a lot of dimensions to explore.

JZ: There was an exhibit that I saw on African textiles [[Music and Movement: Rhythm in Textile Design](#), at the Chicago Art Institute] that were created as part of a musical and dance tradition; the patterns related to movements of dance and rhythms of music. I found that really fascinating because you can see the movement and feel the rhythms through looking at these fabrics. But I would imagine that this is something that would be pervasive in a lot of different cultures—it's just not something that I was personally aware of before. So we were talking about polyrhythm, which is what triggered my memory of the exhibit. Anyway, I love when different art forms interplay with one another. I've done a lot of stuff with art installations, too, and I love that for that same reason, and I kind of view all these things as being one and the same because it's collaboration. It's part of a larger whole. It's not just you and your work. Coming back to the textile example, I never thought about how making fabrics and sewing could be related to music and dance, you know, the act of doing.

AM: I think about this a lot, how contemporary American culture tends to be focused on the finished object or the end product, especially with visual arts, but physical, embodied actions always go into making something, and they kind of leave a residue of gesture on the object. The process is still perceptible somehow.

JZ: And what I really love about creating music is the process. Once the music is done and out there, I like it but I'm less interested. I love the search and the exploration of finding the notes and creating the music, and then the recording process as well—there's a search-and-discovery part to that too. I love the act of creation, more than anything else.

AM: That is a wonderful thing to hear from a working composer! So, for *On Pointe* you were both composer and music supervisor, right? That means that you wrote the original score, but you also made choices about when to keep diegetic music from rehearsal footage or performances. Tell me a little bit about deciding when to use source music vs. a score.

JZ: Well, there are a lot of moments where we're "in rehearsal" with the dancers and there's piano music playing, or we're rehearsing on stage in a concert hall and maybe there's orchestral music, but for the most part it's rehearsal piano music, so that would be diegetic. And then there are moments where as a composer you want to support the drama or the emotion, or you want to help move the story from one place to another, or underscore character development, and that's where the underscore can come in to help support those moments. And then sometimes you try to let the scene play itself, and let the characters speak for themselves. That's really important with any project, to let the scenes breathe—and the dialogue in any show is number one. We have to know what the characters are saying, what they're trying to accomplish, where the story is going. The music part has to respond to that; everything else is secondary, in my mind.

AM: That's exactly the impression that I got from your score. You used the term "a light touch" when talking about the directors' choices earlier on in our talk, and I feel like your score also had this light touch. Sometimes a score can almost micromanage the audience and dictate what they're supposed to feel, but yours very much didn't do that.

## Sounding Movement (cont.)

JZ: Most of the films that I've worked on don't have an agenda. I think a great filmmaker should have a point of view that should come through, but that's different than pushing a certain narrative on the audience.

AM: Oh sure, it's more that I wonder if some creative teams don't always trust the audience to draw their own conclusions, so they overdetermine emotional beats.

JZ: That happens a lot. I've found, thankfully, that a lot of the filmmakers I've worked with don't do that, but I certainly see that out there because, you know, at the end of the day, we are creating entertainment. It's for people to watch either in the theater or their homes, to escape their own lives and experience something else or someone else's.

AM: Yeah, I did get a sense of escapism watching the show. I'm sure part of it was nostalgia for when I used to do ballet seriously. But also, I wrote down some free associations about your score while I was watching the show, some descriptive words. And of course your music swelled and changed a lot but I kept coming back to certain adjectives like "impressionistic," "minimalistic," "transcendent," "diatonic" or "white notes." Also, to use a term from ballet, the music had "ballon"—that means like when you jump and you have a lot of lift and height but also a soft landing. This word especially came to my mind with your original music for the dance footage that had been slowed down—was it your call to use slo-mo?

JZ: I don't have any say whatsoever! But one of my favorite scenes was with [SAB Faculty Chair] Kay Mazzo talking about Balanchine and his cat Mourka, and I felt like that was to be in a way the essence of the show; that scene was very touching, and also it speaks to what you're talking about with seeing the dancers almost float. I don't know how they move like that. It's magic to me. To have the opportunity to create music that would hopefully in some way

capture a little bit of that transcendence was really fun and inspiring.

AM: Transcendence is really such a core aesthetic of ballet—as in, make the physics of the body so perfect that it can fly. But all of this ethereal stuff was taking place inside the dance studio, and then I noticed that as soon as we were out and about in NYC, you jazzed it up.

JZ: That was also a discussion from the beginning with Larissa, the director, and the editor, Jenn. When I met with them, at first, on the project, we talked about having New York as a character. That was a really important thing, and one of the sounds of New York is jazz. So, yeah, that felt very appropriate. It's energetic. It's different than the music that's happening in the interiors.



*Establishing shot of NYC in On Pointe*

AM: And City Ballet is maybe the most jazz-adjacent classical ballet company—think Jerome Robbins and Gershwin, Balanchine and Stravinsky. So it worked for me on that level too.

JZ: I knew early on that we were going to do jazz, and I had written some sketches and my intention was to go into the studio and record with a jazz group, which obviously was not possible in the middle of COVID. So the musicians all recorded themselves individually, and then I pieced it together in Pro Tools. I gave them charts and then asked them each to do two takes of each piece. I was nervous that I wasn't going to feel the edge; obviously it's an art form where it's

## Sounding Movement (cont.)

meant to be played live, collaboratively. And so to not have that was very nerve-racking. But I was lucky enough to work with a trio of phenomenal musicians [Arturo O’Farrill, Jim Whitney, and Hal Rosenfeld]. They just killed it.

AM: So did you have a similar recording process for the “inside the studio” parts of your score?

JZ: Hal Rosenfeld plays mallet instruments, so he played marimba and vibraphones and such. Eric Jacobson and Caitlin Sullivan played cello, and Ralph Farris played viola. They were all people I knew through Juilliard. Originally I had written some pieces for Ralph’s string quartet, ETHEL, to play for the show, and then again with the pandemic—I was like, oh man, I cannot record them, so I guess I’m multi-tracking this one. I played all the violin parts. It’s different than having a quartet in a room together but it still worked. And then there was a bunch of orchestral music, and I went to Budapest for that and they were open and recording so that was no problem.

AM: Oh yeah, I noticed that the credits swelled to a glorious full orchestra each time. So wait, you could still do that recording session during COVID?

JZ: They did it as an orchestra together, and I was remote-listening from a booth with a computer.

AM: So, re: your orchestral music, or actually all of your original score—was any of it inspired or shaped by the repertoire or rehearsal music? Like any similar motives or textures, to create continuity?

JZ: That’s a good question. I did write some music that sounded diegetic that was meant to be diegetic. So there were some places where I wrote tunes that were meant to sound like rehearsal piano. But in terms of the actual score, I actually started writing a bunch of the themes before getting into the cut and the edit. At that point, I just knew that there was going to be rehearsal piano music. I knew there was going to be a lot of *Nutcracker*, so I certainly was aware of both of those elements, and I knew that I wanted to do something that was a little bit in contrast to them.

AM: See, here I was trying to be a good little

musicology grad student and pick out all of your musical references and quotations. Like, I fully convinced myself that your “white notes” theme was modeled on an excerpt of Stravinsky’s *Agon* that got used in the series.

JZ: No, I didn’t see any footage until maybe July of last year, and we were well into the process at that point. I wasn’t taking any material from the source music and putting it into the score or vice versa. We were really keeping those two elements very separate, the diegetic and the score. In terms of original themes, I did have many that were repeated throughout the series. I was thinking about trying to create coherence in that way. For example, when Kay [Mazzo] was speaking about Mourka, Balanchine’s cat—there’s another scene where Kay speaks about her own history with Balanchine, and I use the same theme in both of those places. And then it comes back later on where one of the students is talking about Balanchine as well.

AM: There was definitely continuity. Backing up, why did you need to compose music that sounded like rehearsal piano?

JZ: Sometimes we couldn’t get the rights to what was being played in the studio, or there actually wasn’t music with the original footage but we wanted something there. As music supervisor, I had to identify every piece of music in the show, and I worked with a few music consultants to help me out with that. I think there were over 350 cues in the series total.

AM: Wow!

JZ: It was a lot of music to deal with, split pretty much 50/50 between score and source. Even though we were trying to keep them separate, they have to work with each other. Like you were saying before with *Agon*, I wasn’t thinking about Stravinsky when I composed the theme, but later when I put my music in the episode, I did think about how that would fit in stylistically, and what would make sense coming out of that piece of music and into the next scene. I should mention that also one of our collaborators on the show was an amazing music editor named Shari Johanson, and she was integral in terms of shaping the source music to make it coherent. She’d work to

## Sounding Movement (cont.)

smooth out when you're entering or exiting a cue, or if there's a cut she'd ensure that it makes sense musically.

AM: I appreciated that you kept a lot of footage of the rehearsal pianists. They do hard work! The *Nutcracker* especially is a hairy score to reduce.

JZ: I actually studied the *Nutcracker* score a lot for this. First I printed out our full score, everything that I'd composed and everything we used, and cross-compared to the Tchaikovsky score to identify the exact passages that we incorporated. There's a lot of musicological work there, which you would appreciate. Even still, I probably don't know the score as intimately as the kids who dance it every year!

AM: Extremely relatable—the *Nutcracker* score is burned into my brain forever, because I danced in the ballet nine consecutive years growing up. So, speaking of year-after-year, are there any plans to do another season of *On Pointe*? I want more!

JZ: I don't know—I'm not aware of anything yet. Right now I'm working on two films, and I also score a show on HBO called *Axios*, which is starting up again next week. And I have my full teaching load, so, you know, you get busy. But maybe.

AM: Post-COVID I bet your process will be streamlined.

JZ: You know, I actually didn't deviate much from my work habits during the pandemic. The tech side and logistics, going into the edit suite—I was used to doing that on my own. With *On Pointe*, I was more concerned that musicality and expression wouldn't come through with players recording separately from one another. But, like I said, the musicians I worked with were amazing. In the end it all worked out beautifully, and I think we made something really special.

## Ray Allen is retired and well and living in Brooklyn.

Jeffrey Taylor

I hope Ray will forgive the silliness of the title, but we all felt a typically chilly academic announcement was insufficient for our dynamic colleague. Ray was one of the first people I met at Brooklyn College in fall of 1993, a term I remember vividly, despite being now rather aghast at the time that has passed. The Institute's founder, H. Wiley Hitchcock, had just retired and the Institute was now in the expert hands of his student and mentee, Carol J. Oja. Ray had already spent a term as a research associate for the (then) I.S.A.M. and he knew the lay of the land much better than I. It would be some time before I moved my office permanently into the Institute's mini-suite of rooms, but I felt a part of the enterprise immediately (indeed, it was a main reason for my accepting the job at Brooklyn). Ray and I could hardly have known we were starting a friendship and professional relationship that would last twenty-eight years.

Ray is the longest serving associate of what is now HISAM. In addition to co-editing the *I.S.A.M. Newsletter/American Music Review*, he worked with directors Oja, Ellie Hisama, and myself to produce conferences on a variety of subjects including Caribbean jazz, calypso music in New York, folk music icons Alan Lomax and Woody Guthrie, Brooklyn's Black music renaissance, and genre-bending composers Henry Cowell, George Gershwin, and Ruth Crawford Seeger. Two of those conferences turned into edited volumes: *Island Sounds in the Global City: Caribbean Popular Music in New York* (co-edited by Ray and Lois Wilcken, University of Illinois Press, 2001), and *Ruth Crawford Seeger's Worlds: Exploring Innovation and Tradition in Twentieth Century American Music* (co-edited by Ray and Ellie Hisama, University of Rochester Press, 2006). He also enjoyed a stint as Acting Director of the Institute himself. In more recent years we both worked to develop the M.M. in Global and



Ray (far right) in conversation with Caribbean musicians (L to R) Frankie McIntosh, David "Happy" Williams, Étienne Charles, and Garvin Blake during *An Evening of Calypso Jazz at Brooklyn College, April 2016*  
Photograph courtesy of *When Steel Talks*

Contemporary Jazz Program, which inspired academic conferences as well as concerts by jazz artists from Puerto Rico, the West Indies, Haiti, Israel, and India.

In addition to his work with HISAM, Ray directed the American Studies Program at Brooklyn College for more than a decade, and he developed a number of new courses as part of the Conservatory's expanding coverage of American music. Alongside his HISAM activities and a heavy teaching load, he pursued his own research interests in New York City music cultures. In 2001 he co-compiled (and wrote the liner notes for) *New York City: Global Beat of the Boroughs*, a rich recording collection issued by Smithsonian Folkways that I use in class to this day. He published two monographs, *Gone to the Country: The New Lost City Ramblers and the Folk Music Revival* (University of Illinois Press, 2010) and *Jump Up! Caribbean Carnival Music in New York City* (Oxford University Press, 2019) and is currently at work on a third, a co-autobiography with St. Vincent pianist and calypso/soca arranger Frankie McIntosh. Along the way there were many journal articles and contributions to this publication.

## Ray Allen is retired and well and living in Brooklyn. (cont.)



*Ray and Jeff outside the HISAM Office at Brooklyn College, 2016*

On a personal note, Ray was one of the best editors I ever had, quick to pick up on annoying mannerisms in my prose, including my infatuation with superlatives ("Amazing!" "Stunning!" "Exquisite!"). The tight focus and elegance of the pieces in our journal are largely a result of his keen eye. One could not ask for a more generous colleague and friend. But perhaps most importantly, his inventive ideas, tenacious spirit, and endless enthusiasm (yes, here I go with the superlatives) are responsible in large part for the fact that this Institute is thriving in its fiftieth year. We're all delighted he will stay on as a member of our Advisory Board, but his daily presence at the College will be sorely missed.

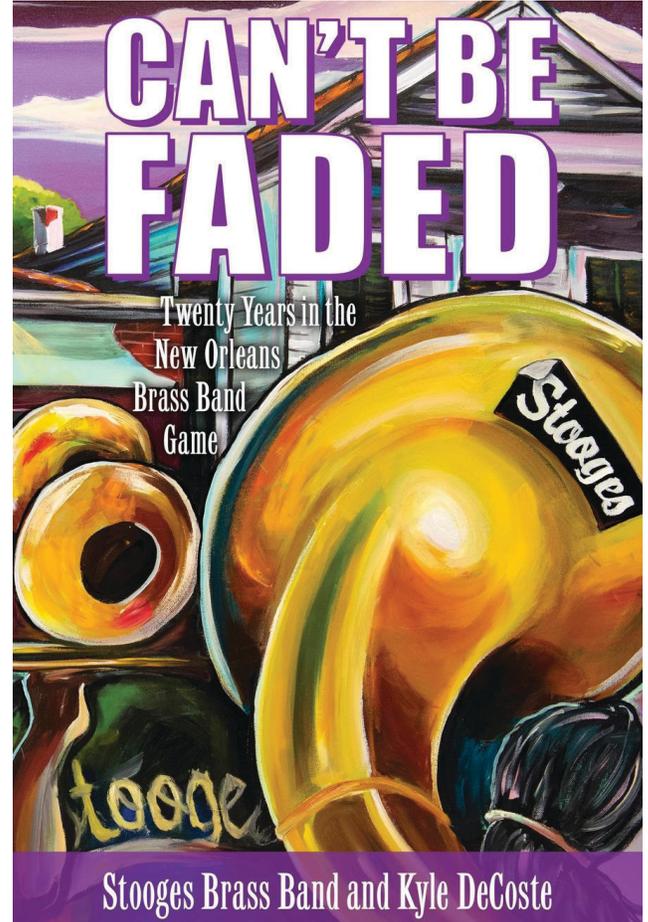
# Decolonizing Knowledge in Musical Biography: The Story of the New Orleans Stooges Brass Band

Ray Allen

The past year has been one of renewed racial introspection for ethnomusicologists as well as anthropologists and folklorists who study music. I say renewed because these disciplines have long been aware of their colonial roots and the perils of their predominantly white ranks who chronicle the music of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC). But the current climate of racial reckoning has ignited efforts to reexamine the way we go about our research and writing, and to rethink our relationship with musicians with whom we work and how we tell (or help them tell) their stories. In recent years there have been various efforts to address these issues under such banners as collaborative research, reciprocal ethnography, and dialogic editing. These approaches envision projects anchored in partnerships between scholars and musicians that seek to obviate asymmetrical power relations inherent in the traditional researcher/subject hierarchy. Only by empowering the voices of our collaborators, so goes the thinking, can we as scholars begin to dismantle institutional racism and to decolonize knowledge.

These concerns weigh particularly heavy on white scholars, this reviewer included, who work with African and Afro-diasporic music cultures. In the past decade there have been a handful of noteworthy co-written works that attempt to foreground the voices of musicians from Africa and the Caribbean. I'm thinking of books like Carol Anne Muller and Sathima Bea Benjamin's *Musical Echoes: South African Women Thinking in Jazz* (Duke University Press, 2011); Steven Feld's *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra* (Duke University Press, 2012); and Jocelyne Guilbault and Roy Cape's *Ray Cape: A Life on the Calypso and Soca Bandstand* (Duke University Press, 2014). But aside from the "as told to" genre of autobiographies such as those by jazz icon Randy Weston (with Willard Jenkins) and R&B legends Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, and the Neville Brothers (with David Ritz), there is little comparable literature on American music. But now enter the Stooges Brass Band and ethnomusicologist Kyle DeCoste with *Can't be Faded: Twenty Years in the New Orleans Brass Band Game* (University Press of Mississippi, 2020).

The members of the current Stooges Brass Band are co-authors on this project, which sprang from



their desire for a book celebrating their twentieth anniversary (the work would not appear until four years after their twentieth, but no one seemed to mind). Formed in 1996, the Stooges represent New Orleans's most recent iteration of a venerable marching band tradition that dates back to the mid-nineteenth century. Though perhaps not as heralded as the Dirty Dozen or the Rebirth Brass Bands, the Stooges have been community fixtures in the Crescent City for over two decades, playing regularly for second line parades and funerals, and adding keyboards, guitar, and drum kit for weekly indoor club engagements. As a twenty-first century brass band, they cut their traditional New Orleans jazz with more contemporary sounds of funk, R&B, and hip-hop.

Example 1: "[Where Ya From](#)"—*It's About Time* (Gruve Music, 2003)

## Decolonizing Knowledge in Musical Biography (cont.)

The book's other co-author, Kyle DeCoste, comes from a very different world. He describes himself as "a thirty-year-old, white, working-class/upwardly mobile, trumpet playing scholar from Nova Scotia" (xiii). At the time of the book's writing, he was a Ph.D. candidate in ethnomusicology at Columbia University. To his credit, DeCoste recognizes his position of white privilege as "a problematic colonial norm (white researcher/black subjects)" that is "hopefully pushed back against by this collaboration" (232). In that spirit he envisions the project as "an effort at public-facing scholarship" (xiv) that places issues of race and social justice front and center in a work about music and culture.

*Can't be Faded* is organized as a joint project between a scholar and musicians. DeCoste introduces each chapter with what he calls "some political/contextual scaffolding" (xiv); that is, he presents sufficient historical information and ethnographic description to make sense of the conversations with band members that follow. His writing in these brief vignettes is lucid and compelling, combining crucial history with rich descriptions of joyful second line street celebrations, steamy club scenes, and the grittiness of life on the road. He doesn't shy away from controversial issues, reminding readers of the racist policing policies, disproportionate incarceration of Black youth, and post-Katrina gentrification that the band and their fans face daily in the city's Black, working-class neighborhoods. His commentary is at times provocative but never excessively heavy handed—rather he provides a springboard from which the band members can elaborate.

And elaborate they do, through extended conversations sprinkled with pertinent anecdotes. In the first chapter we meet several of the group's longtime members, including bandleader and tuba/trombone player Walter "Whoadie" Ramsey, trombonist Andrew "Drew" Baham, and saxophonist/music educator Virgil Tiller. They reminisce on how the band first came together through the merger of marching band players from two New Orleans rival high schools. They credit the training they received in their school bands for providing the firm musical foundation

and sense of discipline that proved invaluable in pursuing their careers as working musicians. As their stories unfold, we learn that the Stooges are more than a music unit. The band also functions as a sort of fraternal brotherhood, offering young Black men an alternative to the perils of street gang life, as well as an economic enterprise to provide a living for the members and their families. Some of the band's early proceeds went toward the purchase of several floors in a large apartment building. In what turned out to be an experiment in communal capitalism, they transformed it into the Livin Swell Recording Studios that doubled as office and rehearsal space. "The Stooges are run like a business," declares bandleader Walter, and one that demands time, discipline, and dedication.

Throughout the book various band members reveal the vicissitudes of brass band life. There are those transcendent moments when they "wind it up" with fans at local clubs like the Well and the Hi Lo Lounge, and when they commune with neighbors at second line parades and social aide gatherings. They recall with pride their excitement in winning the 2010 Red Bull Street King brass band competition and of producing their three main recordings: *It's About Time* (2003), *Street Music* (2013), and *Thursday Night House Party* (2016). And they take great satisfaction in knowing that the weekly music instruction classes that their senior members run at the Livin Swell compound are passing on the tradition to a younger generation of soon-to-be brass band players.



*Stooges Brass Band*

## Decolonizing Knowledge in Musical Biography (cont.)

Fortunately, the Stooges and DeCoste resist the temptation to overly romanticize the brass band experience. The endless labor needed to eke out a living as a musician is a frequent theme. They recount a typical Saturday when the band spends hours in the heat of a second line parade, then runs to several “black and white” wedding gigs, and completes the day with one or more evening club appearances. With many members now in or approaching their forties, the intense physicality of the job has begun to take its toll, as described in chapters devoted to the toil of working the local club circuit and the grind of summer touring in old vans prone to late night Interstate breakdowns.

Added to these routine daily challenges was the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In response to the collapse of the city’s economic and cultural infrastructure, the band split apart, only to regroup when Walter returned from Atlanta two years later. This was a turning point for the band. Out of necessity the Stooges expanded their outfit to include an indoor stage band with drum kit, keyboards, and guitars to complement their traditional street band configuration.

The most chilling chapter in the Stooges’ story bears the title of one of their original and most poignant songs, “Why They Had to Kill Him?” (Example 2). The piece is a tribute to one of the band’s ex-members, twenty-two-year-old trombonist “Little Joe” Williams. He was, ironically, on his way to play a funeral gig when he was stopped by the New Orleans Police for driving a stolen truck (the family claimed it was borrowed). As he was getting out of the vehicle and reaching for his trombone case, someone apparently yelled “gun” (he was in fact unarmed), and he was riddled with twenty-one bullets by three police officers. The song lyrics and the band members’ recollections are solemn reminders of the racist policing that was, and remains, a systemic issue in New Orleans’s Black neighborhoods. This should give present-day readers pause as they process the sad reality that this now-too-familiar scene took place more than a decade ago, years before we knew the names Michael Brown, Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, or George Floyd.



*Street Music* (2013) album cover

Example 2: “[Why They Had to Kill Him?](#)”—5 May 2016 at the Hi-Ho Lounge, New Orleans

As compelling as many of these individual stories are, parts of the book are not totally cohesive, and a few areas cry out for further commentary. The band members’ dialogues sometimes wander, resulting in the occasional unwinding of their narrative threads. What is also lacking is more discussion the band’s informal head arrangements. How do they balance melodic themes, riffing sections, and individual solo improvisations? What makes a good brass band arrangement, and a moving solo? And how does the band merge elements of contemporary R&B and hip hop with older funk and traditional jazz styles? These are not always easy concepts to put into words, but readers would benefit from hearing the Stooges expound in more detail about their music.

My other concern is the absence of any discussion of gender. The dozens of players whose stories form the core narrative of the book are all men. I understand that the brass band world is a male one, and, as DeCoste points out, the band affords young Black men the opportunity to gain a modicum of respect and economic independence that American culture too often denies them. Yet one

## Decolonizing Knowledge in Musical Biography (cont.)

cannot help but ask, “Where are the women?” Is this absence a result of early gender-instrument profiling back in middle and high school—adherence to the old trope that horns and drums are not for girls (this way to the flutes and glockenspiels ladies)? Does the current Stooges mission to teach young aspiring musicians extend to the recruitment of young women? These questions need to be asked.

These minor quibbles aside, *Can't be Faded* is, by every measure, an exemplary collaboration between the Stooges and DeCoste. Together they take us deep into the worlds, and indeed the heads, of New Orleans brass band musicians. Yet by his own admission, DeCoste had a strong hand in shaping and editing the narrative, so the specter of the white interlocuter never fully disappears. This begs the question of how the story might have differed if told by a Black co-author, perhaps a New Orleans-based insider? This is an unknown that will probably remain unknowable. But here's what we do know. There is no shortage of talented Black musicians in New Orleans, and for that matter across the United States (yes, Brooklyn's in the house), who probably never will make the media spotlight. Their stories need to be told in the name of cultural equity, social justice, and the celebration of art. To see that this history is presented from a variety of perspectives we need to encourage, and our institutions must support and hire, more BIPOC researchers and writers. This doesn't mean that white writers shouldn't be part of the mix, but if they are, they should take a lesson from DeCoste and the Stooges: more collaboration leads to more empowerment and more information being made available to diverse audiences.

Some readers may question if this sort of collaborative writing belongs on a University Press. After all, more than half of the text consists of spoken dialogue between lay musicians with little formal writing experience, rather than the carefully researched and well-polished expository prose of a professional scholar. A related issue is whether such co-authored works should count when scholars go up for tenure or promotion at their academic institutions. On both counts let me respond with a resounding “Hell yes!” If university presses and university music departments are ever going to break out of their myopic disciplinary bubbles and academic silos, and if they are ever going to seriously address issues of

racial justice, they need to bring more diverse voices to the table and to reach out to broader audiences. Or, as Stooges' trumpeter Al Grove remarked to DeCoste early on in the project, “it would be nice for all of us to be able to go up and show our grandkids a book of our story.” To that trombonist Drew Baham's added that the book should also include “some sort of social commentary” regarding the broader struggles facing band and their community (xiv).

We should applaud the efforts of the Stooges, Kyle DeCoste, and the University of Mississippi Press for bringing this work forward. Such co-authored biographies are one small step forward in the larger project of decolonizing knowledge and standing against institutional racism. And to the Stooges, happy belated anniversary!

# Conference Announcement: “Beyond Tokenism” Symposium

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## Pre-Conference Event, Teaching Music History Conference, 9 June 2022

We invite you to submit your ideas for the inaugural “Beyond Tokenism” Symposium scheduled for 9 June 2022, presented in partnership with the Hitchcock Institute for Studies in American Music. The Symposium will occur in collaboration with the Teaching Music History Conference (10–12 June) as a one-day pre-conference event, with presentations on site at the University of Missouri, Kansas City.

“Beyond Tokenism” is dedicated to helping music history instructors develop equitable and relevant pedagogies. To create equitable classrooms and develop relevant and equitable music history pedagogy—including courses for non-majors, and core and elective courses for majors—we need to move beyond tokenism, or the addition of a few works by non-White and non-male composers into traditional historical narratives. We need, instead, to rethink the purpose of teaching music history, highlight alternative historical narratives, and improve equitable instructional design. Two significant barriers to making meaningful changes in music history pedagogy are:

- The institutional structures (accreditation organization, entrance exams, textbooks, recruitment, outreach, attitudes, etc.) that condition the types of historical narratives that are taught, promoted, and reproduced;
- The traditional training that many music history instructors have received.

In order to effectively learn new materials and to manifest alternative narratives, we often need guidance—people with whom we build relationships, or a person who tells us what articles we need to read first, or resources that help us synthesize the new information we are receiving, and so on.

A CFP will be issued on the Beyond Tokenism website by 1 October 2021. After presenting and

workshopping materials at the symposium, we aim to publish each participant’s work on the “Beyond Tokenism” site for pedagogical use.

If you have any ideas for the symposium that you want to share, please email [musichistoryredo@gmail.com](mailto:musichistoryredo@gmail.com). Please submit abstracts no longer than 250 words to [musichistoryredo@gmail.com](mailto:musichistoryredo@gmail.com) by 1 January 2022. Topics that explore social justice and ways in which race, class, LGBTQ+ topics, nation, and disability intersect with music history are preferred.

You can click [here](#) to view the resources currently available on our site.

