Special Issue: Scoring Madly

Accidental Ideas: An Interview with Sara Landeau

Lindsey Eckenroth

Back in the pre-COVID times, I sat down with musician, teacher, and The Julie Ruin guitarist Sara Landeau at The Coffee Project in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. We talked composing, performing, teaching, timbre, genre, CBGB, inspirations from everywhere, rockumentaries, and the inexorable challenge of knowing when it's done. The following is an approximate transcript of our sprawling conversation.

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LE: To start, can you tell me about how you got into playing music, when you decided you wanted to make it your career, and how you made that happen?

SL: I thought I was going to go to art school, so I just planned to be an artist. I started playing drums at eighteen and guitar at nineteen. I got very into it … just practiced eight hours a day. Then I went to Columbia University for art history. I also worked at CBGB as a bartender, and my band played there. We were an all-woman band; there were three of us, and we played a lot because we all worked at CBGB. At the same time, I kept studying. I went to Juilliard for a while to study classical guitar, which was great, and I just kept taking courses. Then, starting in 2005, I became a volunteer at the Girls Rock Camp. I met Kathleen [Hanna] there—she was also a volunteer—and we started our band [The Julie Ruin] shortly after.[1] Kathleen and I had a lot of mutual friends from the scene, and definitely our idea of feminism was the same, plus we both liked the same music. I feel so lucky to have found a collaborator like her. Also she loves to sing and write, and I don't love to sing or write—words, that is. I don't write lyrics.

LE: Ah, excellent. I will come back to that because I want to ask about the distribution of authorship in the band. But to follow up for a second—CBGB, were you there until the end?

Sara Landeau performs with The Julie Ruin in Seattle
photo by Helen Marie Fletcher

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SL: Yes. I was the last bartender too, with the last dollar, giving out the last PBR.

LE: Wow. So, was it ceremonial or was it just … crazy?

SL: Patti Smith was playing. Everyone was crying. It wasn't as glamorous as you'd think; it was almost like a riot.

LE: Are you glad to have been there for that time?

SL: Definitely. I went to Columbia kind of late … I didn't get my B.A. until I was in my late twenties, and I was at CBGB that whole time. There was this academic side of me, which I loved, and then there was that [CBGB] side, which is how I grew up: in a punk, working-class scene. To have that balance was really important to me, but it was also kind of confusing when CBGB closed. I never wanted to quit; this had become my new family. We're all still really close.

LE: That's so cool. But I'll stop geeking out over CBGB. When you started playing music, how were you learning?

SL: Partly by ear. I also love taking lessons, and I was always looking for female teachers. I found a female drum teacher who I stayed with forever. I never found a female guitar teacher, which is why I started teaching guitar in 2003. I said, "I'm opening my own place to teach girls and women."

LE: That's fantastic. In terms of The Julie Ruin, how do you as a band—or even just you as an individual in the band—define yourself, in terms of genre or ideology or sound …

SL: So how we would label the band?

LE: Yeah. But you can feel free to move beyond that, because I feel like sometimes genre labels aren't necessarily suitable to capture the essence of a band, and they can be kind of demeaning or reductive.

SL: Kathleen is—I guess you know about Kathleen [Hanna]. Did you see *The Punk Singer*? Oh yeah, you work with rockumentaries, right? I wanted to ask you.

LE: I do! I definitely saw it. I have a chapter [in my dissertation] on music as labor, and I write a little bit about *The Punk Singer* [2013].

SL: What do you mean by music as labor?

LE: Well, the whole idea [for the chapter] started from me thinking about how often when you tell people who aren't musicians or artists that you do music for a living, they say, "that must be so fun! You just get to do what you love!" It's like ok yes, but also this is *work*, and I started thinking, where do these ideas come from? And to a certain extent, I think they come from rockumentaries, because these films tend to mystify the labor that went into the music, furthering the idea that making music is just this pursuit of artistic ecstasy at all times.

SL: Yes.

LE: When I watched *The Punk Singer*, the scene that really hit me is when she [Kathleen Hanna] talks about losing her voice. She describes how her voice was like a bullet, and she could always hit the target, but then suddenly she couldn't. I felt that moment really illustrated how much labor is involved in the continual vocalization night after night, especially in a touring scenario.

SL: That makes a lot of sense.

LE: I'm glad!

SL: I've watched a lot of documentaries, like the one about the Roland TR-808 drum machine [the 2005 film *808*]. I've watched tons of them. And it's always a series of talking heads. Usually, it's men talking about something. It's fantasy! And I think, I want to know how they learned to play guitar! You didn't just show up in the studio and all of a sudden you wrote the song. Why can't you tell me about all the time you spent in your basement practicing? How did you get there? Why is that part of the story so often missing?

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LE: Totally. And what about all the things you did that didn't work?

SL: Yes. I understand music is supposed to be this magical idea for the public, but it's a series of descendants. Inspirations from everywhere. I'm the first to admit I practiced *so much*, and I still don't ever feel good enough. I get a lot of girl guitar students who say, "My boyfriend just grabs the guitar and does this," but I'm like, he doesn't tell you how he spent six hours a day in his parents' basement as a teenager working on this to impress you. That should be more told, the actual hard work that goes into becoming proficient on an instrument. I really believe in that. And demystifying that is important for people in any artistic field.

LE: Yes! And I feel like it's very connected to people's willingness to pay for music, remembering that there are working humans behind this who need to live.
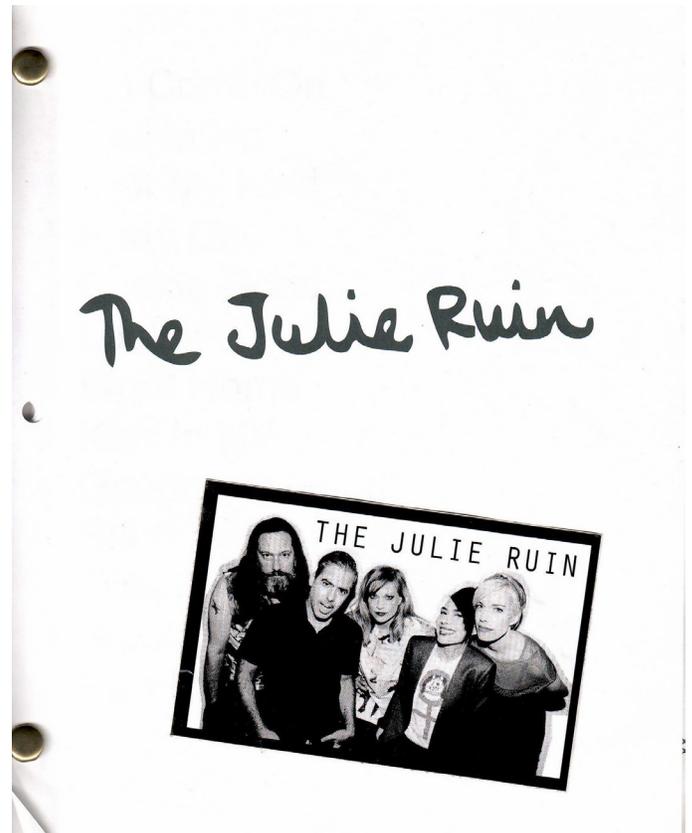
SL: Absolutely. So as far as do you want to know our approach to writing the music or…?

LE: Yes…I'm sort of curious…well obviously Kathleen is incredibly associated with riot grrrl. So I wonder if you as a band still think of yourselves as part of this lineage, or if you feel departed from it, or if you are just like "People please stop referencing riot grrrl, that was thirty years ago."

SL: That's funny, because it's a conversation we've had a lot.

LE: Really? Interesting.

SL: Well let me approach this with a little background. Our keyboardist Kenny [Mellman] was a big cabaret star. He's played Joe's Pub, Carnegie Hall … He's huge in the cabaret world, and he's also the best piano player I've ever played with, hands down. So he comes in from a background that's conservatory trained. I can also read notation and talk theory. The rest of the band, they talk feeling, so they'll say, "Can you play that meow meow meow part again?" and that sort of thing. And then Kenny's like, "What's that?" and I'm like, "She means the minor chord." So we

Front cover of Sara Landeau's Julie Ruin notebook

all come from different areas. Obviously Kenny's classically trained, and I came from more from pop/rock/jazz, and experimental guitar. I do a lot of drone stuff, work a bunch with pedals, that sort of thing. Our drummer [Carmine Covelli] comes from more of a rock background, and so does Kathi [Wilcox, bassist], who was in Bikini Kill. We wrote pretty much of the first album [*Run Fast*, 2013], and then Kathi came in on bass. She's got all these years of touring experience; she's just so solid. One thing we wanted for *Run Fast* was to write songs that were very different from one another, because we had so many influences and come from different backgrounds. In terms of composition, I'm always thinking, you don't want to completely compose something that doesn't relate to anybody. So you need to find, I guess you might say in academia, cultural signifiers.

LE: In terms of genre, inspirations, things like that?

SL: Yes. We have some things that we'll never let go. I always have some distortion on my guitar, and Kenny always has a little bit of cabaret, and Kathleen has a

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mission. These things make a band. In the end, there's always going to be dance and punk, because we all come from that. So it's very hard to label it because we're all huge music fans with diverse interests. When you're there with five people collaborating, and we all get so excited about so much music, it's really hard to narrow down. I'd say punk and dance are central, but it's also not just that …

LE: That makes so much sense. In the end, I always come back to genres being problems, because music is rarely just one thing. There's so much in The Julie Ruin's music…it's definitely dancey, then there are these more experimental electronic moments, but it's also punkey. Kathleen's vocals have always struck me as very punk just because she's so declamatory. Also her voice is aging in the best way!

SL: I agree!

LE: I hope she knows that. It's so good.

SL: I love her voice. In fact when I first met her—I can't remember who we were playing with—but I said, "Your punk voice is my favorite punk voice." There are a lot of punk voices that are great, like Debbie Harry; she was a big idol for me when I was younger. I also like bands like The Raincoats, X-Ray Spex … I was a big fan of those kinds of vocals. But there's something about Kathleen's voice that's perfect. I thought, you're exactly who I want to work with.

LE: Absolutely. More specifically, about your guitar sound in the context of The Julie Ruin: do you think a lot about it works with Kathleen's voice? Because there are times when the melding of those really strikes me, like on "Planet You." You have a solo on that track, and the timbre matches so perfectly with her voice.

SL: That's funny you said that song, because that one we particularly wanted to do that way.

LE: Oh wow! So could you maybe talk a bit about the songwriting process, and when decisions like that would come into play?

SL: Sure. When we started up as a band, everyone was so busy. We developed this method where we'd put samples of stuff we'd write, or snippets of things, into Dropbox. They were all .wav files. I put tons in! A lot of them we didn't end up using. Sometimes I'd write a bassline and guitar part, play them together, and just put them in there. Or I'd be bored playing around and suddenly do something I liked, so I'd throw it in. Then as a band we'd go through them, like, "Ok let's try something with that one." For example, there's a song where Kathleen really liked the beat. So she messed with it and then the time signature got really weird, and she sent it to us and the drummer was like, "I don't want to play that!" But I said, "No I see where we're going …" So there is a lot of working with mistakes and then turning them into songs. I would say almost all of our songs are written that way, with accidental ideas.

Also a lot of it was generated electronically. One of us would make some loops, we'd play them back in the studio, and then we would recreate them acoustically. The original would be this little electronic thing that someone did at home on MIDI, and when we recreate it acoustically, it grows into 3D. It's crazy how that can work. Then the sounds obviously shift; a guitar string is going to sound different than a MIDI, and an acoustic drum kit has really made the difference, especially compared to Kathleen's older band Le Tigre. So yeah, inputting all of these electronic pieces and turning them into live acoustic sounds.

Dropbox is a fabulous thing because you can be anywhere in the world and you can go through and listen, make alterations, and then everyone shows up to rehearsal ready. We're a Dropbox band, which is weird to say.

LE: But it makes sense to me from what you're describing, how you started with these discrete ideas and then worked on how to layer them.

SL: Another big thing is that we have different approaches; a guitarist writes differently than a keyboardist. So, Kenny will say flats, I will say sharps, and our harmonies are completely different. So that

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made the songs interesting too, because we'd write a lot of parts together.

LE: So, there's almost a tension between these two modes, and part of the composition is working that out?

SL: Right. And a good tension, because I'll play something, and Kenny will say, "Whoa, I've never thought about that."

LE: Going back to your shared Dropbox for a second: did you name the files?

SL: Yes, they all have nicknames.

LE: Can you give me examples?

SL: Well, there were always some kinda surf songs, so it'd be "surf song 1," "surf song 2"… there was "Devo song," when we were working on a kind of Devo-esque thing. Some of them have crazy names. But what would usually happen was, we'd record our practice, because a week later we don't remember what we did. Then during the week, Kathleen listens to the recording and writes words over it.

LE: Ah, so the lyrics typically come last, or at least later in the process?

SL: Yes.

LE: Is that Kathleen's preference, or is it more of a group decision to work that way?

SL: It works for everyone, because it turns into: the Dropbox snippets—sketches, we'd often call them— get turned into a three-to-five minute thing, and we do a bunch of them, and then Kathleen takes the recordings home and says, "This one, I feel this over this."

LE: Does it ever happen that she comes back with something and you feel differently about what you'd like to do sonically, in relation to her lyrics or melody?

SL: She's come back with melodies that I *in a million*

"I Decide" lyrics with Landeau's composition notes

years would never have thought to put over what we recorded. It's amazing. There was one track where I thought, "I have no idea what we're going to do with this," and she came back with something so far beyond my expectations; that was for "Mr. So-and-So."

LE: Oh, that's such a great song!

SL: Yes, it's funny. The video, too.

LE: Yes! The whole song is so satirical and snide … I love it. I noticed that all the band members are always credited as authors, and that seems to be consistent with what you're describing as the composition process, so would you say The Julie Ruin follows a model of collective authorship?

SL: Completely. In terms of lyrics: Kenny wrote some lyrics on what he sings. So I'd say most of the lyrics are Kathleen, with some from Kenny. Kathy and I sing back-up sometimes, but I've never written any lyrics.

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LE: And it sounds like you prefer it that way.

SL: Yes. I always want to be like the producer, the sound person. I like being a musician; I'm totally too shy to sing. Back-up singing is fun though. With that, I'm fine. It seems like every time I tell someone I'm a musician, they think I'm a singer.

LE: Ugh. Such a gendered assumption.

SL: It is. I like the textures, and I love guitar pedals and nerding out with that forever, and composing, and doing experimental electronic music; I'm just really happy with that.

LE: I'm curious about how you as a band talk about timbre, because I feel like it escapes language in a lot of ways. What kinds of words or phrases do you use … like when you said before about referring to the "meow meow meow part …"

SL: [Laughs] That is part of our language, definitely; we all say "the meow meow meow part." I think timbre is everything, and lately I've been obsessed with it, probably from learning more about electronic music and how to build sound installations. I know everything comes together, but timbre is the emotion. In composing in the rehearsal room, I think the sounds are equally important to the forms, and to the message. There is definitely a nod to nostalgia in everything we do, but we don't want to be time-stamped; we'd like to avoid ephemeral fads that could stereotype the results. At the same time we love dance and punk music, but we have tried very hard to create a new sound. Creating a new guitar sound is my goal, but it's a work in progress. You never feel it's done.

LE: In terms of completion then, how do you find the moment when the song is done?

SL: That's where my problem is; it's very hard to finish music. Whether I'm doing something with the band or just for myself, I never feel that it's done.

LE: I feel the same way about my writing! Like, when is it done? It's when I've hit the deadline, or when it gets published.

SL: Right!

LE: So for you, there's a moment in the studio?

SL: Yes, that's pretty much it. Kathleen has a helpful way of saying, "It's done." I will keep composing until someone stops me, but she is able to say, "We're moving on, we're putting this on the album." To have someone who can do that is so important in collaborations. Do you have someone like that in your life?

LE: My whole life it's always been deadlines, held by various people. Especially now that I have publications … invariably it'll be the minute before it's due and there I am tweaking that same freaking sentence. That's my nature and I try to accept it. And there's something comforting about working under pressure; you're held by this knowledge that it ends right over here.

SL: I totally agree. Some people are very successful not needing that, making self-imposed deadlines. But obviously you call up a mixing and mastering service, you go in and you have to be ready, and then it's done. But listening back, I always think "Ah I want to change this one thing."

LE: Totally. Do you ever do that in live performance? Do you tend to deviate from the recorded versions, or is it pretty straight?

SL: It's pretty straight, at least for me. We try to let Kathleen do whatever she wants.

LE: Ah. You all remain consistent so that Kathleen feels like she has the support to experiment?

SL: Right. I would call that, in musical terms, foreground in motion. So sounds are the timbre, the harmony, the timing, and then I feel like our motion is in the foreground. The guitar and the keyboard are too, but I want her to have the freedom to go off. Although there are a couple songs where I'll improvise, because I know she's good.

LE: Back to composition, do you notate anything for

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yourself, or does the band collectively write anything down?

SL: I write down everything. When I handwrite, it helps me remember. And Kathleen writes everything down with colored markers. You could make an exhibit of these set lists because they're all like different colors … she's very visual person. In fact, all of us except for Kenny went to art school, so there's definitely a visual component. But as far as "real" notation, not in this band; it almost looks like hieroglyphics.

LE: That's so cool. Is what's written mutually intelligible by multiple members?

SL: No way would anybody be able to read mine! I do a lot of guitar tab really fast. I'll write out the tab and then the rhythms and everything, because I love notation. Maybe that's weird in the punk world, but I really love writing things down.

The Julie Ruin setlist in progress

LE: Well, notation is beautiful! It sounds like writing things down is partially memory-oriented and partially an aesthetic practice for you then.

SL: Exactly. But you know, it would have been different twenty years ago. Now it's so easy to record with your phone. My first band, Chiclets—we just had a tape recorder in the middle of the room for rehearsal. We'd have to put it in a cassette, record, and that's all we had. It was one tape, so we couldn't all go home and listen to it.

LE: [Laughs] Right! So this was the CBGB-era band?

SL: Right.

LE: Turning quickly to gender: how much do you feel like the specter of rock's masculinity impacts either you or your private guitar students?

SL: I feel that I live in a bubble, because I work with a lot of girls and women, and within a queer scene where it's not an issue. But then I go on tour and I'm like, "Oh yeah, I forgot, it's a bigger world." Europe has been great. Australia, too ... maybe the bubble came with us, I don't know. But in some of America I feel there's still an antiquated question of, why are women being loud? I'm a soft-spoken girl, but I think my alter ego is very loud. I'm from the Midwest, and I've found that some people there have a hard time understanding the loudness; that's a situation that came up on the West Coast, too.

But also regarding the masculinity question, I feel like it's dying out. I do feel there are not enough women in audio, though. When I've talked to most female musicians, they try to record their music and it doesn't come out the way they want. That's part of the reason I've gotten into recording, to help produce and say, "This is your vision." We've just gotta keep on pushing, because it's unfamiliar territory. There are a lot more female drummers, which I'm really excited about. When I started on drums I felt like people would be super surprised, and then now it doesn't feel that way. At least for me.

Accidental Ideas (cont.)

The Julie Ruin performing at Irving Plaza
left to right: Kenny Mellman, Sara Landeau, Carmine Covelli, Kathleen Hanna
photo by Helen Marie Fletcher

LE: I feel like, at least in the pop/rock world, drums are the last frontier in terms of the exclusive gendering of instruments. It makes me think of that rockumentary *Hit So Hard* [2011], which does a great job of constructing a historical lineage of female drummers.

SL: Yes!

LE: So, in conclusion, a fun question: what are some of your most memorable or best performance experiences?

SL: There are so many! I got to open for The Raincoats solo at The Kitchen, and I would say that was the best of night of my life. I played just with pedals, one song that I wrote about them. Right after me Bikini Kill did a secret show, the very first one announcing they were coming back. Then The Raincoats played, and they were so good.

LE: That's amazing! What about memorable Julie Ruin shows?

SL: There were some great shows in California. There was one, and there was this all-teenage-girl mosh pit,

which was incredible to watch. The only man there was like maybe a guy in the back. My joke was that it was someone's boyfriend, and he was there just so the girl could hand him her glasses and be like, "I'm going in!" These girls were tearing it up. Another favorite was a show we played in Tasmania, because I never thought I would go there in my life. We were facing the mountains and on no sleep … my band doesn't even remember the show because they were so tired. But to me, it was almost like I was on acid, just thinking, "I can't believe I'm here."

LE: That sounds fabulous. Well, on that note, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me, and for your music.

Notes

1. Kathleen Hanna is a NYC-based musician and artist. She is well-known for the major role she played in the formation of the riot grrrl movement of the 1990s and as a member of the punk band Bikini Kill. Prior to her work with The Julie Ruin, Hanna also released a solo album (1997) and was a member of the electronic rock/punk band Le Tigre, which released three albums between 1999 and 2004.

two places at the level of the voltage
Dominic Coles

"Because, indeed, isn't 'blurred' just another word for 'connection'?" —Tracy McMullen

two places at the level of the voltage emphasizes connections between recordings made in Kolkata and New York City through their participation in a shared electrical field. Heard as containers for discrete conceptions of place and home, these recordings are reduced to their most foundational logic: disruptions in air which are converted into electrical impulses through the mechanics of the microphone. These electrical impulses become the primary material of the piece: once reduced to their electrical forms, these recordings of disparate places become indistinguishable from one another, participating in a shared and fluid field of electricity.

Institute News

As I write this installment of the Hitchcock Institute's News, my social media feeds are bursting with tributes: today is the fourth anniversary of the mass shooting at Pulse Nightclub in Florida; not one, but two memorial services are taking place for Brooklyn College faculty and staff taken too soon by COVID-19; and at the center of it all is the resurgence of antiracist activism following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police. As faculty and staff of a research institute that focuses on the ways American music reflects American culture, we have to take this moment to reflect upon our Institute's past complicity in a Euro-American music research agenda, and renew our commitment to work that reflects the complexity and diversity of our city, the students we teach, and the creative artists that surround us in America writ large. In contemplating these ideas, we at HISAM realized that we needed to write a mission statement that articulates the way forward for the Institute. We welcome the feedback of our readers on what follows:

> *The H. Wiley Hitchcock Institute for Studies in American Music at Brooklyn College (HISAM) supports American music scholarship, pedagogy, and performances. We recognize and seek to connect diverse local, national, and global musical practices across a broad spectrum of oral, popular, and art music traditions. We represent scholars, performers, and creators that reflect the racial, economic, and gender diversity of our students, faculty, community, and the world. Through our biannual publication,* American Music Review, *the Polycultural America Speaker Series, monographs, collection of oral histories, and forums for public musicology, the faculty and staff of HISAM seek to resist systems of oppression, acknowledge the privileges of whiteness, strive for social justice, and publicly promote antiracism.*

In the same spirit of dismantling old narratives, this issue of *American Music Review* re-examines the concept of musical score through the work of six different artists and media, in a group of articles and works we dubbed "Scoring Madly." While European classical music traditions tend to rely heavily on a notated score, here the authors examine compositional and performance practices in American musics that either reimagine the nature of "score" (Lindsey Eckenroth on Sara Landeau; Michelle Yom on Cecil Taylor); utilize a hybrid of oral tradition and other scoring methods (Jeryl Johnston on her own work); or envision the production process that happens in the recording studio as a way of scoring (Will Fulton on First Priority hip hop in Brooklyn). Jordan Stokes' review of *Transmedia Directors* (Bloomsbury 2020) rounds out the issue by examining the connections between media scoring and directors' vision. We also invited composers to publish examples of work that represent music in ways that defy the concept of "score": Dominic Coles' *two places at the level of the voltage* and Dean Rosenthal's *Unconfirmed Report* each create a new system of meaning for performers, breaking out of the bars of traditional western notation.

During this extraordinary academic semester, the faculty and staff of the Hitchcock Institute have invigorated HISAM's social media campaign to reflect the Institute's rich history of scholarship on Black artists and queer artists. Beginning in Fall 2020, our social media will feature a series of video clips from Brooklyn-based musicians and composers, as well as archival audio from the HISAM files. To follow, find us on Facebook, Instagram (@hisam_bc), and Twitter.

HISAM Director **Jeff Taylor**'s sabbatical year has continued into Spring 2020. Though the pandemic cut short his research trips, he has been working at home on both his book on Earl Hines and Chicago and a study of the musical legacies of the player piano. In February, just before the curtain of COVID fell, he gave a talk at Carleton College on "Revisiting Jazz Biography." He continues to join a chorus of quarantined musical neighbors in frequent practice sessions. Managing Editor **Lindsey Eckenroth** had the pleasure of playing flute in two pieces on the inaugural Ukrainian Contemporary Music Festival (UCMF) back in February, one of which was conducted by Whitney George. Lindsey was all set to give a paper on the MC5 at this year's IASPM-US conference in Ann Arbor, but the world had

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other ideas. So, she looks forward to presenting at the rescheduled conference next spring. HISAM Assistant **Whitney George** was commissioned by New Camerata Opera to write music for their film opera, *Julie*, in 2018–19. The opera was recorded in November/December 2019 with instrumental performances by The Curiosity Cabinet. Directed by Chloe Treat, the work was released in June 2020 (just in time to celebrate Pride). You can watch the entire opera [here](#).

Continuing in my role as Interim Director this spring, I brought together HISAM and the Brooklyn College Listening Project in an effort to connect our general education music courses with collecting Brooklyn Oral Histories. HISAMers Ray Allen, Lindsey Eckenroth, and Whitney George, as well as nine additional faculty and staff participated in the project, which resulted in the gathering of hundreds of Brooklyn College students' interviews with family, friends, and neighbors about a breadth of music experiences across the borough. Meanwhile, I managed to squeeze in visits to archives at San Francisco Opera and San Diego Opera before the COVID-19 lockdown in March, and speak at a virtual symposium on Music and Disability at McGill University in April.

I thank all of you for your continued support and readership of *American Music Review*. Please feel free to share your ideas and feedback on our mission statement and/or this Issue of *AMR* at hisam@brooklyn.cuny.edu.

> In solidarity,
> Stephanie Jensen-Moulton

HISAM meeting, remote style (May 2020)

Top Billin': First Priority Music and Brooklyn's Local Hip Hop History

Will Fulton

In the ever-changing cityscape of Brooklyn, little evidence remains on the streets of the vibrant early years of hip hop culture that existed in 1980s. Though a significant culprit may be gentrification, part of the reason for the absence stems from the ephemeral nature of the music business itself. The sites of that industry——recording studios, record companies, record stores, and nightclubs— have only occasionally survived through civic support or been considered landmarks. Further, often due to the increasingly high cost of living and changing demographics in the borough's once-predominantly African American neighborhoods, many of the participant rappers, deejays, producers, and promoters in the early days of Brooklyn hip hop culture have since moved away.

L-R: Milk Dee, Gizmo (in red hat), MC Lyte, King of Chill, and engineer Yoram Yazzul at Firehouse Studios, 1988

While the cultural sites that supported hip hop music in its early years all but disappeared in some borough neighborhoods, the records produced by Brooklyn rap soloists and groups in the 1980s capture the borough's critical contributions to hip hop's vibrant first decades. Long before the images of hip hop stars were used to elevate Brooklyn's cultural cache during city-sponsored urban development projects like Forest City Ratner, local performers such as Audio Two and rappers such as MC Lyte (Lana Moorer) were producing recordings that captivated the city. Collectively they employed innovative techniques that redefined what was possible in hip hop, and mainstream music in general. Their locally-produced records stand as sonic reminders of the importance of DIY production at a critical period in the history of hip hop.

During this era, 12" singles served as both the primary mode of transmission and sonic artifact of hip hop culture. They reflected a distinct mode of cultural production, and their legacy with local hip hop fans was reinforced every time the record was played by a deejay on the radio, at the club, or block party. These events were then memorialized on homemade cassettes that teenagers commonly traded 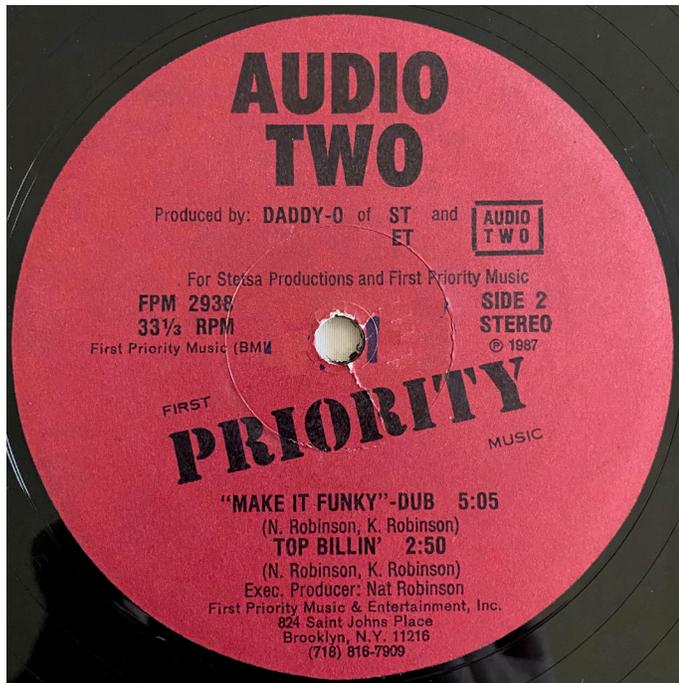for boombox or headphone listening. The success of a hip hop record could be judged by the number of times it was heard coming out of cars or radio speakers, and the speed that fans memorized and recited the lyrics.

Given this history, understanding how these records were conceived, produced, sold, distributed, and received is critical to understanding local hip hop culture. A prime example is the story of the First Priority Music label, a Brooklyn-based independent label run by former club promoter Nat Robinson with his teenage sons Kirk Robinson (Milk Dee) and Nat Robinson Jr. (Gizmo), who recorded as Audio Two. Their struggles and accomplishments exemplify how Brooklyn entrepreneurs (often before they turned eighteen) redefined what was possible in the music industry.

Kirk chose "Milk Dee" as his rap name in the fifth grade, and recalls his classmates laughing at him when he arrived on the bus wearing a windbreaker with a custom emblem bearing the name in 1981. Later, while attending Brooklyn Technical High School with his friend and neighbor King of Chill, who had a group called the Alliance of MCs, Milk recalled:

Top Billin' (cont.)

Audio Two, "Make It Funky"/"Top Billin'" 12" Single
First Priority Music, 1987
photo courtesy of DJ Eclipse

"We both lived in Bed Stuy, I lived on Halsey, and [King of Chill] lived on Sterling, and his DJ lived near there. And at that point, we met, and me and Giz[mo] would go over to his DJ's house, and we would rhyme, and we were making routines, like [Bronx pioneers] the Cold Crush [Brothers]. And we became friends."[1]

Their early attempts convinced them both that they should have their own record label and their own recording equipment. Milk eventually persuaded his father to invest in the project. He and his brother, Gizmo, made their first recording as Audio Two in 1985 for MCM Records, a label run by a club promoter friend of their father. Milk recalls that they "went into the studio, and they had an MCI board, thirty-six tracks, we were recording on twenty-four tracks. After doing that record, that's when I decided, like 'Yo, I could be a producer, I want to make the beat myself.'"[2] Meanwhile his father, Nat Robinson, using the MCM label and services but paying all the bills himself, decided, "we might as well start our own label."[3] In addition, he wanted to find a way to cut down on the high recording studio costs by buying home recording equipment: "We're paying all this money per hour, and we're not professionals, so we're spending like crazy hours. We're getting into a thousand dollars for one song! So at that point, Milk says 'I want to experiment more,' and we gave him the four-track [recorder]."[4]

After their parents' divorce, the Robinson sons moved in with their father, leaving Bed Stuy for Staten Island, and setting up a studio in the basement with a cassette-based Tascam 246 four-track cassette recorder, two Roland drum machines (a 707 and a 727), and a Boss sampling delay guitar pedal. While contemporaneous digital samplers were too expensive for the fledgling producers, using the guitar pedal was an ingenious, inexpensive workaround. The Robinsons connected with local Brooklyn celebrity DJ Cutmaster DC who, following a recent success with his "Brooklyn's in the House" single, had also relocated to Staten Island. DC helped them set up the studio, but Milk remembers everyone telling him "you can't do a record on a four-track!" But "the more they kept sayin' it, the more determined my father was for us to do songs on the four-track."[5]

While Milk's makeshift studio was downstairs, his father set up a makeshift record label office upstairs crowded with records, as he describes:

Milk Dee's Tascam 246 four-track recorder
photo courtesy of Milk Dee [Kirk Robinson]

Top Billin' (cont.)

The First Priority office was in my home in the beginning, we were working out of the house. So all the boys, when you'd eat your dinner, 'cause you know you had wax in those days. So we had so many records coming in from all parts, different manufacturers, and we had them in the house. So what we had to do, our dining room, our living room was just completely full of boxes of records. So the guys used to pile four boxes of records on top of each other, and at dinner time, you'd get yourself a chair and you get four boxes of records and you'd put your plate on top of the records.[6]

When the first Audio Two/Alliance EP failed to gain traction in 1986, Milk, his brother Gizmo, and their friends continued to experiment with new songs in his home studio on the cassette-based four-track machine. Meanwhile, his father relocated the newly christened First Priority Music to a storefront at 824 St. Johns Place, on the corner of Nostrand Avenue in Brooklyn.

Milk had met Brooklyn rapper Daddy-O of Stetsasonic at a local studio while recording their first records. Nat Robinson was impressed and soon enlisted Daddy-O to help with his kids' productions and his fledgling label. The collaboration would soon prove fruitful. Milk recalled the evening when he introduced Daddy-O to his off-kilter rearrangement of the Honey Drippers' "Impeach The President," which featured a funky introductory drumbeat that was popular with rappers, and would provide the instrumental track for the group's "Top Billin'":

And that night (in my basement), I came up with the beat for "Top Billin'," I liked it, put the rhyme down, that song took a total of thirty minutes. The guitar pedal only allows you to record two seconds. And, that's it. And that's why, with "Impeach," it's just kick, hat, snare. That's all that would fit into the pedal. Every time the kick hits, it plays the kick, hi-hat and snare, unless I cut it off with another kick.[7]

Figure 1 shows the opening drums of the Honeydrippers' "Impeach The President," outlining the section sampled in "Top Billin'." Figure 2 shows the arrangement of samples triggered in "Top Billin'." Note that the audio waveform is significantly altered due to low-resolution sampling in the guitar pedal. In the early days of hip hop sampling, influenced by the technical limitations of the guitar pedal sampler, Milk had created something quite original: a stuttered, atomized version of a popular drumbeat with a rhythmic pattern that shifted from measure to measure. The low-resolution guitar pedal sample and the offbeat reconfiguration of the "Impeach The President" drums, coupled with Milk's high pitched voice, made "Top Billin'" a highly unusual track. To this, Daddy-O added a vocal sample from his recent 12" single to highlight the borough, and felt they had something special:

We grabbed the 'Go Brooklyn!' [chant] 'cause we got a thing called 'Go Brooklyn' on the [Stetsasonic] 'Go Stetsa' 12. So we [sampled]
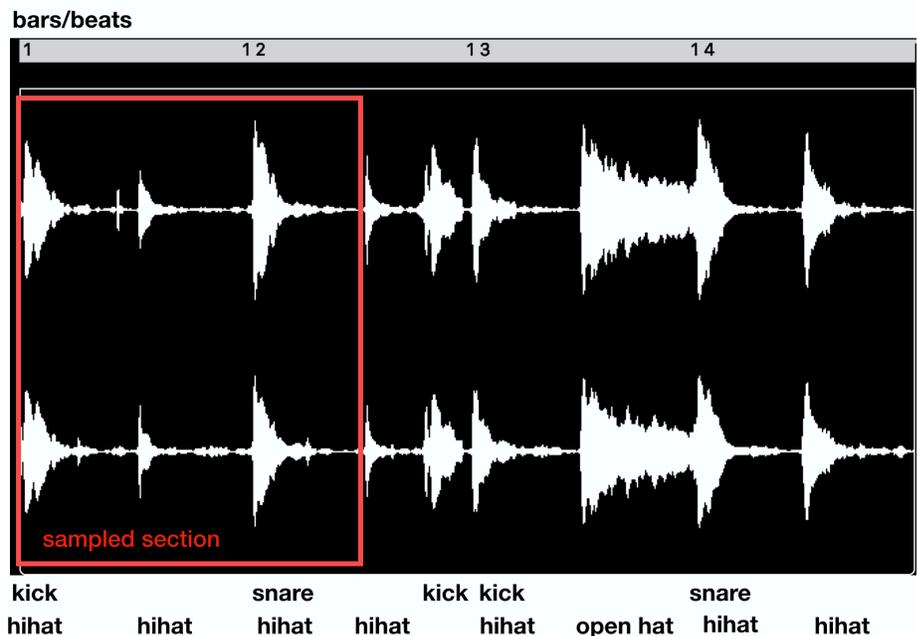

Figure 1: Honeydrippers, "Impeach The President" (Alaga, 1973) Waveform of opening measures
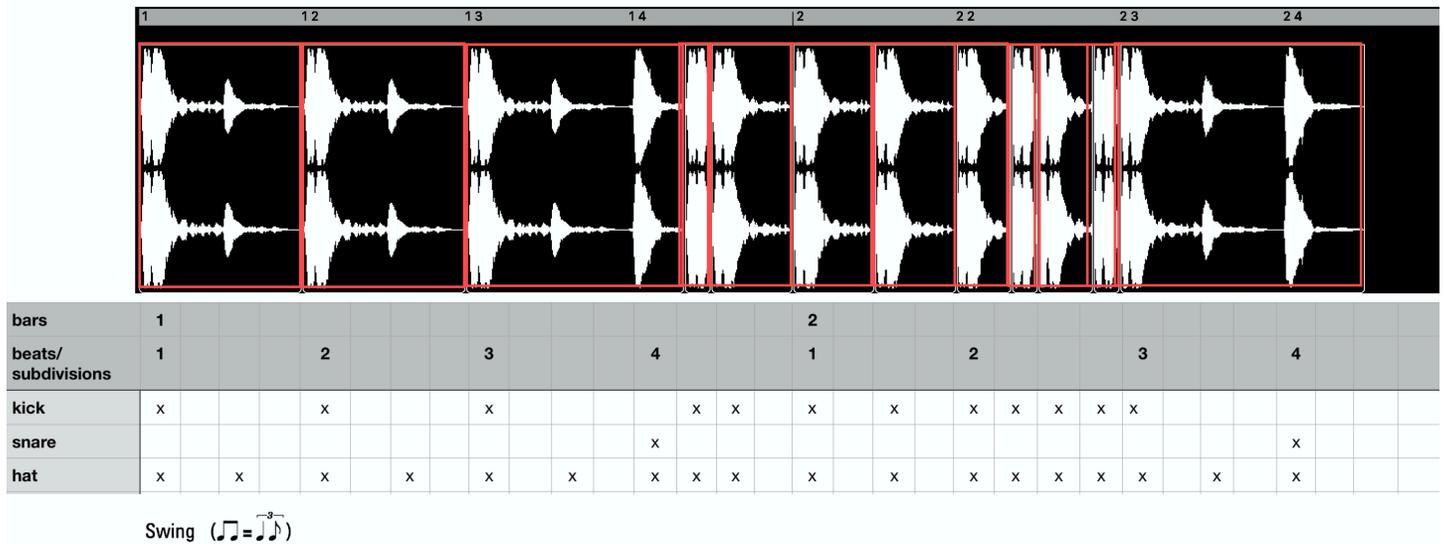
Top Billin' (cont.)

bars	1								2							
beats/subdivisions	1		2		3		4		1		2		3		4	
kick	x		x		x			x x	x	x	x x x x x					
snare							x								x	
hat	x	x	x	x	x	x	x x x		x		x x x x x		x		x

Swing (♫ = ⁀³♩♪)

Figure 2: Audio Two, "Top Billin'" (First Priority Music, 1987)
Sample arrangement of opening measures; Graphic arrangement technique developed by Patrick Rivers

a little bit of that 'Go Brooklyn.' I said, 'this is gonna be a big [DJ] Red Alert record!'[8]

They pressed the record, with "Top Billin'" as the B-side. But DJ Red Alert, then the most influential hip hop DJ in New York, wouldn't play it. For months, Audio Two's "Make It Funky"/"Top Billin'" single found few supporters. The family went to work promoting from the First Priority office on St. Johns Ave in Brooklyn. But it was slow going. Milk recalls:

When we released "Top Billin'" every DJ that we sent it to said it was wack. They said "Top Billin'" was wack. [They said] 'He sounds like a girl!' It took us a year, of constant, we were sending out records every day. My father pressed 50,000 records. The people at the post office, when they would see us comin' they would just let us in the back. And I'm talking about typing up the labels individually on a typewriter, putting the records in an envelope with an insert. We had boxes of the records in the car, and we were driving around to record stores, tryin' to get them to put the records in the stores.[9]

The Robinsons had little knowledge of how to proceed with their records. For distribution of their initial pressings, they relied on two local Brooklyn record stores, Birdel's on Nostrand Avenue and Soul Shack on Pitkin Avenue, which served the Black community and had recently incorporated a section for rap records. Eventually their efforts with these and other Mom and Pop record stores paid off.

When record distribution became overwhelming for the family-run label, Nat Robinson took his records to Pearl One Stop, a record distributor on 20th Street in Brooklyn that agreed to distribute it to local stores for a per-record fee. One-stop distributors like Pearl were an essential part of independent music business network in New York, working with independent record labels to distribute smaller shipments to stores than would be of interest to major distributors. But even with city-wide distribution, the record still struggled to find an audience. For then sixteen-year-old rapper-producer Milk, the seeming failure of the single that featured both his solo rapping and production was heartbreaking.

I used to cry. There were times that I would hear that "Top Billin'" was wack so much that I would cry! I would come home, and I'd be so hurt, and I'd cry, then I'd get myself together, and I'll be like, "I'll show them." It took us a whole year of that, every day, before we found one DJ that was like, "this is dope."[10]
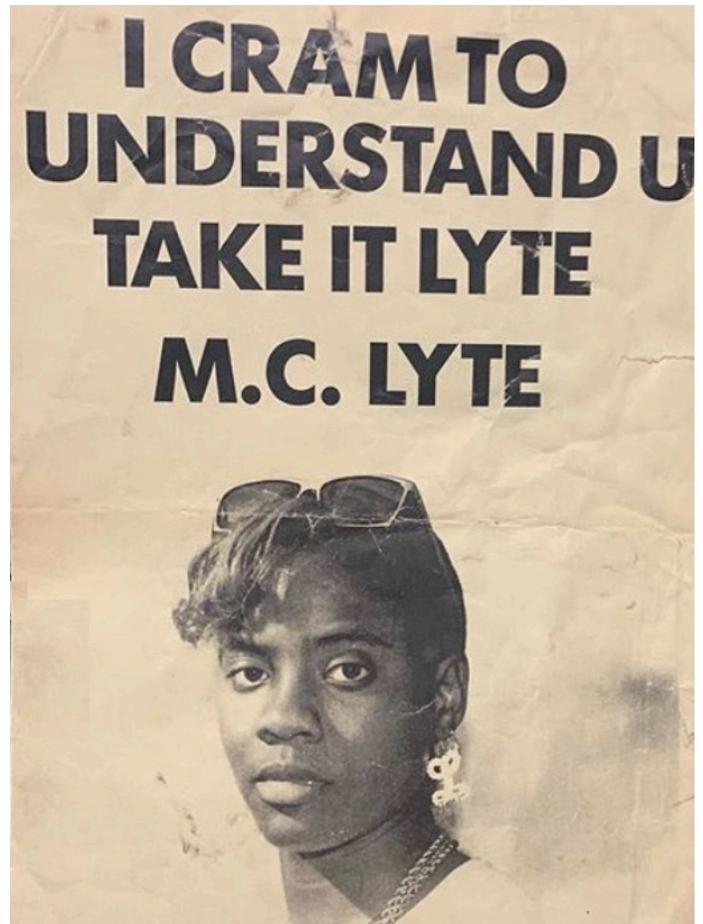
Top Billin' (cont.)

Undaunted, Nat Robinson continued to push the record and eventually things began to shift:

> I started calling all the college DJs, and sending everything out, and there was a guy named Jeff Foss, at that college out in Long Island [WHRU - Hofstra]. He was the first guy that started playing the record on the radio. I would give Red [Alert] a record every time I saw him. So I got [DJ] Marley [Marl] and Marley started playing it, and he loved it. So I got Marley to play it, I got Chuck Chillout to play it. So I had Jeff Foss, Marley Marl, Chuck Chillout, and Teddy Ted and those guys playing it [on their popular radio shows]. ... And then "Top Billin'" started getting a little momentum with these guys playin' "Top Billin'." So I reissued the record, and I made "Top Billin'" the A-side. And I put it back out again. Just "Top Billin" [with a remix]. So we hit the streets again. So one day, I'm walking down the street in New York, and somebody comes past with a car, [with the song's lyrics] "Boom Boom - Milk Is Chillin!" I'm like, "Wow, they playin' in the car." I go a few more blocks, I'm walking somewhere. "Boom, boom." Another car. I'm thinking, "This is happening, the kids are playing this song, they're playing it!"[11]

Soon, the record, a 12" single B-side recorded on a cassette four-track in a basement studio and released on a tiny independent label run out of a Brooklyn storefront was the #1 requested record on WKRS-FM. At the same time, First Priority started to gain traction with another single by a sixteen-year old Brooklynite, the recently named MC Lyte [Lana Moorer].

MC Lyte's recording career started in a Brooklyn home studio. She recalls that the "first time she recorded" a demo of her initial single, "I Cram to Understand U," was at "Tony's studio in Brooklyn."[12] He knew her as Lana, she knew him as Tony, but he would soon be known as DJ Clark Kent, and become a key proponent in the careers of Notorious B.I.G., Jay-Z, and others. Clark Kent recalls that the

1987 photocopied promotional flyer for MC Lyte's first single, distributed from the First Priority office courtesy of Milk Dee [Kirk Robinson]

two "were at Union Square [club] until four in the morning, and then after we went to my house and I made a beat on a DX drum machine. I made the beat for her, it wasn't the record, it was just a beat for her to do it in my crib, at like five in the morning after playing at Union Square."[13] Lyte played the demo for her friend Eric Cole of First Priority group The Alliance, and shortly after, she was re-recording "I Cram to Understanding You" on the Robinson's Tascam four-track to a Milk Dee-produced track.

In 1987, promoting both singles from their storefront office on St. Johns in Brooklyn, First Priority had to overcome resistance. If people initially dissed Milk for sounding "like a girl" on "Top Billin'," the response was similar for gravel-voiced Lyte: "She sounds like a boy!"[14]

Top Billin' (cont.)

But as "Top Billin'" started gaining national success, Larry Yasgar and Sylvia Rhone of Atlantic Records took notice, and offered Nat Robinson a distribution deal for First Priority Music. Within a year of her first single, MC Lyte would be the label's star performer. "Top Billin'" had crested its yearlong wave from being a humble local record to receiving national acceptance, while "I Cram To Understand You" had introduced MC Lyte. Once struggling to get their independent records played, First Priority now had Atlantic Records' backing and an avenue for the label's creative output, which by 1988 increasingly centered on the success of eighteen-year-old MC Lyte. With Audio Two, Alliance, and Lyte all releasing albums in 1988, as well as a compilation and singles by Bronx rapper Positive K, First Priority had turned the enthusiasm of two teenaged brothers and their friends, and their new star performer MC Lyte, along with their dad's business acumen, into a successful Brooklyn record label with nationally-charting records.

Although the label had major backing, the record production in the early years continued to center on tracks developed in the Robinson basement or at King of Chill's family's apartment on Sterling Avenue. There was no major label representative to mediate the creative process. Rather, if Milk, Chill, Lyte, Giz, and their high school friends thought a song was "hot," they pursued it. And since no one had initially believed in "Top Billin'" or Lyte's first single, Milk was disinclined to listen to outside opinions. Meanwhile, most of the lyrics for Lyte's debut album came from her rhyme book that she wrote in her early teen years: "With recording the first album I just showed up with my rhyme book. Literally, Milk and Giz were like 'What you got?'"[15]

One of the songs in Lyte's book would become her breakout 1988 single, "Paper Thin," written about an unfaithful partner before she had even been in a relationship. Alliance's King of Chill crafted the track for her rhyme, with short sampled fragments of Prince's "17 Days" and Al Green's "I'm So Glad You're Mine." The initial work was done in Chill's family's apartment on Sterling Avenue with his Alesis drum machine, and followed by mixing at Firehouse Studio in Brooklyn Heights. For producer Chill, the success of "Paper Thin," from his apartment to the clubs, TV screens, and national chart success was a "dream come true" in their journey:

> The goal when you start rappin' is to be the coolest dude on your block and in the neighborhood. But after a while, you tryin' to be heard in the clubs that you frequent, which is Latin Quarter, Union Square, Rooftop, places like that. At the point to now we can hand the record to the deejay, and it's not a hassle for them to play it. You couldn't be nobody and hand the record to the deejay. So we get to "Paper Thin," and he puts it on, and it's just lightin' up the dance floor, that was the greatest thing! Not only that, we had a video to support it on [local cable rap show] Video Music Box, which was our MTV, that was the greatest.[16]

The video—filmed on a subway car at the New York Transit Museum in Downtown Brooklyn—includes Lyte, Audio Two, and many of their friends, and serves as a document of their youthful creative works and locally produced success story.

MC Lyte, "Paper Thin" video still (First Priority Music/Atlantic, 1988)

Top Billin' (cont.)

MC Lyte, Audio Two, and King of Chill's group Alliance each released their debut albums in 1988, before Lyte had even turned eighteen. First Priority now had major label backing but was still driven by singles written and recorded in Brooklyn apartments and Staten Island home studios, as well as local studios like Firehouse. Within a year, the company had become a successful local record label, with the help of other local Brooklyn businesses, including Soul Shack and Birdel's record stores, Pearl One Stop, and Firehouse. The crew of friends that had formed at Brooklyn Tech were now touring nationally in support of their largely homemade records made with the assistance of other Brooklyn rap pioneers DJ Cutmaster DC, DJ Clark Kent, and Daddy-O of Stetsasonic.

Most of the Brooklyn locales integral to the early history of First Priority Music—the record label office on St. Johns Place, Soul Shack on Pitkin Avenue, Birdel's Records on Nostrand, Pearl One Stop record distributors on 20th Street, and Firehouse Studios on Dean Street—are long gone. While Birdel's, a fixture in the community for forty-five years before closing in 2011, has been commemorated with a street sign on a section of Nostrand Avenue, the rest are simply facts of history, known only to those who experienced the vibrant local culture of Brooklyn hip hop in the 1980s.

At a 2018 concert at the Coney Island Ampitheater celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of his debut album, Big Daddy Kane brought out a series of Brooklyn performers who made their name in the 1980s, including First Priority Music's MC Lyte and Milk Dee of Audio Two. Both Lyte and Milk were celebrating the thirtieth anniversaries of their debut albums as well. The two local legends were received enthusiastically by the crowd of five thousand, many of whom were in their forties and fifties and had grown up in the local hip hop scene. When Milk Dee rapped "Top Billin'," most of the crowd rapped along with the lyrics word-for-word, the song serving as a document both of their youthful memories and a testament to the local DIY hip hop culture of the 1980s.

(L-R): MC Lyte and Milk Dee of Audio Two performing at Coney Island Ampitheater, June 20, 2018
screen captures from Big Daddy Kane: Long Live the Kane 30th Anniversary

Riding home from the concert on the subway, I sat next to a woman who reported that she had a cousin in local hip hop group Divine Sounds, and while in high school, she visited the First Priority offices on St. Johns Place and interviewed Audio Two for her high school newspaper. For her and many in attendance, these local sites of hip hop culture were an important part of the Brooklyn they grew up in. Although the borough has changed, the records of performers such as Audio Two and MC Lyte serve as reminders of this vibrant local Brooklyn scene in the 1980s, when a high school kid's dream was to be "Top Billin'" at a local rap show.

Notes

1. Milk Dee [Kirk Robinson] interview by author, 7 March 2019.

2. Ibid.

3. Nat Robinson interview by author, 20 February 2019.

4. Ibid.

Top Billin' (cont.)

5. Milk Dee interview.

6. Robinson interview.

7. Milk Dee interview.

8. Daddy-O [Glenn Bolton] interview by author, 27 November 2018.

9. Milk Dee interview.

10. Ibid.

11. Robinson interview.

12. MC Lyte quoted in Keith Murphy, "Full Clip: MC Lyte Breaks Down Her Entire Catalogue (Brandy, Janet Jackson, LL Cool J & More)," *Vibe*, 7 January 2011.

13. DJ Clark Kent [Rodolfo Franklin], interview by author, 8 March 2019.

14. Milk Dee interview.

15. Lyte quoted in *Vibe*.

16. King of Chill interview by author, 22 February 2019.

Notating Across Cultures: A Composer's Dilemma

Jeryl Johnston

In the summer of 2017 I had the good fortune to spend several weeks in Havana, independently studying Afro-Cuban music. I was inspired by ways in which some Cuban musicians varied their religious music using jazz vocabulary, so I decided to try my own hand at this type of variation, while including Euro-classical vocabulary as well. The result was "Yemaya—Okuo and Other Songs," a piece that I created during the first half of 2019.

Jeryl Johnston
photo by Ana L. Alicea

Often, when someone hears this work, they ask "How did you notate that?" The first thing that came to mind when I was asked that question is that I hadn't ever really thought about it. The manner of notation didn't make any difference to me, as long as it resulted in effective communication between musicians. I believe that my lack of concern about the method of notation is one of the reasons why the project was successful. If I had been attached to any particular style of notation, then I would have run the risk of alienating key players who weren't comfortable using that notational style. For this reason, I used the multiple notational styles preferred by the various musicians, including myself.

Each of the genres at play in this piece uses an entirely different mode of notation. For example, Lucumí music is passed down through aural/oral tradition.[1] It is normal for highly-regarded, master practitioners to use aural/oral communication exclusively in order to learn, teach, and execute this music. At the same time, standard jazz heads are usually written down using lead-sheet notation, which defines a melody, a corresponding chord progression, and very little else, making it the responsibility of the performer to determine what interpretation of the notation is appropriate. Euro-classical music is traditionally notated very specifically, with very little left for the performer to decide. While creating this piece, I had to take into consideration the fact that practitioners of all three of these various styles would need to communicate with each other successfully in order for the project to work.

The first thing that I needed to do in order to facilitate this project was to acquire a working knowledge of each of the types of music involved. By the time I started studying Lucumí music, I had already spent many years playing salsa and Latin jazz. Put simply, salsa (an umbrella term) is descended in part from a variety of Afro-Cuban traditional drumming and singing styles, including those of the Lucumí people. My experience playing salsa made sacred Lucumí music more accessible to me than it would otherwise have been, and it provided a common starting point through which I and the musicians who play Lucumí music could relate to each other. Only after spending years studying each of the three aforementioned genres did I undertake the creation of a piece that utilized all of them.

One problem I encountered early on was how to label my own role in the writing and production of the piece. The piece uses melodies by the Lucumí people and their ancestors, and it also uses music that I composed in both the classical and jazz styles. On the one hand, if I called myself the "arranger," then those familiar with the classical music definition of "adaptive arranger" would assume that I haven't composed any of the music in the piece. On the other hand, I could not simply list myself as "the composer"

Notating Across Cultures (cont.)

because then I run into issues of cultural appropriation. Moreover, if I'm communicating with a jazz musician or aficionado, they will likely understand the word "arranger" to be contributive and therefore, part-composer. It is hard to know the specialty of the people whom I am addressing, yet it is important to label my role clearly, as the leader and central creative entity. This is especially true because of assumptions that I find are often made about the roles of participants in an ensemble based on gender and race. So far, my solutions have been to either list myself as "contributive arranger," regardless of familiarity with the term, or to list multiple composers, as in "Composed by Traditional Lucumí/Jeryl Johnston."

If the relatively basic words "composer" and "arranger" can create such confusion, then how can composers persuade musicians to dialogue with the intricate musical notation of unfamiliar cultures? Fortunately, there was no need for all of the musicians involved to read each other's musical languages, as long as at least one person was willing and able to read all of them, and the others were open to receiving a translation. In the case of "Yemaya—Okuo…," I served as the main translator. I also had help from my principal percussionist, Louis Bauzo, who has more fluency in the rhythms of Lucumí batá drumming and who translated my requests to the other percussionists. A key element to the success of the project was the open-mindedness and professionalism of the musicians playing the piece.

tradition, and that has remained at the foundation of the music of the Lucumí. Clave is always a precise rhythm that is repeated over and over, creating a cycle which is used as the rhythmic structure in a style of music. This rhythm need not be audible in order to be the underlying structure. There is also a musical instrument called the claves. When I use the word clave, I am referring to the rhythmic cycle, not the instrument.

Afro-Cuban derived music in the United States is notated in two ways. Most commonly, one clave cycle is the equivalent of two measures of music, as seen in Example 1. This method is very prominent in salsa, the style of music that all of the musicians in this ensemble originally had in common.[2]

Less commonly in Afro-Cuban music within the United States in general, but more commonly in the few instances of notation of Lucumí music, one clave cycle is the equivalent of one measure of music, as seen in Example 2.[3] The second way is more efficient, for two reasons. First, if one bar equals one clave cycle, then the musicians who read music have very little room for confusion with regard to how the music fits the underlying structure of the clave, even if the clave is not being played. Secondly, if one clave cycle is equivalent to one bar, then communication between those who read music and those who don't becomes easier, because one can refer to "X" number of bars as "X" number of claves.

Example 1

Example 2

In order to aid the communication between musicians, and to simplify the notation, I chose to notate the music in 12/8 so that each measure would equal one clave cycle. This was not very familiar to the musicians who read music, including myself, and took some explaining and some getting used to, but it worked very efficiently.

One rather controversial decision I made was to write the piece in 12/8 time. In order to explain, it is important to define *clave*. Briefly, clave is a term that is often used in reference to an African rhythmic

Because of my European classical music back-ground, it was natural for me to use a score. Some of the musicians who were trained in the Lucumí aural

Notating Across Cultures (cont.)

tradition naturally worked without a score. There were others trained in the Lucumí musical tradition who referred to the score from time to time but often elected to play without it, and there was still another performer who favored using a lead sheet. For this reason, I organized the score to reflect the different preferences of the musicians involved.

One example of this hybrid technique that stands out is the percussion solo (1:35). With the exception of the improvised solo on the conga, the rhythms played by the percussionists are traditional, meaning they are prescribed and played from memory. In general there is no need for notation. However, the percussionists who choose to read notation would want to be able to see where they are in relation to the other musicians, so I needed to notate a percussion part. To achieve this, slash notation, from the language of lead sheets, worked best (see Example 3).

more Western style of "counting off," so a *llamao* was used to begin the piece. I notated the *llamo* in the score even though the percussionists didn't require it. This made it easier for the bass and keyboards to line up their introductory phrases with the percussion. It worked as though we were reading a cue in a European-style score or part.

Another place I used slashes in order to denote time was the bass solo (Example 3, 0:25). In this case, no notes needed to be written down because they were improvised. In addition, I knew I could depend on the bass player, so I left it up to him to determine how he wanted to play his solo, both harmonically and melodically. The only factor that I needed to notate was the piano cue used to exit the bass solo and move on to the next section.

Example 3

One exception to this almost-non-notational method in the percussion parts is the *llamao*, a rhythm that is played by the lead percussionist to start the music or to change the rhythm (see Example 3, mm. 1 and 2, percussion part). I preferred this method to the

The piano cadenza that I played at the end (5:32) was not included in the score, even though I notated it in detail in another document. I played it from memory, and the other musicians didn't need to see it in order to play their parts well. In the score I simply

Notating Across Cultures (cont.)

Example 4

wrote "Piano cadenza on Okuo" in the appropriate place, and kept the written copy of the cadenza nearby for reference. The cadenza is nintey seconds long, but it is indicated in the score by one bar of slashes with repeat signs for the percussion, and the aforementioned phrase in English for myself. This was all that was necessary in order for us to know where we were in the score (see Example 4 for details).

Notation of the lead vocal parts was not needed. The melodies sung by the lead vocalists are traditional melodies performed from memory and almost always varied within traditional parameters of rhythm and form. The background vocal parts, however, were notated precisely (Example 4, 4:32), so that I could remember how the vocal lines were divided into

sections as the piece progressed, and how these subdivisions matched the chord progressions I had composed. As far as I know, I was the only person in the ensemble who used the notation of the background vocal parts.

Another place in which precise notation was necessary was the bassline that the electric bass and keyboard play together during the percussion solo (listen to Example 3, 1:30). Not only is this bassline very specific, but it is played in a different key each time it returns. These key changes are deliberately free from any pattern, and therefore had to be fully written out, without repeat signs. In addition, more repetitions of the bass line exist than are heard on the recording. This facilitates performance situations where the piece

Example 5

needs to be lengthened. The four bar cue out of the percussion solo results in the bass and piano playing the progression starting on B-flat, regardless of which key we were on immediately before. Because of the random key movement, the moment is more varied than what is usually found in background piano and bass accompaniments to percussion solos in Latin and American jazz styles, so the notation had to be more specific and demanded more space on the page, as shown in Example 5.

Yemaya—Okuo and Other Songs *recording session*

Score notation took a mapping role in the overall trajectory of the piece, much in the same way that it is used in jazz and salsa, but in this case, with even fewer notes and more flexibility. Without the map that the score provided, rehearsing and recording would have been very disorganized, because this map was what we referred to when translating between aural, lead-sheet, and scored methods of communication.

There was only one rehearsal before we recorded the piece. Each person learned the music in the way that he or she was most comfortable. I was the only one who used the score the whole time. The bass player preferred to use a lead sheet, two of the percussionists used no notation at all, and two of the percussionists referred to the score peripherally, but played mostly from memory.

At this moment, real-time translation between musical cultures became important. Bearing in mind that most of the musicians had substantial parts of this music already memorized because of the traditions that they had been trained in, those who learn aurally learned their parts by listening to the examples played or sung by those of us who referred to the score. For

them, the transmission of information was aural, as usual. At the same time, the bass player learned his part using a lead sheet, as he is accustomed to doing, and the rest of us used the score, more or less often, depending on our preferences. Each of us used the notation that we were comfortable with, in our own way.

The recording process was complicated, employing a mixture of gadgets, locations, and performance practices including multiple digital audio workstations, a handheld recorder, a small recording studio, click tracks, overdubbing, improvisation (musically and logistically), MIDI, sound libraries, and various other components. I'll save a detailed explanation of our recording experience for another time.

The last step was to revise the score to reflect what we actually recorded in the studio. For instance, I originally intended to comp during the bass solo, but during the recording session it became apparent that this was superfluous. Also, the way in which the piano ostinato at the end interacts with the drum parts is different than I had intended. Originally I had wanted the piano ostinato to line up rhythmically with the percussionists, but while recording I realized that

Notating Across Cultures (cont.)

this was not necessary, or even desirable, because of the rhythmically free nature of the piano cadenza beforehand.

This brings us to the version that you hear via the link provided at the beginning of this essay. Now that I have thought about the process of creating and notating this piece, my conclusion is that flexibility is key. In order to do a cross-cultural project like this, I had to be willing to move outside of my comfort zone and to reevaluate my definition of the "correct" way of learning and composing music. I also had to allow the piece to change during the production process, rather than be attached to a particular version, notated or otherwise. Most importantly, all of the musicians involved had to be open enough to respect each other's methods, which allowed us to translate and receive translation. That is to say, we were all flexible enough to cooperate.

I offer my special thanks to all of the musicians involved: Bernard Miñoso (bass, vocals); Louis Bauzo (Iya, vocals); Gregory Askew (Itotole); Jerome Goldschmidt (Okonkolo); Reinaldo Alcantara (Congas, vocals); Richard Byrd (lead vocals); and Francis Rodriguez (recording engineer).

Notes

1. For more on Lucumí music, see: Kenneth Schweitzer, *The Artistry of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming: Aesthetics, Transmissions, Bonding and Creativity* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013) and Judith Gleason, "Notes on Two Sacred Afro-Cuban Songs in Contemporary Settings," *Research in African Literatures* 24: 3 (1993), 113–21.

2. See Larry Dunlap and Rebeca Mauleon-Santana, *The Latin Real Book* (Sher Music Co., 1997) and Carlos Campos, *Salsa and Afro-Cuban Montunos For Piano* (A.D.G. Productions, 1996).
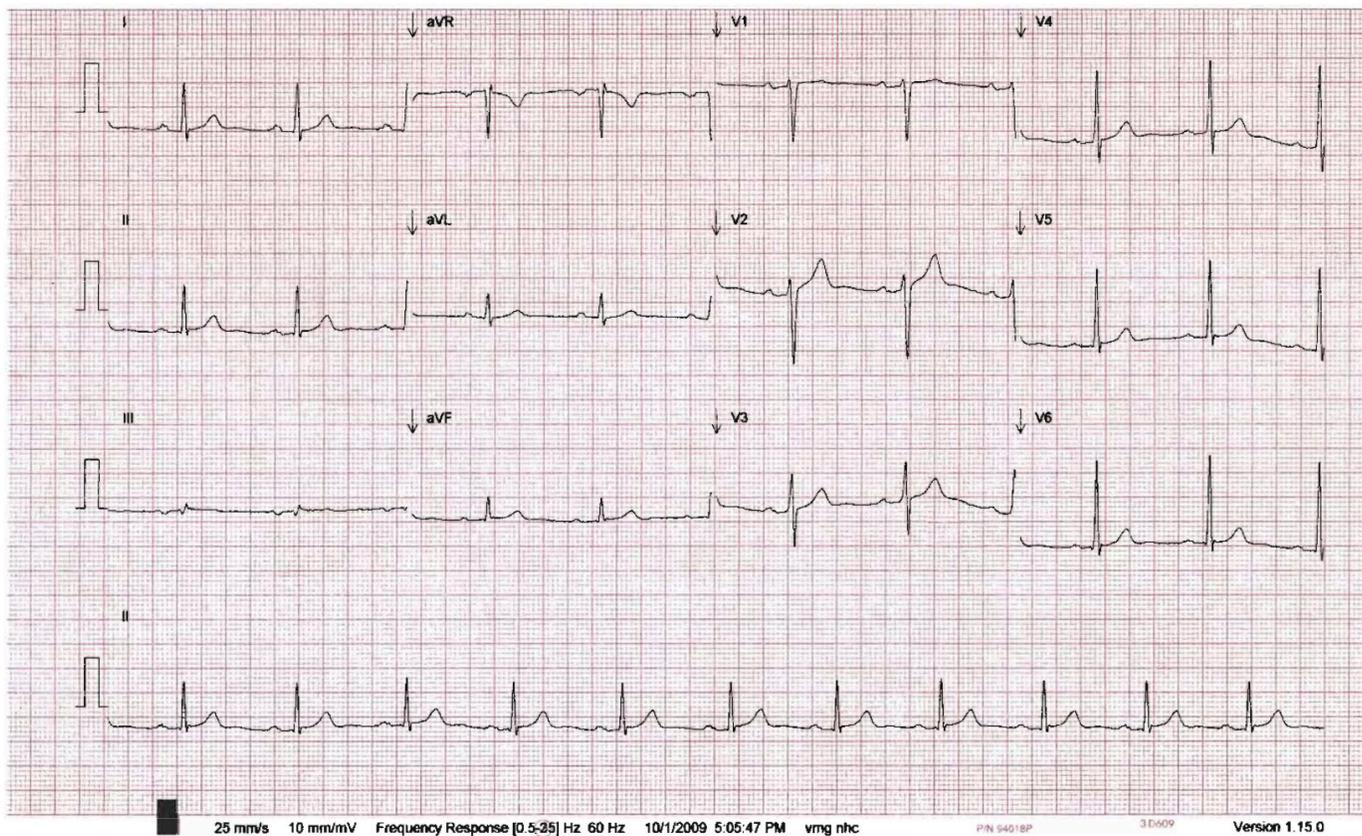
3. For example, see Michael Spiro and Justin Hill, *Roadmap for the Oru Del Igbodu (Oru Seco)* (authors, 2012). For a more detailed example of the debate between use of cut and common time in Afro-Cuban Music, see Kevin Moore, *Beyond Salsa Piano* (Timba, 2009). Schweitzer, listed in footnote 1, uses a combination of methods.

Unconfirmed Report

Dean Rosenthal

Above is the full score of my piece *Unconfirmed Report*, written for any number of players. Below are the performance notes and an example of an individual part.

Performance Notes

Unconfirmed Report (2011) is a piece for any number of players, for soloist to large ensemble. The instrumentation is open. There are any number of ways to interpret this score, and the players will arrange the parts in an order that pleases them, or leave any part out to suit the music. Perhaps there will be one or more group leaders who decide on a plan of action. For example, there can be solos, duos, trios, quartets, or other configurations made from the score or the parts. A group of musicians might decide to set

a tempo of sixty-nine beats per minute, the rate of the heartbeat. A soloist may interpret any part at a given timing to reflect a familiar mapping of a line or a point or a shape he or she may have considered in a different score, or approach a graphic element in a completely fresh way, perhaps by employing a foreign technique in contrast with a conventional one, new rhythms, scales, tunings, and so forth.
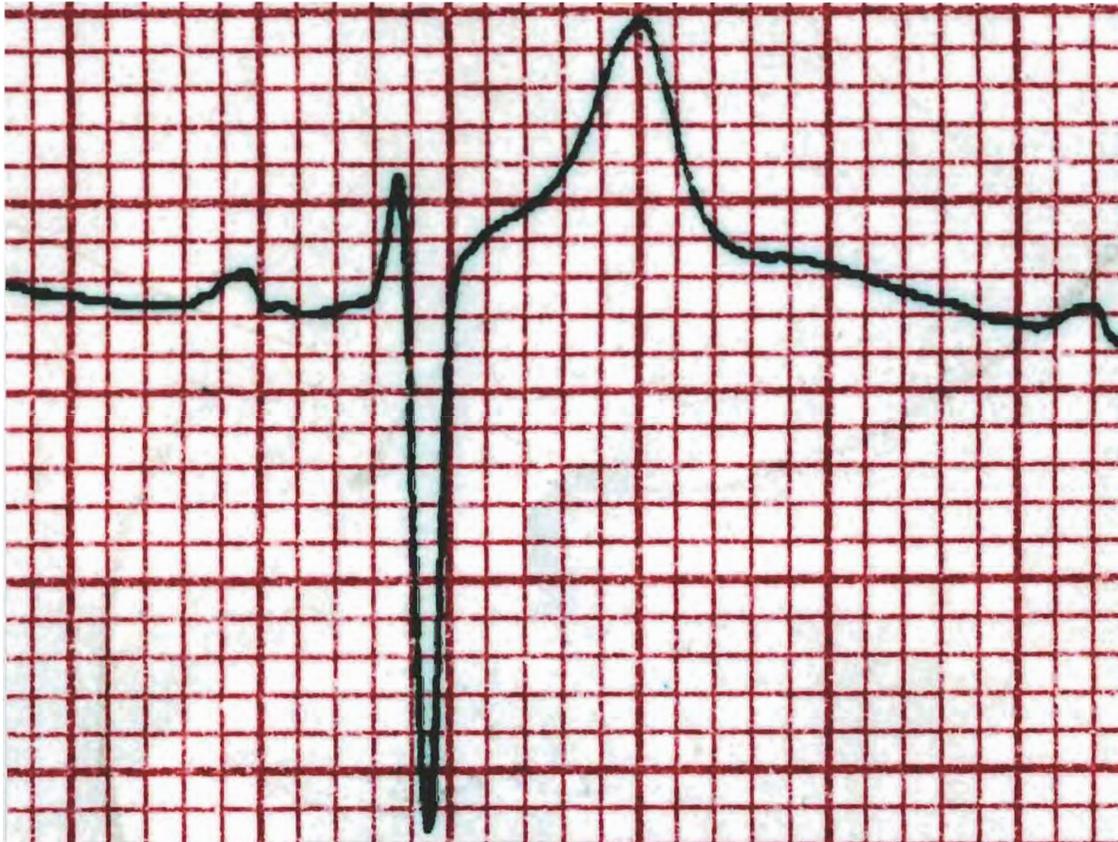
In some performances, ensembles have prepared the approach as follows: they play in timed segments for a total length of their choosing (for example: six segments of four minutes each for a total length of twenty-four minutes). To start the piece, the performers pick any part, individually. At the end of the first segment, with a timer and a cue, performers

Unconfirmed Report (cont.)

will move on to another part of their choosing. They continue this process through the end of the piece. They may repeat parts, but not immediately after they have played them, and if they choose to repeat a part, they are instructed to interpret the part differently. Performers may also want to sit out one segment. Parts may be prepared in advance or improvised or both as performers see fit.

To understand how an EKG is read by a cardiologist is not necessary to a performance. A performer may wish to consult a physician to learn more about the EKG, watch a YouTube video of a heart beating, or reflect on unique medical experiences they or a family member or friend may have or have had. The composer may make himself available for interpretive decisions or consultation with a performer or group of performers or group leader.

The history behind the piece is as follows: the experience related to an EKG reading that came in the form of a panic attack I faced one afternoon at my studio. After making an appointment with a local clinic, an EKG was taken. There was nothing found to be wrong with me. I soon realized that this mediation between work and sickness, an exact graphic depiction of my cardiac health, might offer a unique opportunity to respond as a composer.

"Getting the Layers Going":
Karen Borca's Big Band at "Unit Structures: The Art of Cecil Taylor"

Michelle Yom

Unit Structures, Cecil Taylor's celebrated 1966 album, provided the name for a four-day conference exploring his art and music that I organized for last fall at the CUNY Graduate Center and Brooklyn College.[1] One reason for the choice of this title was the multiple ways in which the phrase "unit structures" could be read. The grammatical function of "structures" is particularly ambiguous.

Big Band rehearsal at Brooklyn College, led by Karen Borca

As a verb, it refers to a singular unit, the subject. As a noun, it designates a plural and suggests a multiple. This ambiguity has an effect on the idea of unit, which in this grammatical construction implies a crossover between singularity and multiplicity. From the improvisational process that he describes in the liner notes, to the names of his bands such as the "Cecil Taylor Unit" or "The Unit," the phrase "unit structures" figures aspects of Taylor's practice into an effective metaphor.

In the record jacket alongside the title, Taylor provides a description of his compositional practice in poetic prose. Named "Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture," the essay describes a state of being located in an improvisation of becoming where beginnings and endings are in a constant state of overlap.[2] As the title of the conference, the phrase "unit structures" hovered over the four days in continuation of Taylor's impact. The conference was like a performance, which I thought of as an event where different players aggregated in the halls of CUNY to structure ideas, debates, and as well, stimulate and assume positions. There is no room here to mention all the stimuli,

but the interested reader may refer to the conference program.[3]

Like much of Taylor's music, the conference began with Taylor's voice in a poetry listening session. In my mind, however, the "unit" that started and ended the conference was the big band workshop which rehearsed on the day after the poetry session, before any of the paper presentations, and concluded the four-day conference with a concert. The big band, composed of twenty-two musicians, was led by Karen Borca, a bassoonist in New York City whose music was shaped by Taylor in the early 1970s.[4] She was a student of his Black Music Ensemble at the University of Wisconsin and worked as his assistant during his residency at Antioch College. She also played in his ensembles after his academic residencies, including in the 1976 opera *A Rat's Mass* and the European tour in the Fall of 1984.[5]
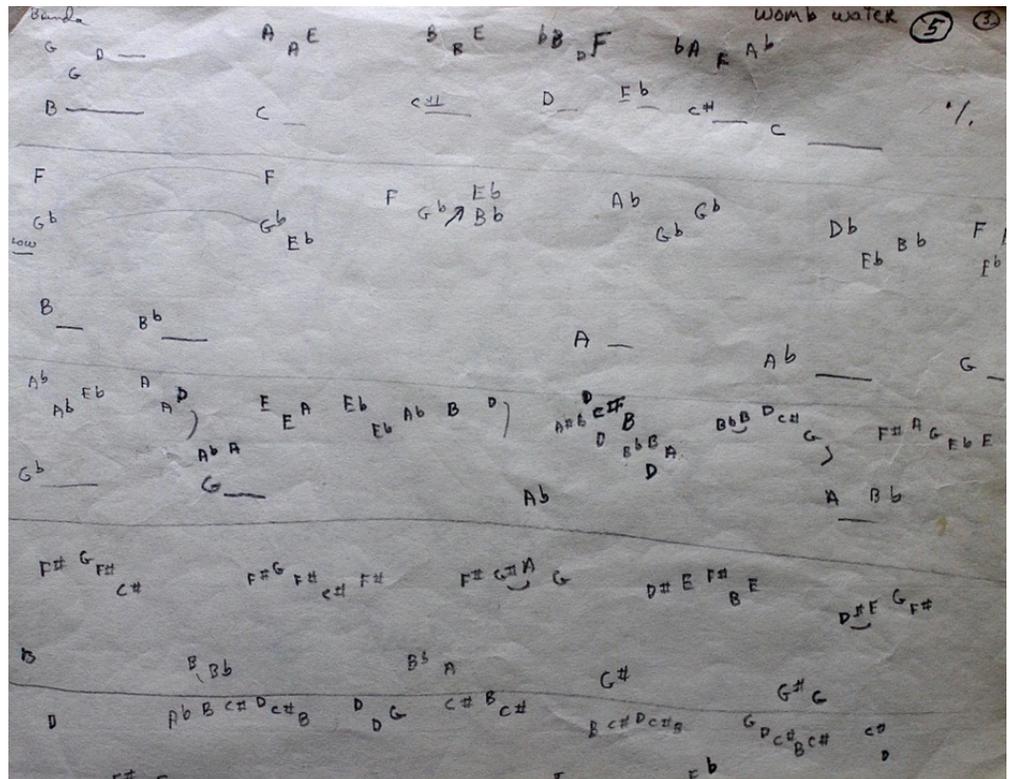
The rehearsal of the workshop was documented on video. This article briefly reports some of the patterns that arose from my analysis of the video along with my experience of playing in the band as a flutist. I also supplement my observations with accounts

"Getting the Layers Going" (cont.)

of Taylor's workshops. The "charts" sent to us by Borca a few days before the first meeting had prepared us for the rehearsal, but her procedures at the rehearsal were largely based on an oral/aural practice where verbal instructions and demonstrations by voice and by instrument were the main means of organizing our structured improvisation. A particular heterophonic texture which Borca calls "layers" was her goal effect in the ensemble sound. This texture is the possible result of a collective experience, where each player's ability to hear oneself both within and against a larger unit echoes the idea of "unit structures."

Borca's notation for Womb Water

Throughout the workshop, Borca strived to teach us to play Taylor compositions as he had taught them to her. According to Borca, Taylor gave preference to oral/aural instructions, as he did in 1966, "I had found that you can get more from the musicians if you teach them the tunes by ear, if they have to listen for changes instead of reading them off the page."[6] Teaching "by ear" was also a method for Borca during the workshop. As well, she urged me to invite everyone who had applied to the workshop because she was compelled to recall that Taylor's big band practice was inviting and inclusive.

The notations we received from Borca were called *With Blazing Eyes & Opened Mouth*, *Between Poles of Light I*, *Milano Jim Frank*, *Milano-Frank Jimmy*, *The Question*, and *Womb Water*.[7] As a collection, Borca referred to them to as "charts." Some of the music notated in the charts date back to the early 1970's when she had first transcribed Taylor's dictations to his students at the University of Wisconsin, but the charts at hand were transcribed for the 1984 European tour. As a teacher and bandleader, Taylor had dictated

pitches for the students to write down using symbols of their own choosing. He had also demonstrated the music on the piano for band members to transcribe and thereby listen actively. Even with writing aid, learning melodies and chord progressions by ear can be a slow process. The Black Music Ensemble was rehearsing nearly every day for months. The conference workshop had only one day to rehearse. Borca had therefore elected to distribute photocopies, and according to her, even Taylor used copies when his workshops and rehearsals were pressed for time

Beyond the correlation of pitches to the letters of the alphabet, Taylor's notations for me are a source of wonder because they are not scores using the conventional notation system using lines, dots, and other markings that indicate specific pitches, durations, groupings, and so on, nor are they like graphic scores, where there is little if any necessary relation between the symbols and the music for group playing. Taylor's own notations are more elaborate than transcriptions, as can be seen in the documentary *All the Notes*.[8] To the best of my knowledge, no living person knows how to read the circles, squiggly lines, brackets, and other symbols in Taylor's notation system.

"Getting the Layers Going" (cont.)

The "alphabet notation" was first developed by Taylor for his students when he started organizing big bands in the 1970's. Borca's charts are simply sets of pitches that correlate to the letters of the English alphabet, which she adopted from Taylor's system. They are read from top to bottom, left to right. Out of the five charts that we had played, one exception to the alphabet notation was *With Blazing Eyes and Opened Mouth*, a photocopy of notation by Taylor's hand which Borca calls "the verbal chart" or "the verbal." Similar to the alphabet notation, the verbal chart groups small units of sound, except that the smallest unit is a word, not a pitch. In vocalizing the chart, the words break down further into syllables. The verbal chart began the Saturday night concert because, as Borca recalled, "Cecil loved to start with chants."

Borca used three different ways to teach us to play the music. Her spoken instructions mostly had to do with the not quite fixed but least flexible parts of the music: beginnings and endings, transitions, number of repetitions, and instrumentation. Although spoken instructions planned the music's structure, most of the "how to play" were given through Borca's demonstrations on the bassoon. Because the charts do not indicate time, the demonstrations were especially important for learning the tempo and rhythm, duration and articulation. Although these time and semi-time related elements are not written in the charts, it was soon apparent that the music the charts refer to have specific time-related designations. The charts are material traces of a music played in the past, and that "same" music, played again, takes references from Borca's experience of playing them with Taylor. Demonstrations were attempts to restitute aspects of the music that are not indicated in the charts, but still present in Borca's memory. Her demos were crucial because they facilitated the musicians to listen attentively and build a common starting point to sense a group space within the rehearsal room.
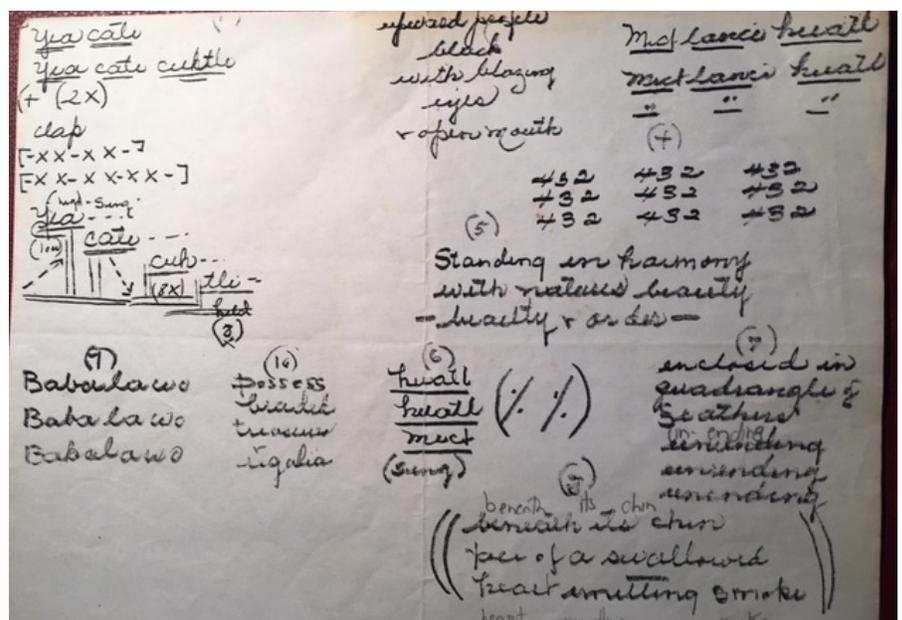
As crucial, if not more, was the quality of the band members' ability

to be inspired by the demos. Through Ted Panken's description of a scene where Taylor is teaching in 2001, we can sense the giving/receiving dynamic of Taylor's demonstrations with saxophonist Ras Moshe Burnett:

> "Play notes exactly / the way they are supposed / to be played," he intoned, punctuating his words with well-timed vertical hand-chops. "I played you just a single line. Unless you play this extension chord, you have all sorts of possibilities within that sound." After a break, Taylor read off another passage, fine-tuned each section with a total command of detail, then played the passage with his left hand and launched into seven or eight variations. Tenorist Moshe Ras spontaneously applauded, and embarked on a few minutes of spirit-catching through his horn.[9]

Borca's demonstrations were intended to clarify the sounds that were not written in the charts, but just as important was the musicians' ability for "spirit-catching," as Panken put it, which also exceeded the charts.

The detailedness of the demonstrations allowed the musicians to play melodies in unison, and the melodies in unison created the starting referent for

Borca's verbal instructions

other melodies. During a rehearsal of *With Blazing Eyes and Opened Mouth*, the attitude musicians should embody to play contrasting melodies was characterized by Borca in numerous ways: "Whatever you choose to do, really do it. I mean, don't be halfway in. Either you are with me or you are against me."[10] The player chooses decisively the melody they play, which either supports or contrasts another melody. But rhythm is always played in contrast: "You'll have one rhythm here doing one thing, and another rhythm running parallel to that, which is completely, totally different than the first."[11] Put simply, melody is relatively delimited but rhythm is not. These "rules" are the starting point for improvisation. "Once something gets stated, you start stating it in a different manner and improvise that way. All of you as a unit, doing that."[12] The resulting texture is a heterophony created by the improvisation of melodic intention and rhythmic invention.

In an interview with me before the workshop, Borca spoke of "getting the layers going." "Layers" refers to the musical texture formed by "pockets" of small ensembles that emerge out of improvisation. To get them going is to collectively get into the groove of that heterophonic texture and its contrapuntal possibilities. In my experience as a player in the band, simultaneously hearing the sounds of my flute and the sound of the band seemed like a challenge to experience an unusual mode of listening that has something to do with accepting all the sounds. To "get the layers going," the "pockets" of small groups have to be worked out in unforseeable but intentional ways, which takes a specific kind of group effort:

> Try to figure out which line, who's going to keep which lines. So there's going to be a certain group of people who are going to be playing the top line, and another group that's going to be playing [another line]. And another group after we get done playing this last line. I'll try to break it up into three parts so we can get three different layers going on this one. The other one will work fine with two layers, so this should be fine.[13]

Through her memory of playing in Taylor's bands, Borca had envisioned a particular musical texture with two to three *layers*, each of which are made of *lines* played by single players. Each line is an individual member in a small group in relation to the whole group. The heterogeneity of each line and layer is maintained by the rule of contrast. This goal heterophonic effect, however, was not always realized, as noted in Borca's response to an instance of the band's lack of clearly opposing lines:

> So those two things will be juxtaposed, but the way this happened now is fine. If it happens that way, fine. You can go back and forth between those lines. I don't want to be forcing this juxtaposed stuff too much. So that sounded fine, the way you were doing it.[14]

The form is open-ended, even as juxtaposition is given as the goal effect. The director's resignation of control has to do with an ideal of power distribution amongst the musicians. As Nathaniel Mackey wrote, "black music--especially that of the sixties, with its heavy emphasis on individual freedom within a collectively improvised context--proposed a model social order, an ideal, even utopic balance between personal impulse and group demands."[15] In musical form, can "personal impulse," the individual freedom, balance "group demand"? For Taylor, each player has the "right" to speak, in a section, and within the overall structure:

> Each of you has the right to say, "I would like to hear this part over again." Each section has its technical problem. What is the relationship of the note to the overall structure? I can show you where everything is connected, but I don't want to be in the position of telling you how to play it. Where do you want to begin? How do you want to proceed?[16]

Taylor stirs the band of the 2001 Turtle Bay Music School towards the ensemble sound, which he suggests is wholly connected. But he formulates his directions as questions. The musicians must answer the questions and arrive at the ensemble sound on their own. He gives them plenty of encouragement:

"Getting the Layers Going" (cont.)

"'Whatever you play, play it so people who hear it can hear the magic,' he urged. 'Try to remain connected.'"[17] This formula leaves (too?) much room for each player to interpret the "problem" in their own way. Solving the problem *by* playing is equally and potentially creative and destructive. It leaves room for players to abandon the efforts towards the goal effect of layers. The "layers" may be both the desired sonic manifestation and a proposal of a utopic social order. But like political orders in reality, the actualization of such intent is not guaranteed.

Taylor's big band music has been criticized sometimes for sounding chaotic. Even long-time champion of the music Amiri Baraka noted in 2005:

> That night at the Iridium, what had drawn us there was not the chance to hear & see Cecil again, but that he was appearing, the Newspapers taunted, with a Big Band. Hey, we thought, that was something. The mind always creates its own world, only to be "advised" of the contrast of that world with reality.[18]

The possibility and the limit of an ensemble sound that could become, as Baraka writes in the same text, "near-ambient," takes us back to the multiplicity of the phrase "unit structures." As discussed earlier, the phrase puts in tension the singular and the multiple; to decide, assert, and sound a contrast or compliment in every line is to co-create the layers of the ensemble sound. The actual sound is the sum of each player's sense of the "problem," within a section and the whole band, and in tension with the imagination of desired effect. Which brings us to motive. What motive did each of us want to hear, musical and otherwise? The conference, conceived as an expanded form of "unit structures," asked that same question, and each of us played, in sections, and in the whole of the ensemble.

Notes

1. For more on the 2019 Cecil Taylor conference see David Grubbs, "Scented Parabolas: Occasions of Cecil Taylor's Poetry," *American Music Review* (Fall 2019).

2. Cecil Taylor, *Unit Structures* (Blue Note Records, 1966).

3. See the Unit Sturctures website.

4. The band members were Karen Borca, Evie Ward, Michelle Yom, Pawan Benjamin, Ras Moshe Burnett, Elliott Levin, Charles Sharp, Elizabeth Newton, Bobby Zankel, Dario Fariello, Paolo Rossi, Scott Currie, Chris Stover, Ben Zucker, Julian Velasco, Anthony Caulkins, Rafael Goncalves, Dominic Lash, Gahlord Dewald, Jeff Schwartz, Mark Micchelli, and André Martinez.

5. See Michelle Yom and Ammiel Alcalay, *Cecil Taylor: Memorial Scrapbook & Sessionography* (Lost & Found, 2019).

6. A.B. Spellman, *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* (Third Limelight Edition, 1990), 70.

7. Taylor named and renamed his compositions, whilst the charts may have remained the same. At the beginning of the rehearsal, the two Milanos became "Milano Jimmy Frank" and "Milano Frank Jimmy." Borca recalls that "Jim and Frank were Jimmy Lyons and Frank Wright. That was a cue in the score probably indicating that they were soloing in those sections."

8. Chris Felver, *All the Notes*. Directors Cut, DVD, 2003.

9. Ted Panken, "Abstraction without Compromise," *JAZZIZ* (June 2001), 42.

10. Video transcript.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Nathaniel Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 34.

16. Panken, "Abstraction without Compromise," 42.

17. Ibid.

18. Amiri Baraka, *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music* (University of California Press, 2009), 288.

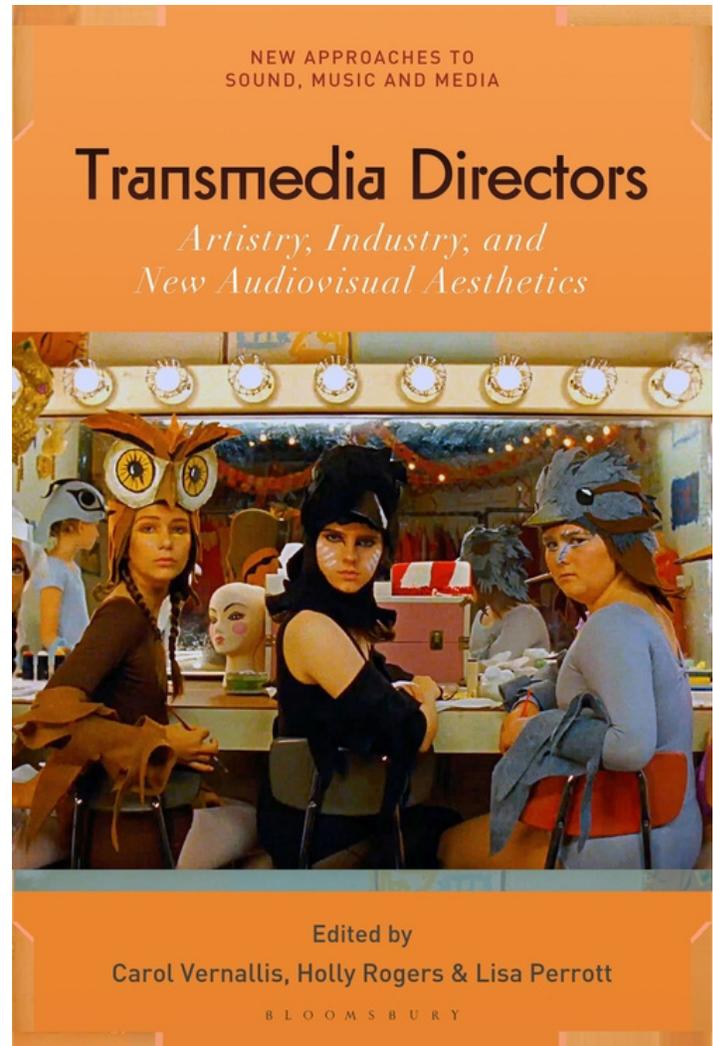# Seeking Definition: A Review of *Transmedia Directors*

Jordan Stokes

Transmedia Directors: Artistry, Industry and New Audiovisual Aesthetics, edited by Carol Vernallis, Holly Rogers, and Lisa Perrott (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

"Transmedia" in film studies refers in the most basic sense to the way that big media franchises such as S*tar Wars* spread their narratives across multiple media, each contributing to a shared storyworld: films, television, novels, and so on.[1] Even simple definitions of transmedia raise a cascading series of questions. And although the example of a big media franchise is paradigmatic, transmedia scholars have evinced a certain discomfort with this, arguing (or hoping) that an understanding of transmediality would be less nakedly beholden to capital. Nevertheless, this is the basic meaning of transmedia in the existing literature. I expected a book with "transmedia" in the title to grapple with these issues. While this one does not, it is nevertheless an excellent book that brings to bear numerous authorial standpoints on the question.[2]

The editors of *Transmedia Directors* take up the accepted definition of transmedia just long enough to discard it, and rather than arguing for a clear alternative definition, they float a constellation of possible meanings. A transmedia director might be one who works in many media: film, TV, music video, and beyond. Or, a transmedia director might be one who pays unusually careful attention to the multiple media that film comprises: the written word, the photographic image, sound, and film music. Or, a transmedia director might be an artist whose creations do not neatly fit into any of our established media categories. Or, a transmedia director might be one whose auteurist stamp are detectable less in the film as a finished text and more in the filmmaking process itself, outside of any artistic medium, but inside the web of money, power, technology, and talent that gives rise to art.

But although none of the essays collected here referenced a traditional definition of transmedia, I found that the book came into focus most clearly when I kept that traditional definition in mind.[3] Most of the authors in the collection focus their attention on some kind of text that is projected across multiple media— it's just that the texts are not fictional narratives or story-worlds. Instead they are, variously, the auteurist text of a director's signature style, or the star text of a performer's persona and reputation, or the irreducibly multimedia text of a *gesamtkunstwerk*, or some other *sui-generis* text that escapes simple categorization.[4]

With nine parts, twenty-seven essays, and 396 pages (not counting endnotes), *Transmedia Directors* is on the long side for a collection of its kind—and the editors make full use of that space, creating a focus that is at once both broad and deep. On the one hand, the topics are wide-ranging, covering arthouse cinema, Instagram feeds, music videos, and the *Transformers* franchise. On the other, each part is tightly focused,

A Review of *Transmedia Directors* (cont.)

allowing for an effervescent interplay of ideas. This makes *Transmedia Directors* a handy volume for teachers of film music: if a student wanted to write about a Wes Anderson film, one could do worse than to assign this book's entire Wes Anderson section as background reading. The book features similarly rich sections on Barry Jenkins, David Lynch, Emil Nava, and Lars von Trier, along with a handful of thematically organized sections.

I. Collaborative Authorship: Wes Anderson

Warren Buckland argues that Wes Anderson's films are primarily driven by "new sincerity," defined as a vacillation between sincerity and irony. In Anderson's work this manifests as a tension between the emotional behavior of the characters and the mannered artificiality of the cinematic language, especially with regard to music and narration. Theo Cateforis argues that both Anderson's films and the music of his longtime collaborator Mark Mothersbaugh are marked by a vacillation between the world of childhood and the world of adults. This is a good example of the kind of synergy that arises within the individual sections. Surely, sincerity is a constant theme in our culture's depiction of childhood, and vice versa. Are Buckland and Cateforis two facets of Wes Anderson's output, or one facet from two perspectives? The juxtaposition enriches both essays.

II. Cross-medial Assemblage and the Making of the Director

In Part Two, Jeff Smith offers a rich analysis of Sofia Coppola's films, advertisements, and music videos, arguing that her distinctive style arises from her ability to work in all of these forms, but also that her ability to move freely between them is a matter of historical contingency—a kind of extension and ramification of the "high concept" era as defined by Justin Wyatt, in which the film industry pursued cross-marketing to the point of horizontal monopoly, and filmmakers focused on style and image to the exclusion of narrative coherence.[5] Mark Kerins makes similar claims of Michael Bay, arguing that the director's distinctive (if much-derided) narrative strategies and visual rhetoric can be traced to his career as a director of music videos.

The juxtaposition of Coppola and Bay lays bare an interesting pattern. Smith and Kerins both claim that their chosen directors are special and unique, not just as transmedia directors but as transmedia auteurs.[6] Yet so many of the traits that they describe are shared! One could scarcely pick two more dissimilar filmmakers; but, as Smith and Kerins point out, Coppola and Bay both devote a fetishistic level of attention to "stuff" (cars in *Transformers*, pastries in *Marie Antoinette*). They both use shared cultural archetypes to flesh out characters that their screenplays barely define. They both make heavy use of ellipsis in the construction of their narratives. And what's more, as readers of *Transmedia Directors*' first section will know, we find these same features in the films of Wes Anderson. Can these shared features be part of any one director's signature style? This criticism can be generalized: many of the traits that the writers in this collection ascribe to one director in particular could be seen as examples of broader trends.

III. Transmedial Relations and Industry

Part Three briefly shifts the focus of the book to industrial history. J.D. Connor maps the connections between intellectual property, tax policy, and auteurish charisma that went into Bong Joon-Ho's *Snowpiercer*, while Graig Uhlin explains how David Fincher's creative process is shaped by technological and industrial forces. The essays offer fascinating details and observations, but both are marred by attempts to suggest that these poietic features are legible on the filmic surface. For example, an important plot twist in *Snowpiercer* is delivered by telephone, and many details of the intercontinental production were arranged over Skype. Connor wants this to be a significant resonance. But leaving aside the questions that this raises about the phone calls in, say, *Dial M for Murder*, would it be superfluous to point out that Skype is not a telephone? These interpretive flourishes, however, don't undermine either essay's central claims about the ways that technology and globalism have changed film production, or about Bong and Fincher's navigation of this new landscape.

A Review of *Transmedia Directors* (cont.)

IV. Music Video's Forms, Genres and Surfaces

Its title notwithstanding, this section focuses narrowly on the music video director Emil Nava. Carol Vernallis contributes a free-flowing interview with Nava in which she tries to draw him out on the subject of his creative process. (Nava proves a somewhat reticent subject, but the interview is still quite illuminating.) The remaining essays in the section include Brad Osborn's formalist analysis of Nava's video, "This is what you came for," discussing how the musical form of the song interacts with the narrative of the video, and a more wide-ranging discussion of Nava's visual technique and color grading by Jonathan Leal. Osborne's essay is technical in a way that most of the rest of the collection is not, perhaps pointing to the music video as a natural vehicle for formalism in multimedia analysis, or perhaps simply reflecting his training as a music theorist.

V. Music Video's Centrifugal Forces

Part Five addresses music videos through a lens more comparable to the rest of the book (i.e., treating an artist's persona or a director's signature style as a metaphorical text that unfolds transmedially across multiple concrete artworks). Carol Vernallis traces themes and images across the music videos of Dave Meyers, attempting to carve out a space for director-focused criticism of the music video. Lisa Perrott's divided essay is a highlight of the collection. The first half establishes David Bowie's star persona as a collaboratively-authored transmedia text, and the second focuses on the way director Floria Sigismondi puts her own auteurist stamp onto this David-Bowie-text in her music videos. It was after reading Perrott, I think, that the collection's extended definition of "transmedia" came into focus for me: where traditional transmedia properties are linked by an ongoing narrative or a shared storyworld, here the constituent artworks are united by a metaphorical text—in this case, David Bowie's star persona.

VI. Audiovisual Emanations: David Lynch

Holly Rogers writes about the sonic eeriness in David Lynch's work: electronic drones, static, vocal

Plot twist delivered by phone in Snowpiercer

distortion, strangely pulsating music, and so on. We could call this one of Lynch's style markers, but Rogers wants to say that it is more. These sonic traces tend to mark not an uncanny realm within the diegesis, but rather a kind of uncanny boundary or limit to the diegesis: a place where storytelling itself breaks down. But because the same sonic signs are used to mark these borders in work after work, it's as though Lynch's films and TV shows (and even potentially artworks by his collaborators, such as Julee Cruise's albums) form a kind of sonic non-space that, while non-diegetic with regard to any particular film, is still a meaningful part of Lynch's fictional creation.

The second essay, by Greg Hainge, has two themes: the first explains the use and representation of time in Lynch's work; the second explores the ways that our common-sense understanding of time is challenged by, variously, quantum physics, or Gilles Deleuze, or granular sound synthesis. It is clear that these themes are connected, but I am not sure precisely how. At times it seems like a simple analogy, with Hainge using abstruse concepts from physics and philosophy

to explain Lynch's cinema (or perhaps using Lynch's cinema to explain physics). At other times, however, Hainge seems to claim that Lynch's weird cinematic language really does lay bare the hidden workings of time: that watching Lynch's films allows us to feel the temporal consequences of the Planck scale, according to which space and time are not an infinite flow but a quantized and striated set of divisions. But if this really is more than an analogy—if Hainge thinks that Lynch is not merely letting us feel what Planck time would be like, but letting us actually feel Planck time—then it fails. After all, the experience of time that the Planck scale gives rise to is, in fact, our ordinary experience of time. The essay is a fascinating read, but for some may be a frustrating one.

By contrast, John McGrath's essay on the use of varispeed over the course of David Lynch's career resonates like a perfect punk rock album: a brief six pages of unpretentious, vigorous, and unassailable truth. Varispeed is an audio processing technique that shifts the duration and pitch of a sound simultaneously. (Think Alvin and the Chipmunks—although in Lynch's case it's always used to make sounds slower and lower.) Lynch has used it throughout his career, in films, TV shows, and commercials. McGrath describes a representative sampling of these moments, and analyzes the aesthetic and ideological effects of each, with attention to the ways in which each medium colors our understanding of the technique.

The last chapter in the Lynch section, by Elena del Río, delves again into the metaphysical, but with clearer purpose. Del Río employs a set of philosophical concepts drawn from Gilbert Simondon, specifically his rejection of hylomorphism, to explain certain curious features of Lynch's cinema, most notably the shaky and provisional definition of his characters.[7]

VII. Multi-vocality, Synchronicity and Transcendent Cinematics: Barry Jenkins

Kwami Coleman's essay on *If Beale Street Could Talk* and Dale Chapman's essay/interview with *Moonlight* composer Nicholas Britell work together to show that time, and more specifically the sonic representation of time through music, is a major theme in the work of Barry Jenkins. Chapman discusses the way that the chopped-and-screwed aesthetic—incidentally a varispeed technique— shapes both source music and score in *Moonlight*, drawing meaning from the ways that the sounds are temporally distorted at different points in the film's echoing timeline and narrative structure. Coleman, on the other hand, describes a fundamental difference between source music and score, arguing that the first is inherently and inevitably linked to mechanistic clock-time (a recording is released in a certain year and lasts a certain number of seconds), while the second is linked to our flexible sense of time as a lived experience due to the privileged connection of underscoring and the characters' emotions. I would have pushed back on both of these claims: have film musicologists not established that source music is just as powerfully linked to emotional experience as underscoring? Isn't our experience of recorded music still an experience, and therefore temporally flexible? But somehow this doesn't detract from the essay as a whole. I would qualify Coleman's thesis heavily, but I doubt I will think of *If Beale Street Could Talk* again without thinking of it through his terms.

VIII. Community, Identity, and Transmedial Aspirations Across the Web

Part Eight contains two striking but unrelated essays: Lori Burns on Jess Cope's stop-motion video for Steven Wilson's "Routine," and Gabrielle Veronique on the Jay Versace's Instagram feed. Burns applies something very close to the traditional definition of transmedia as she untangles the vagueries of text and timeline in Cope's video. "Routine" is taken from a narrative concept album called *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* Accordingly, Cope's video both shapes and is shaped by the frame narrative. The protagonist of the video is, or becomes, the protagonist of the album. This complexity is reflected in the looping, ritualistic timeline established by the video and the song.

Veronique's fascinating essay tries to do justice to the internet celebrity Jay Versace, yet Versace is

hard to pin down. Is he a comedian? A dancer? A filmmaker? A star? He's certainly all of these things, but he's also more than the sum of his parts. Veronique merely scratches the surface: large parts of the essay are devoted to descriptions of Jay Versace's work, although written in sharp-eyed, probing detail. But given the state of the field of cinema studies (let alone film music studies), Veronique's approach is probably the right one. Many readers will be unfamiliar with Versace, or will not have seriously engaged with his work. Veronique's essay prompted me to pay attention; hopefully it will do the same for others.

IX. Diagramatic, Signalectic, and Haptic Unfoldings Across Forms and Genres: Lars von Trier

The final section explores the cinema of Lars von Trier, with a focus on his later work. Although von Trier made a few highly-regarded television projects in his early career, he is essentially a film director, and thus "transmediality" in his work is a matter of allusion and quotation. Vivaldi concertos bridge the scene changes in *Manderlay*; tableaus are modeled after Delacroix and Botticelli in *The House That Jack Built*. Whether or not the word transmedia applies to this tendency, it is a notable feature of von Trier's work, and helps unite an otherwise wide-ranging set of essays. Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen traces a heightened "haptic" cinematographic style through von Trier's career; Linda Badley engages von Trier in dialogue with the ideologically compromised remnants of German Romanticism (Wagner, Speer); Donald Greig takes up, and ultimately rejects, the idea that von Trier's use of stagey artifice is a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*.[8]

Tableaux from The House That Jack Built*, modeled on Delacroix's* The Barque Of Dante (1882)

As this whirlwind tour through the book's contents shows, *Transmedia Directors* leans more heavily on the second word of its title than the first.[9] While the book's definition of transmedia constantly shifts, the essays are typically director-focused. Directors select the music that they place in their films with a careful eye to its historical and ideological significance (as Badley shows of von Trier), that directors collaborate actively with their composers (as shown in Chapman's interview with Britell), that directors cultivate signature soundworlds (as Rogers shows of Lynch), that even non-melomane directors develop consistent methods of working with music (as Kerins shows of Bay), and that, insofar as a director's auteurist reputation is first and foremost a construct in the minds of the audience, music will get swept up into that construct even when the director has no part in its creation (as Cateforis shows with regard to Mark Mothersbaugh's music for Wes Anderson). I would even go so far as to say that, if Gorbman lays out a general theory of how auteurist criticism can apply to film music, *Transmedia Directors* puts that theory into practice. It is gratifying to have so many excellent pieces of auteurist film music criticism gathered into a single volume.

Notes

1. Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling and Entertainment: An Annotated Syllabus," *Continuum* 24: 6 (2010): 943–58.

2. There is another way in which the title is potentially confusing. Although the title mentions "new audiovisual aesthetics," it doesn't really prepare the reader for the fact that the vast majority of these essays focus on film music and/or film sound. Nobody reading this review is likely to mind this surprise very much! But I can imagine that some film music scholars will pass over the book because they don't know how much it focuses on music, while some pure media studies types may pick it up and be disappointed, especially because this focus is probably mainly a function of *Transmedia Directors* having been as published as part of Bloomsbury's "New Approaches to Sound, Music and Media" series.

A Review of *Transmedia Directors* (cont.)

3. There is perhaps one: Lori Burns's "Multimodal and Transmedia Subjectivity in Animated Music Video: Jess Cope and Steven Wilson's 'Routine' from *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* (2015)," 331–48.

4. For example, Warren Buckland suggests that Wes Anderson's most distinctive creation is not a particular film, or even a body of films, but a "supersystem" (23), a sort of idea of what it is for something to be a Wes Anderson project. And it's this—the Wes Anderson auteurist stamp—that constitutes the transmedia text. Wes Anderson's supersystem is to *The Royal Tenenbaums* as the Star Wars franchise is to *The Empire Strikes Back*.

5. Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (University of Texas Press, 1994). The high concept era is a chapter in film history that arises in the 1980s (following the collapse of the studio system and the chaotic rise of New Hollywood). As Wyatt defines it, high concept is both a set of industrial practices and an aesthetic: wide release openings and media-saturation ad campaigns are features of the high concept era, but so are high-contrast lighting schemes and training montages set to non-diegetic pop music. Paradigmatic high concept films would include *Top Gun*, *E.T.*, and *Flashdance*.

6. To say that a filmmaker is an auteur is to make three claims: first, that they are an Artist rather than a mere technician, second, that they are responsible for every detail of their films, and third, almost as a consequence, that their individual artistic genius leaves a legible trace in these details, which can be experienced and understood by a well-trained viewer. Criticism that discusses film in these terms is called auteurist, or is said to follow the auteur theory. Classic accounts of the auteur theory include Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Indiana University Press, 1972), 74–115; Andrew Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford University Press, 2009), 451–54; and François Truffaut, "Une Certain Tendance du Cinema Français," *Cahiers du cinema*, 31: 1 (1954), 15–28.

7. Hylomorphism, which dates back to Aristotle, defines objects as a combination of matter and form: a wooden cup has certain properties because of its cup-like form, and certain properties because of its underlying wooden substance. As Del Río explains, Simondon rejects this, arguing that what we think of as matter and form are both material forces, working against each other in a particular moment. (294)

8. Brecht famously wanted to jar his audiences out of their emotional engagement with his plays so that they could be forced into a more intellectual posture. A *Verfremdungseffekt* (literally, "distancing effect") is a strange or off-putting element introduced for this precise purpose.

9. One can never touch on every essay in a review such as this. My apologies to the scholars who I left out; please rest assured that your omission does not reflect on the quality of your work.