

INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION

The Sixties, when *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* was written, were as wide open as American culture has been during my sixty-seven years. The Sixties were a garden of controversy, and, indeed, the decade remains controversial today among historians and social critics. Writers of the Right see the period as disruptive and divisive. Writers of the Left see it as liberating and progressive. For those of us who were involved with the arts and social action of the time, the Sixties were the good old days.

In 1966, the year *Four Lives* was published, many of the cause movements that are now assumed to be enduring parts in the American chorus were in their early stages of development. Modern feminism was beginning to be broadly spoken, like an esoteric new language, and was thought to be seditious even by men on the Left, who were having difficulty accepting that it was more than a fad. The writings of Rachel Carlson and other environmentalists were instilling a concern for earth, air, and water into the consciousness of a generation. The nuclear disarmament movement had propagated a pacifism that became

explosive after U.S. combat troops arrived in Vietnam in 1965. Resistance to that war was radical in 1966, though the universal draft later seemed to recruit more antiwar activists than it did soldiers.

Then there was the civil rights movement that inspired so many jazz compositions during the Sixties. The Warren Supreme Court had rendered its pivotal decision in the case of *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* twelve years earlier, and the massive civil (sometimes called “human”) rights movement that it stimulated was everywhere. In 1966, Martin Luther King was leading the so-called Meredith march in support of the integration of the law school of the University of Mississippi. It was during this march that the term *black power*—though coined years earlier in another context by Richard Wright—was broadcast. A heightened militance was further indicated by the election of Stokeley Carmichael to the head of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. The eloquent cultural nationalist Malcolm X had left the Nation of Islam to speak to and for a rising number of northern African-American activists.

Confrontation of the establishment and its standards inspired a fierce antimaterialism. Settlers in lower Manhattan (especially Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side, the latter being where Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and Jackie McLean lived) and the other artists’ enclaves of the city professed a high idealism for their causes, their way of living, their art. A certain shared alienation was the bond. An author in the *New York Times Magazine* wrote, “If you can imagine calling the police for any reason whatsoever, you have left the Lower East Side.”

I do not mean to beatify the twenty to forty year olds who populated the scene. There was a great deal of superficiality; a great deal of vacant hanging out; more bad art than good; and, worst of all, a lot of drugs. The propagation of a narcotic culture was, for me, the most regrettable aspect of the times.

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All of the features of the period were expressed in music. There were several modernist approaches to music making that assaulted the enduring traditional styles. Chance, aleatory, and electronic compositions were heard in the various venues that presented modern Western concert music. Jimi Hendricks led a new wave of rock and rollers who experimented with improvisation and recording techniques. As contemporary aestheticians apply the term *modernism* to twentieth-century aficionados who treated jazz as serious music and accepted its cultural base, so could a large folk movement that let middle class kids pitch traditional grassroots music in a contemporary key be called modernist. And a genuine avant-garde jumped out of the conventions of hard bop with radical new approaches to jazz improvisation.

The new jazz musicians wanted to break down tonal centers, well-defined chordal progressions, pat rhythms—any structures that they found inhibiting. Even bandstand comportment was changing. Sun Ra, the pianist and composer, dressed his band in costumes that were intended to suggest that the musicians were space travelers from ancient Egypt, with lights in their bonnets and incense in their hands. The vibraphonist Bobby Hutcherson told me about a gig with John Handy, the great alto saxophonist: “We were playing this tune that John wrote about the way that the Alabama policemen had set their dogs on the demonstrators. I played my solo, John went into his, and the rhythm section locked. John was doing it, really cooking. I was feeling it so much that I got down on my knees and started barking and growling. Then I started chewing on John’s pants cuff. After the set John said, ‘Bobby, what the hell’s the matter with you? What were you doing?’ I said, ‘Sorry, John, I was just into it.’ He said, ‘Yeah, but look at my pants!’ I had ripped them to shreds.”

The scene was wide open. Everyone was grabbing at the new: new thought, new art, a new world. This is the environ-

ment that *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* was written in: creative, excessive, committed, searching.

With this book I wanted to compare and contrast various aspects of the jazz world. There was Cecil Taylor, the New England Conservatory graduate, studious of contemporary music trends, theoretical, innovative, and uncompromising; jealous of his piano antecedents but alone in his style, fighting to be heard. Ornette Coleman, the autodidact from the slums of Fort Worth, who worked his way from rhythm and blues through bebop to an idiosyncratic innovation that has influenced two generations of jazz musicians. Jackie McLean, son of the mainstream, too hip for his own good, who swelled the voice of hard bop with a distinctive style and an open mind. And Herbie Nichols, too good to succeed, straight in a generation of junkies, one of the great jazz composers, though his music is only now gaining recognition, almost forty years after his death.

It is, of course, great music that makes these lives worth noting. Cecil Taylor's work is the densest of the lot, so it probably requires the most from the listener. It will not serve as background sound; you will never hear it on the elevator. (I could be wrong about this; thirty years ago I would have said that Thelonius Monk's compositions would never be adapted to Muzak, but there it is as you push your cart down the produce aisle.) But anyone who can enjoy, say, Bela Bartok or who can listen to the best of Art Tatum with concentration can benefit from an evening of Cecil Taylor. His music is very well made. It always proceeds according to a system and a carefully contrived structure. Pay close attention to all of those notes blasting over you, and you will perceive a lyricism that is frequently tender, always moving. Cecil is the most percussive of pianists, a characteristic that got him in trouble with the Bosendorfer Company, whose pianos he loved for their large sound and the extra octave in the bass of their grand. His standards are very high, and

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even today he has no patience with musicians who are unable, or unoriginal, or unwilling to fully live up to his music when they are on the stand with him.

Today, jazz musicians finally accept Ornette Coleman and acknowledge his originality. I credit this acceptance to the blues, which is both patent and potent in Ornette's song. It is in his phrases, his expansive harmonies, the ineffable distinction of his voice. But though almost all of the jazz musicians of my acquaintance quite happily admit to his importance, it is extremely rare to hear them play his brilliant compositions in their sets. This is probably because Ornette's work is so structurally unorthodox—like Herbie Nichols'—and would require great adaptation in the playing of most mainstream musicians.

Coleman has not compromised either. He holds tight to his conceptions, as indicated by his predilection for working with musicians whom he has trained for years, such as his son, De Nardo, a drummer, and the bassist Charnette Moffett, the son of Charlie Moffett, his drummer for many years.

Herbie Nichols has gained stature in the forty-five years since his death. Several musicians have issued recordings devoted to his compositions. The important trombonist and composer Russell Rudd has been most vocal in his advocacy of Nichols. There was a very fine recording a few years ago by a quintet of outstanding contemporary musicians that included the trombonist and composer George Lewis; the saxophonist Steve Lacy; the pianist Misha Mengelbert; Arjen Carter, bassist; and the drummer Hans Bennink. Their recording was devoted to the music that Nichols recorded for Blue Note.

There is one fluid ensemble, the Herbie Nichols Project, that was founded for the exclusive purpose of doing research on and performing the music of Herbie Nichols. The Herbie Nichols Project was derived from the seminal Jazz Composers' Orchestra in New York. The Project employs various combina-

tions of as many as twelve musicians to apply Nichols' work to horns as well as to the trio foundation that we know it by. Herbie would have been pleased, for he never heard the harmonic possibilities that he so carefully built into his pieces exploited by a band. The Herbie Nichols Project was able to amend the forty or so compositions that survived the flood in Nichols' father's basement (Herbie Nichols was said to have written as many as 170 pieces) with thirty others that they found in the archives of the Library of Congress, a major contribution to the jazz repertoire.

The three living musicians have settled into their years. All have achieved international stature; all are playing with the freshness and vigor of youth; none has gone commercial. All have been named "Jazz Masters" by the National Endowment for the Arts, the highest honorific that America offers to jazz musicians.

Cecil Taylor has been composer in residence at Johns Hopkins University. He has won a MacArthur Foundation "genius" award. Cecil has executed numerous commissions, two from the Rockefeller Foundation. One of these was a work for a twenty-eight piece orchestra that was performed at the Knitting Factory in New York. The other was for the Bang on a Can performance ensemble. He has had several duo concerts, including one with the late pianist and composer Mary Lou Williams; with the drum master Max Roach, whom Cecil calls "extraordinarily brilliant"; and with the powerhouse percussionist Elvin Jones, "who listens very closely to you," Taylor says. Elvin in turn calls Cecil "a great giant." Cecil also has held numerous poetry readings. He had the wisdom and good fortune to purchase a house in a rising neighborhood in Brooklyn at Atlantic and Flatbush Avenues before the real estate values went up. He goes dancing regularly at Arthur's.

Ornette gets numerous commissions as well, most in classical music. He has done some very interesting mixed media

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collaborations, including one with a scientist at a New York art gallery and another with body piercing performance artist Fakir Mustapha at the 1994 San Francisco Jazz Festival. One viewer described that event as “like being at the premier of the Rite of Spring.” While Mustapha shoved assorted pointed objects, including swords, through parts of his body, most of the audience screamed for him to get off the stage.

Ornette is enthusiastic about his work with musicians of other cultures. One performance that still stimulates his memory was with a master of an ancient two-stringed Chinese fiddle called the erhu. Coleman told him, “Take these notes and play them as if they were Chinese.” Ornette thought this to be one of his most successful concerts.

For his recording *Dancing in Your Head*, a wonderful world music synthesis, he traveled to the Djebala foothills of the Rif Mountains in Morocco to perform with the master musicians of the Jajouka village. This is the music of legend, for the Jajouka claim to have passed it down, generation to generation, for four thousand years. He told me, “I love to work with indigenous musicians because they’re not thinking about sharps and flats. They’re thinking about expression. Most Western music originates with the piano, so that limits musicians to the diatonic-chromatic system and inhibits the instrumentalists. I want a more human expression that’s not limited to tempered notes.”

This, of course, is the basis of the theory of harmolodics that Ornette has been developing for several years. According to Coleman, harmolodics is “a concept of sound and feeling that a person can adapt to his instrument the same way that an alphabet can make understandable words, then phrases, then complete statements.” Harmolodics would be inclusive of the diatonic-chromatic system as well as modes and other methods of organizing sound. He is planning a book on the theory.

With his second generation trio of Charnette Moffett and Denardo Coleman, Ornette works a number of the sixty or so jazz festivals that occur around the world each year.

Jackie McLean has grooved into a mature good life of music making and pedagogy in Hartford, Connecticut. He teaches at the Hart School of Music and at the Artists' Collective, the community cultural center that he and his wife of forever, Dolly, founded. Jackie also is the founder of the jazz department at Hart, where, now emeritus, he offers direction to the department, checks on its programs, and teaches about a month of the academic year. He names with pride several strong graduates who have trained under his tutelage.

Speaking of the way that musicians learn their craft today he told me, "It's not at all like when I was coming up. We were street musicians. We learned from older masters who took the younger cats into their bands. It's a tradition that goes back to Buddy Bolden taking in Bunk Johnson; to Art Blakey's band, which was like a school in itself. Now these kids have music schools and conservatories to go to, and they get to play and develop there. They have equipment that lets you slow the music down so that you can pick out solos and analyze them."

The entire jazz scene looks new to Jackie: "There aren't as many clubs as there were when I was coming up. But there are now concerts at universities and noncommercial places that didn't touch jazz in those days. These gigs are better for you anyway, because you aren't out working all night every night." And there isn't the same incidence of drug addiction as there was among McLean's generation. "There's plenty of drugs in the streets, but these young jazz musicians just seem to know better. We didn't know anything about what heroin could do to you when we got into it. But then, we didn't have AIDS to worry about either."

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So if the social life and the job scene are new, what about the recording industry? Jackie is not dismayed by the absorption of the independent jazz labels by multinational corporations but rather finds advantage in the fact that musicians like his son, the outstanding saxophonist Rene, are able to burn their own CDs and sell them at their concerts and through the Internet.

Jackie McLean is most proud of the work of the Artists' Collective. The Collective has been a source of artistic, educational, and social development for thousands of inner-city kids in Hartford. It offers classes in music and the visual arts and holds jazz concerts in its theater. For years the Collective occupied a former public school building. Then the McLeans, after years of struggle, were able to build a commodious new facility. "It was very, very satisfying to give this to the community," Jackie said. "It has everything you need: practice rooms, classrooms, a concert hall—everything."

McLean accepts as many concerts as he chooses and an occasional club date but no longer tours extensively. "No more local rhythm sections," he insists. He plays abroad a few times each year and finds the Japanese to be the most supportive of serious jazz. Particularly enjoyable to him are performances with the Dizzy Gillespie Alumni Orchestra, which includes such masters as the great saxophonist and flutist James Moody; John Faddis, the trumpet giant; and the trombonist and composer Slide Hampton, one of the most respected intellects in jazz.

The most impressive thing about Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, and Jackie McLean is that they all sound as young and fresh today as they did thirty-seven years ago when I first interviewed them for this book. That they no longer have to fight for audiences and the respect of their peers has allowed a certain mellowness to settle in, but each of them still manages to excite

Four Jazz Lives

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himself with his instrument. This is a gratifying state for artists who are in their seventies. You truly cannot begin to guess their age by listening to their music. It is the music that keeps them young and growing and alive in the world; it is their music that draws new generations to them. The same can almost be said of Herbie Nichols, too, whose music has brought him, at long last, new life.

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