

**The Ear of the Behearer:
A Conversation in Jazz**

Jed Rasula and
Brent Hayes Edwards

This exchange was conducted via e-mail between 10.17.07 and 12.18.07.

Jed Rasula: Catherine suggested maybe beginning with how we got oriented to jazz, started writing about it, etc. To that end, I'll start with a query and a bit of rambling to get things rolling. Generation(al). I'm interested in how it is that African Americans of a younger generation—yours, presumably—get exposed to, and interested in, jazz in the first place. Certainly, the same thing could be asked about white people, but I generally have the sense that jazz has long since migrated (commercially and culturally) far from any sustaining sense of black roots/community.

My own generational peers who were personal guides and allies and inspirations would include Nate Mackey, the poet Will Alexander, and a bookseller named Melvin Gupton who died around 1989. Will was from South Central LA and had a terrific collection of original Blue Note LPs (blue and white label, not the dreadful Liberty pressings of the 70s). Melvin had moved to LA from the Midwest for college, I think, and had quite a collection culled from his own local sleuthing, and Nate always listened and thought of jazz in an expansively global (now “world music”) context from the time I first met him in 1976, which is the same time I became friends with Melvin and Will. It seemed perfectly and fluidly natural at the time that my jazz buddies, to call them that, were African American and had grown up with a substantial sense of the music being specific to community and family. But during the 1980s in the jazz gigs I went to throughout the LA area, it was getting to be the case that the audience could often be all white. During that same decade, whenever I caught anything in New York, it was also a mostly, if not entirely,

white audience. However, since I've lived in Georgia (since 2001)—though I take this as possibly unique to the Atlanta magnet—I've found that not to be the case. Cassandra Wilson gave a great show here about four years ago, and I found myself pleasantly surprised to be not only in a white minority but a very tiny minority, at that. And a few weeks ago, Joshua Redman came through with his trio (another blistering set), and, while whites were not a minority, it was nowhere near what I'd experienced in the 80s.

But these are demographic observations and may have nothing to do with another factor, which is how those of us drawn to jazz feel connected to it in the first place. This may be a postbop phenomenon going way back, the symptom of a multigenerational outsider identity having more to do with intellectualism than with race. Certainly, the guys I've mentioned, Nate and Melvin and Will, were all relative loners, distinctly removed from any sort of group identification, driven primarily by the creative imagination firing up from anywhere, at any time, in any medium, by anyone at all.

Well, this is a bit more fulsome than I'd intended, but it's meant simply to strike a match to see the label on the box.

Brent Hayes Edwards: Thanks for your note. I, too, am thrilled that Catherine initiated this exchange. I've been reading your work for a number of years now. As scholars, we seldom take the time to consider the enabling function of our "fellow travelers": the colleagues we're *not* in direct contact with but who are working on the same issues, struggling with the same questions. If we think about it at all, it's often invoked, anxiously, in terms of competition. But to me it has a different charge—the sense of intimacy at a distance, the conviction of a collaboration that is weak, almost impossibly fragile, yet persistent and powerful. Sometimes it's just a matter of the hazy backdrop of one's own work or its presumed audience or a proliferation of alternate angles of approach. But sometimes, for me, there are particular sources that I keep coming back to, even when I'm not citing them directly in my own work, and some of your writing is in that category. So it's a pleasure to shift the register of our acquaintance by opening up this direct correspondence, which I think of as an amplification or extension of the already existing correspondences between our work.

I agree with you that the question of how we come to the music is a crucial one. And I agree with you that "jazz has long since migrated (commercially and culturally) far from any sustaining sense of black roots/community." (Although the very notion that there was once a period when jazz was bound to the "black community" in some singular and primary way may be one of our more resilient foundational myths.) I was just recently reading a conversation between the cinematographer

Arthur Jafa and the writer Greg Tate (from the journal *Artist and Influence*) where this issue comes up. It is generational, certainly. Greg and I share some parallels in our upbringing—we were both born in the Midwest and spent formative years in Washington, DC—but I was struck by how different his musical touchstones are from mine, simply because he's more than a decade older than I am.

My listening to music was probably conditioned by my reaching adolescence at the beginning of the 1980s, right on the cusp between eras. As a child, I loved music and often fell asleep listening to LPs on my multiplayer turntable, but they were mostly popular: soul, R & B. Because I lived in Michigan and had a family connection to Motown, the records that slipped into my dreamscape were things such as the Jackson Five (*Skywriter*) and Stevie Wonder (*Songs in the Key of Life*). There was a slightly different playlist on the eight-track player in my father's car: The Spinners, Donna Summer, Diana Ross. Just before I moved to DC, my musical world began to expand as some older black friends who lived across the street introduced me to some of the new music they were listening to: Gil Scott Heron, the Ohio Players, Al Jarreau. But I didn't listen to much jazz until junior high school in Washington, when I had a history teacher who was a big fan of late fusion.

I haven't listened to Spyro Gyra or the Manhattan Transfer in more than twenty years, but, for better or worse, they were among my primary pathways to the music. I've always thought that the pundits who spend countless pages attempting to cordon off the "tradition" are misguided not only because the jazz tradition has always been defined precisely (and paradoxically) by its permeability and its shifts, but also because they underestimate the variety of paths listeners take in discovering the music. Does it lessen my appreciation for Duke Ellington or James Moody that I first was exposed to their music in versions performed by Chuck Brown, the indefatigable pioneer of DC go-go?

I could go on at some length about the importance of Al Jarreau in my musical education. The two albums I heard first, *This Time* (1980) and *Breakin' Away* (1981), sent me in a number of directions: if they spurred me towards the discovery of the composers of songs he covered (Chick Corea, Dave Brubeck), they also sent me to Jarreau's stunning earlier work, especially the albums *We Got By* and *Look to the Rainbow*. I have a few friends (Fred Moten, for one) who share my love for early Jarreau. It may be that one has to have been born around a particular time and formed through a particular range of sounds to appreciate the combination of elements united in his music. But he was the first musician I saw in concert, at Constitution Hall (it must have been in 1983 or 1984 because I saw Prince's *Purple Rain* tour there a few months later). And the brilliance—the sheer joy and boundless inventiveness—of his voice opened the door for me to the jazz singing tradition: Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, and, above all, Betty Carter (to whom I was introduced by another teacher in college).

I studied piano throughout my childhood and played trombone for a number of years, and my playing music definitely had something to do with my listening. In high school, I stopped taking formal lessons but started playing the piano much more, trying to teach myself how to improvise in the tried-and-true method of jazz autodidacticism: listening to records and imitating others. So I wasn't just going to concerts but also transcribing—Taj Mahal's "Cakewalk into Town," Thelonious Monk's rendition of "Just a Gigolo," Vladimir Cosma's "Sentimental Walk" (the theme from the film *Diva*), George Winston's "Thanksgiving." There was more than a little adolescent brooding in all this—and a rather embarrassing attempt to develop what I guess you could call a repertoire of seduction (you'll know what I mean if you remember George Winston!). But I did go back into formal music studies in college. Although I majored in literature, I took the full composition track in the music department. Indeed, it was my composition teacher, Michael Tenzer, who lent me his Betty Carter LPs. And so my relation to jazz was different because I was thinking as an apprentice composer and listening to the music I was discovering (Ahmad Jamal, John Cage, Balinese gamelan, Cecil Taylor, Fela Kuti, James Booker, Ligeti, Don Pullen and George Adams, the World Saxophone Quartet, etc.) through those ears.

I don't recall spending a great deal of time reflecting on the racial composition of the audience at the concerts I was going to. Music for me was always linked to divergent, albeit sometimes overlapping, communities of reception—and race was not the only (or even really the primary) form of divergence. So I didn't come to the music with preconceptions about its privileged relationship to any audience. And the places I was seeing music in DC (Constitution Hall, Wolf Trap, the Kennedy Center, the 9:30 Club, and, above all, Blues Alley) were not really neighborhood venues. I don't think I really had "jazz buddies," to use your phrase, until college and after (and it is true, and worth noting in thinking about trajectories of fandom and collecting, that they were almost exclusively men: Peter Feng, Jed Dodds, Russell Reid, Peter Mendelsund), but as with yours, mine were not necessarily or primarily connections formed on the basis of racial solidarity or community affiliation in any simple sense. At the same time, music certainly was a part of the black worlds (and I would emphasize their plurality) I inhabited, whether in family situations, in church, or at the barbershop.


I can't quite imagine discovering the music with your cohort in Los Angeles—not just because of the generational difference but also because I have discovered so much of the music I love through Nathaniel Mackey's writings, long before I met him in person. (In the late 1980s, I used *Bedouin Hornbook* much as I used Baraka's *Black Music*, as a buying guide to the "new music" of the 1960s and 1970s.) I do share your sense that the gravitation to jazz often has a great deal to

do with a certain “intellectualism,” an attraction to the “firings” of the “creative imagination,” that may well be rooted in iconoclasm. I don’t know whether it involves an alienation “from any sort of group identification at all”—I’ve always thought that a good deal of Mackey’s serial work is propelled by an investigation of the complex dynamics of collectivism in the music: the communities it intimates, their ephemerality or vulnerability notwithstanding.

For me, another component of that intellectualism is that it may find its form most insistently in a *historicist* impulse. That is, the music itself, and especially the ways it has been packaged, seems to compel the listener to place it in jazz history, to seek out its antecedents and descendants. This may be, above all, an effect of liner notes as a genre, which frame jazz so powerfully *as* a tradition, through the provision of discographical and production information—in a way that is striking when one compares it with, say, the flimsy apparatus that has habitually accompanied Latin music, where key releases on major labels such as Fania don’t even give the names of the sidemen or the date of the recording session. One gets some sense of this impulse in John Gennari’s recent history of jazz criticism, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool*, although it seems somewhat different to me when it’s a matter of its influence on the development of literary scholars and poets such as you and me, or Nate Mackey and Will Alexander.

To my ears, the intellectualism was not only a matter of the music’s packaging or reception, but also a feature of jazz itself. I’m not just alluding to the more flamboyantly cerebral musicians of the avant-garde (e.g., Anthony Braxton), but more broadly to the ways the music foregrounds—makes audible—the intellectual work it demands: the quick-wittedness, the responsiveness, the referentiality (for instance, in a soloist’s interjection of quotations from other melodies). And part of that quality involves a historical attunement: not only a requisite knowledge of the jazz tradition but a sense of the manifold ways that jazz can be heard as something like a *performative archive* of historical experience—what Ellington termed a “tone parallel.” One of the musicians I saw live a great deal in the mid-1980s was Wynton Marsalis; a little bit of my applause is preserved on his 1986 record *Live at Blues Alley*. As difficult as it may be to recall so long after his transformation into an institution, part of what seemed exciting about that early band was its insouciant historical sensibility (my favorite of those sessions was *Black Codes (from the Underground)*, so named in reference to the restrictive body of laws governing freedmen in the US South after the Civil War).

On the subject of jazz and history, I want to ask you about the genesis of one of your recent publications: “Jazzbandism,” which appeared in the spring 2006 issue of the *Georgia Review*. It’s a long and insightful foray into the cultures of jazz in Europe in the 1920s. I’m wondering in particular not just about the contours of



the piece as jazz historiography but also about its innovative form; it's composed in short, titled essays, each about a page or two in length. They accumulate and reverberate with each other to create a sort of revolving, kaleidoscopic perspective on the resonance of the music in that period. As it turns out, I'm teaching a class right now called Critical Poetics, a workshop-based investigation of strategies of innovative nonfiction. A number of our readings, from Benjamin's *One-Way Street* to Barthes's *Mythologies* to Samuel Delany's book on Times Square, involve modes of criticism that privilege generic multiplicity and fragmentation: suites and constellations combining aphorisms, dream narratives, prose poems, sketches, memoir, and *Denkbilder*.

I've also been writing in a related mode myself. One section, about Lester Bowie's 1977 recordings with Fela, has just appeared in the new issue of *Transition*, and I'll send you a copy (I think it may be best to resort to snail mail for this purpose). Although my writing in this vein has revolved around instances of diasporic encounter—the complexity of what happens when differently placed peoples of African descent meet each other, interact, communicate, collaborate—I think of the form of the writing as deeply informed by black music: as a mode that relies on what Zora Neale Hurston calls a “rhythm of segments,” and that intuits its connections less through logical exposition and proper disciplinary citation than through obliquity, ellipsis, and the orchestration of fragments. Although I'm struck by the parallels between the work I've been doing and “Jazzbandism,” I'm also curious about the differences between our approaches, even as we're both clearly aiming towards another, formally experimental, way of writing about jazz.

JR: I'm glad you brought up the issue of innovative form. It's interesting how such apparent innovations arise, for me at least, out of seemingly insoluble practical challenges. Breaking “Jazzbandism” down into microtopics solved the problem of how to arrange an unruly variety of materials, and the chronological sequence was a simple ordering device. The gist of “Jazzbandism” had already been delivered in a formal essay, “Jazz as Decal for the European Avant-Garde,” in Heike Raphael's collection *Blackening Europe*, from which “Jazzbandism” emerged as an attempt to include all sorts of other material that didn't fit the European focus and/or wouldn't fit the stipulated length. I faced similar formal challenges in my book *Syncopations*. Chapter Two, “Seeing Double,” literally prints big chunks in parallel columns, which turned out to be thematically apt, but the real reason behind it is that I couldn't decide which section should precede the other if printed consecutively. It's the final chapter of *Syncopations*, though, that is the most exploratory in formal terms and also addresses jazz: “Syncope, Cupola, Pulse.” In it I made use of very precise typographic fluctuations (in point size, leading, typeface, and layout),

illustrations (including a dramatic one inside a footnote), and even a complete if diminutive inset essay (“Excursus on Monk”). I shouldn’t have been surprised when an anonymous reader of the manuscript for the press complained about all this as if it were nothing more than some juvenile indulgence. It never ceases to surprise me that people who spend their careers ostensibly developing a nuanced understand of print culture should more or less quarantine typographic/conceptual challenges as either irrelevant or impertinent. It’s such a straight-laced prosecutorial regime (our “discipline,” as it’s goofily called) that graduate students are astonished when I tell them they can break up an essay into numbered sections (or even just use asterisks), as if I’d given them permission to pee off the front porch.

Jazz has provided me with exemplary insistence on the issue of innovative form, especially Ellington and Mingus. Duke’s ability to synthesize sound-worlds into a three-minute 78-rpm format is mind boggling, and I can’t help hearing it as a standing challenge to anybody in any medium to really grasp the possibilities at hand rather than submit the creative process to the habit matrix of formal greetings (hey, man, what’s up; have a nice day; etc.—though the semantic minimalism of blues-based music is no less instructive for what can be done with almost nothing).

I like your term “diasporic encounter,” which is increasingly accurate to all creative ventures and curiously characterizes the zone established by the Internet. Given your parenthetical specification of diasporic encounter as pertaining to people of African descent, I can’t help thinking of its applicability to relocated and displaced descendents of Asia, Europe, and elsewhere. My Finnish roots, stamped pretty strongly from infancy (and not only in the sauna!), contributed quite a bit to whatever minority consciousness a white person in North America might have. The outsider aura I mentioned sharing with black friends in our ear for jazz reflects something of a difference I felt as a little kid, that whatever grounds of presumed solidarity or identity the mass of other kids shared was not necessarily objectionable but off in the distance and not quite trustworthy. Part of this is obviously the old individual versus crowd mentality, and a hefty social side of it has to do with growing up as a military brat, but part of it derived from an intuition that, racially speaking, whiteness was a grotesquely encompassing sack. So where others obviously felt it a kind of birthright to be included on the basis of being white, I thought it was pretty presumptuous. I experienced acute discomfort with being lumped into any generic categories, and I bristled (in memory I seem actually to see flickering porcupine quills) when, at the age of ten, I went to find somebody to play with and the mother answering the door gleefully told me the kids were downstairs watching cartoons and I could go right on down. I resented the assumption (the syllogism) that all kids watched cartoons and that I, being one, would too. I hated cartoons—that is, until I found Betty Boop, but that was not standard TV fare then.

The bump-and-shuffle sound world of the Boop toons, though, gave me fitful auditions of a musical horizon that was so attractive yet so remote from anything I'd otherwise heard that it was like hearing a broadcast from Mars before the reception faded out.


This is where your characterization of jazz as a “performative archive” of historical experience comes into play. Insofar as any music radiates historical experience, it implies some community, but, as jazz history itself shows, community need not be sociologically predicated but rather more like the ad hoc coagulations that Thomas Pynchon takes such glee in depicting. (I'm glad you characterized jazz and/in the black community as “one of our more resilient foundational myths”—I'd like to hear a more extended take on that. For my part, I think this reflects Ralph Ellison's exorbitant influence, hammered into place by LeRoi Jones's *Blues People*, however much he imagined himself to be overturning Ellison.) Looking back through the haze of fitful childhood recollections, I'd now have to admit that some sort of exotic allure insinuated itself into what became an enthusiasm for jazz by way of *I Love Lucy* and the post-Diz (isn't his name Desi Arnez?) mambo theme song, plus whatever occasional glimpses of the band made their way into the show. Of course, back then I had almost no chance of otherwise encountering Latin American music, so when the stinger hit, via the airways, it was jazz. (Well, I did have “The Lonely Bull,” by Herb Alpert; was hooked like every adolescent male by the whipped-cream-covered lady on the cover of another Alpert LP; and was introduced to Doc Severinson's soaring trumpet work by some friend or military associate of my father's. And now I realize that the first comedy album I ever bought—before an assiduous collection of Bill Cosby, Bob Newhart, Jonathan Winter, the Smothers Brothers—was by José Jimenez, a particularly instructive instance of Hispanic self-loathing.) And it was jazz at almost the last minute before it swung over into what got you going (Spyro Gyra, etc.). In 1967 I was fifteen, in tenth grade in military school (long story), and I was never ready to sleep at ten p.m. lights out, so I'd twirl the dial on a tiny portable radio I'd press tight between the pillow and my ear. My salvation (a word I'm not using casually here) was a jazz station, and the first jazz recording I ever bought was Miles's *Nefertiti*. The next two were by Brubeck and Cannonball Adderley, and seeing Cannonball's band in Germany the next year was my first live gig. Now, Cannonball's not bad bait, but his relatively diminutive stature is related to your point that we underestimate the variety of ways we get hooked in the first place. Krin Gabbard has an article somewhere on Kay Kyser, wondering what it means that someone as omnipresent in the media of his day, a bandleader who for millions personified “jazz,” is so completely expunged from the historical record that he might as well have been one of Stalin's victims. Surely part of the erasure has to do with simple embarrassment: I mean,

how many jazz sophisticates (especially in hip urban venues) want to fess up to being suckled on what they consider tripe? On another level, how many could stand the sheer physical challenge of carefully listening to a lot of music they'd already wrung dry in adolescence?

BHE: Jed, your brief mention of Betty Boop is an important reminder that our paths to the music can involve short-circuits or detours across media: one might discover Cecil Taylor by going to see a Dianne McIntyre dance concert, for instance; or get to Ornette Coleman through a Thomas Pynchon novel or a Bob Thompson painting; or find “fitful auditions of a musical horizon” by watching TV. I was a fan of cartoons as a child, and in that I guess we’re different, but I think that part of what attracted me to television animation in the 1970s—whether Spiderman, the old Super Friends (“Wonder Twin Powers: activate!”), Fat Albert, or Schoolhouse Rock—was its blatant clumsiness: the poorly drawn and recycled backdrops, the cheap approximation of human motion. An unintended consequence of the slapdash construction was a kind of odd, jerky visual rhythm that to me was enthralling precisely in its *distance* from verisimilitude: realism sacrificed to the beat.

I didn’t discover Betty Boop until I was an adult, but I am taken with those cartoons (especially the ones with Cab Calloway and Louis Armstrong) and what you call their “bump-and-shuffle sound world” for similar reasons. To me, this has everything to do with that wonderfully antiquated technology, the rotoscope, which intuits in its very imperfection the proper visual equivalent to jazz. There’s something stunning about the way rotoscope doesn’t quite work. The animation technique of tracing by hand over a live-action film, frame by frame, creates a kind of noise or static; one can still *almost* seem to see Cab Calloway’s body somehow magically captured in that crudely animated long-toothed walrus. (The practice in those shorts of occasionally including a bit of the original live-action films of Calloway and Armstrong only emphasizes the discrepancy.) The awkward alternation between the drawing and the ghosted body can only be described as swing. Apparently, the animators who worked for Max Fleisher when he was developing the technique had a word for this constitutive misfit: in their vernacular, the multiple tiny deviations from the “true line” in each hand-traced frame cause the animated film to “boil.” Or, as you put it in “Syncope, Cupola, Pulse,” “Before bop, Betty Boop was the *look* of hot jazz, its bubble, its droops and dips, its *azz*. Wriggling the *as if* off with her hip shake.”

It brings to mind another posterior formulation, the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where Kant famously argues that transcendental ideas have to be employed in the mode of “as if.” For instance, one has to proceed “as if” the world were created by a “highest



intelligence”—in other words, the transcendental is “only a heuristic and not an ostensive concept”; it is “regulative” rather than “constitutive.” The “as if” serves to “cultivate” and “correct” empirical thought, “always extending the cognition of experience but never going contrary to experience.” You have to be careful, though, not to take the strategic illusions of the “as if” to be trustworthy “dialectical witnesses,” Kant says. The “as if,” so crucial as a regulative principle for speculative reason, is also ultimately “null and void” because it deals “with information which no human being can ever get.”

This is one way to index the difference between philosophy and art—whether poetry or Betty Boop—as modes of inquiry, if art might be said to (mis)take, deliberately, the regulative for the constitutive in a manner that expands the bounds of experience by making the art work itself a realm of experience. Thus the thermodynamics of the primitive cartoon. Thus the grain of the voice in music. Thus the cardiognosis of poetics. In Nathaniel Mackey’s *Bedouin Hornbook*, N. senses that expansion in listening to an Armstrong recording of “Stardust”: “The sense I have is that we’re being addressed by a barely audible witness, some receding medium so heartrendingly remote as to redefine hearing.”

One of the things I appreciate most about the ways that, as you put it, jazz provides “exemplary insistence on the issue of innovative form” is that that expansion is predicated on discipline: on the vexed negotiation of constraint rather than unregulated release. The real idiocy of the old racist canards about improvisation as “free” and “natural” is that they obliterate this insight. When I teach poetry written “after the manner of” the blues (as Langston Hughes describes his second book, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*), I often find myself returning to a brilliant short essay by Martin Williams called “Recording Limits and Blues Form,” from the 1959 collection *The Art of Jazz*. Williams talks about the lyricism of the blues as it developed in relation to the constraints of recording technology, which in the 1920s allowed a performer a space of only a little more than three minutes for a given song—time to sing about three or four stanzas, depending on tempo. Out of the enormous storehouse of recombinant blues lyrics, the best singers learned quickly to hone those three or four stanzas into a taut, dramatic arena of expression—and indeed the limits of the form heightened its expressive possibilities.

If this suggests the reason that all of Hughes’s blues in *Fine Clothes* adhere to that same length (as approximations or transcriptions of the concentrated power of recorded blues), to me these circumstances of constraint also have much to do with the compositional discoveries of musicians who broke beyond them, such as Ellington. There is a formative relation, in other words, between constraint, innovation, and extended form. Describing his attraction to serial form, Mackey once said to me that the recourse to extended form among black artists could in no small

measure be attributed to an impatience with “cramp” in all its guises: that is, the thirst for mobility, the urge to expansion, is rooted in a history of containment and segregation.

I do believe that there is something irreducible about this history and its relation to something called blackness. At the conference for the thirtieth anniversary of the journal *Callaloo* held in Baltimore at the end of October, Fred Moten said (in a phrasing I will not be able to transcribe adequately) that if blackness is above all the name of an orientation, a certain persistent recourse to fugitivity, a resistance to constraint that itself provokes the many ruses of discipline, then peoples of African descent, without holding a phenotypical monopoly on that orientation, did have a “privileged relation to it.” It’s important to add that saying this, for me at least, is not to disagree with your comment regarding my phrase “diasporic encounter,” that it is “increasingly accurate to all creative ventures” (although I am not sure that I would describe the Internet as a diasporic space, at least not as quickly as you do). Certainly the concept of diaspora is applicable, as you say, to “relocated and displaced descendents of Asia, Europe, and elsewhere.” At the same time, given the paleonymy of the term, to me it draws our attention to the (disparate) ways that “community” seems to congeal around a notion of commonality (the “spore”), around a shared core or origin. There has to be that thing in the middle. Thus to look at a “diasporic encounter” means at some level to consider the dynamic of interaction and, unavoidably, negotiation around that shared quality—even if (or especially if) that quality is fictive.

One of the things I find useful in the history of the word itself is that the term is itself a translation: *diaspora* is a Greek word used to translate certain Hebrew words related to “scattering” and “dispersal” in the Septuagint (the Greek version of parts of the Old Testament produced for Ptolemy II around 250 BCE). It’s a foreign word, then, but eventually it comes to take on an important role in the self-understanding of the Jewish communities in the Mediterranean in the Hellenistic period. In other words, the term itself contains a history of overlapping dispersions (Greek and Jewish). And it suggests that a scattered community might come to see itself as a community only through the way another group sees it.

I did say in my last post that the notion of a singular and constitutive link between jazz and the “black community” was “one of our more resilient foundational myths.” Since I’ve raised the specter of community again here, and since you said you’d “like to hear a more extended take on that,” I’ll take the thread a little further. I do agree with you that this mythology has something to do with the ways that Ralph Ellison’s criticism has been received (although obviously it doesn’t originate with his work). And I agree with you that there are striking parallels between some of Ellison’s writing and Baraka’s *Blues People*, even given their mutual

efforts to discredit one another. I usually teach *Blues People* with Ellison's review of it and with Ellison's own 1959 essay "The Golden Age, Time Past," about the advent of bebop in clubs such as Minton's in Harlem in the early 1940s. At the same time, it's true that—despite the ways he has been put to use by his acolytes and self-appointed deacons—Ellison also frames "The Golden Age, Time Past" as a critique of the old mythological approach to jazz historiography.

"With jazz we are yet not in the age of history," Ellison writes, "but linger in that of folklore." That's a parenthetical observation in the essay, and it's as though the essay is the announcement of that impasse rather than its overcoming. The strange little epigraph with which the essay opens seems designed to *dislocate* identity (which Ellison defines as "that which we do") from memory ("that which we would like to have been, or that which we hope to be"). The epigraph is an announcement that the essay will not be able to bridge the gap between practice and ideal: "our memory and our identity are ever at odds, our history ever a tall tale told by inattentive idealists." Even though Ellison will go on to argue that Minton's is a key institution in the Harlem community in the 1940s—he describes it as at once a "sanctuary" and the "jazzman's true academy," the location of a "continual symposium" of the music—the opening epigraph can also be read as a warning that we shouldn't mistake the location of that practice for a badge or a birthmark, as though the music were an identifying marker or a natural attribute of the neighborhood.

For me, the poignancy of the essay has to do with Ellison's inability to countenance a historical methodology that would attend to fragmentation. In other words, it has everything to do with innovative form in writing. At every turn, Ellison finds himself hemmed in by incomplete information. On the one hand, his abortive attempts at ethnography (as Maxine Gordon has shown, in preparation for the piece he tried to interview musicians who'd been at Minton's) lead him to conclude that "when the moment was past no one retained more than a fragment of its happening." On the other hand, if the recorded music itself is the only archive, "all that is left" to mark the "heat" of that lost moment, it is "itself a texture of fragments, repetitive, nervous, not fully formed." But Ellison cannot bring himself to write in a way that would suggest that the truth of the music is a truth of the fragment, of the ellipsis, of the supplement: to find a mode of writing that would attend to the way "the enduring meaning of the great moment at Minton's took place off to the side, beyond the range of attention." At best, he can describe it as "discord," "controlled fury," "underground, secret and taunting."

So Ellison's criticism can be read as both a critique of mythologization and an unavoidable contribution to myth-making. For me, the double bind is reminiscent of Roland Barthes's contention in *Mythologies* (which, perhaps it's worth recalling,

is first published in 1957, only slightly before Ellison's Minton's essay) that "the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn," to "reconstitute" myth as mythology with the kind of "metalanguage" at work in Ellison's epigraph. Ever since I reread Barthes when I taught the book a few weeks ago, I've been struggling with one of the more melodramatic methodological propositions he makes in his concluding essay on "Myth Today": "there is as yet only one possible choice," he writes, "and this choice can bear only on two equally extreme methods: either to posit a reality which is entirely permeable to history, and ideologize; or, conversely, to posit a reality which is *ultimately* impenetrable, irreducible, and, in this case, poetize." For me, at least, the impulse to innovation is less an attempt at what Barthes calls the necessary "reconciliation" of these methods than a stubborn rejection of this dichotomy and the methodological categorization it would impose—a rejection carried out through the practice of a writing geared to agitate its own internal instabilities to the boiling point.

JR: There's much to respond to in your rich posting, Brent. I'll begin with free associations and loose ends. First, on cartoons: despite my professed childhood disdain, I certainly owe a substantial grounding in all kinds of music to the world of Looney Tunes. It's interesting to reflect on the eminence of classical music in the mid-century decades filtering down to kids by way of cartoons, and to the public at large in movie soundtracks (for a quarter century or more after the "talkies" arrived, classical music was the default soundtrack setting). Another filtration system for me was the Classics Illustrated comic books, which introduced me to everything from Shakespeare and Homer to *Moby-Dick* and *Crime and Punishment*. It was an era when "mass culture" actually preserved the culture, and youth was clearly understood to be preparatory for adulthood. Clearly, things have changed, as adulthood has regressed into a kind of lifelong fixation on adolescence. Earliest symptoms, maybe: seeing Wall Street guys in pinstripe suits riding skateboards in the 80s, which I take as symptomatic of a growing cultural expectation that adult life is mostly dress-up. Men will be boys: the motto for a cultural propensity to drag the paraphernalia of childhood along through the whole life cycle.

What I'm inching toward here is your Kantian moment, inflected by Schiller's concept of the play-drive (*Spieltrieb*). What Kant shares with Schiller and so many other German thinkers in the wake of the Enlightenment is how to sustain a productive engagement with the variety of phenomena without being overcome by the sheer profusion of it all, how to attain a balanced outlook that would not be achieved by inflexible standards or any other species of absolutism. For Schiller, the *Stofftrieb* and the *Formtrieb* (i.e., the lure of sensation and the lure of form: the first drive provides cases, the second provides laws, Schiller says) should not be

imagined as viable choices but need to be synthesized in the play drive, in which a capacity for sensory experience is at once a complement to, and complemented by, reason and form. (By contrast, the American indulgence play I mentioned earlier has nothing to do with synthesis: it's either happily immersed in sensation or studiously cherished for its formal integrity.) Sometimes I get the sense, reading his *Letters on Aesthetic Education*, that Schiller wants to promote the sensation of form as such, form as sensory charge. This seems especially clear in his understanding of beauty as "at once a state of our being and an activity we perform" (Letter 25). Now, what's always perked me up about this is how it pertains to jazz. It promotes that sense of individual "sound" so much of the tradition consists of, albeit a sound thoroughly dunked in an activity in the broadest temporal sense: in the moment, but necessarily conversant with the momentum of moments—a momentum that precedes and exceeds the individual sound.

I've been thinking about this in conjunction with Schiller for a long time but was reminded in a curious way at a dinner party last year. The host played jazz in the background through a long evening, so my attention was only intermittently on the music, but he was playing vinyl, so every time he went over to flip the disc or put a new one on, I noticed and would try to identify what I'd just heard. The upshot of it was that by the end of the evening I'd accurately identified every single thing he'd played, but I wonder how. There are, of course, many discs I'd recognized instantly—such as Jackie McLean's heat-shredded alto on *Let Freedom Ring* or the way the ensemble grips the beat in Mingus's *Ah Um*—but on this occasion I recognized things I hadn't heard in years, such as a Joe Bonner piano trio. I'm pretty sure that in a Downbeat Blindfold Test I wouldn't hit a hundred percent, so I've been thinking that it's something more to do with the ambiance. That is, it's possible to become receptive to signature traits of a performance through some aural equivalence of peripheral vision, so that, through the sound, the person walks right on in, like someone you recognize coming into the room. So I'm clearly thinking here of something like Kant's regulative experience as it deals "with information which no human being can ever get"—though, obviously, not quite in so absolute a framework as he devises. This sense of hearing I'm after is most resoundingly registered in the prologue to *Invisible Man*, and Ellison's propensity for synaesthetic tropes gets carried along through Mackey's letters to the Angel of Dust, and it's as if they're feeding off a tradition going back to synaesthetic preoccupations going back to the nineteenth century. As the American painter Max Weber said of his art, in 1916, "The great worlds of colored matter in light must be heard through the eye." This draws on the accumulating prestige of music (in 1873 Pater acknowledged that all the arts now aspired to the condition of music). But "music" in that sense was a cipher for the unknowable, the "abyss," *le gouffre* of Baudelaire, etc.

In a more traceable and substantive historical sense, I think of this as Wagnerism, the inaugural ism that bears all the twentieth-century isms along in its wake, and that's how I came to that term "jazzbandism" (which I found in the Madrid cultural critic Ramon Gomez de la Serna). Now, all these isms share a distinct need that you've beautifully identified in your paraphrase of Fred Moten, "a resistance to constraint that provokes the many ruses of discipline." This comes as close as I can imagine to pinpointing the instinctive response to jazz on the part of so many vanguard artists, writers, and composers after the first World War. And it opens up, in turn, another prospect for the issue of diaspora. Diaspora is a concept positing a certain past, a foundational moment, a lost mooring. But the advent of jazz in the early twentieth century enables us to identify an anticipatory diaspora, as it were, when people of absolutely no kinship get wind of some connection in the future, and can't help feeling that link as an incitement to do or make something. Shared origin is the key element in the common understanding of diaspora, but massive historical displacements turn kinship into negotiation, as you suggest. The reverse-diaspora I'm talking about works on another principle, turning negotiation into kinship, and this kind of negotiation can't be thought of along the lines of participation mystique. You don't get included simply by doing it or digging it, but by making a sound or leaving an imprint that others recognize the way I recognized Joe Bonner and the others at that dinner. An anticipatory recognition, phantom limb in reverse, where the limb that has never been anticipates moves it can make and grows accordingly.

The complex striations of American history gave rise to that anticipatory responsiveness we call jazz. But the mutuality taken up in the music has generally been relegated to simple categories such as style options, leisure pursuits, taste, and even indulgence. This comes home with a bang in an article in the current *Finnish American Reporter* (December 2007) about a woman named Amy Kaukonen who became mayor of an Ohio town in 1922, largely on a temperance ticket. She was profiled by the United Press syndicate along novelty lines: "Fairport's Girl Mayor Defends Modern Girl, Short Skirts, Jazz." It's clear from the profile in the *Finnish American Reporter* that she liked to dance, as so many did, and that she was modern enough to prefer the shorter skirts that dancing to jazz required. The derogatory use of "girl" says much about the time (not only was she a mayor, she was a medical doctor), and I can't help connecting that with the jazz reference. If she had had a penchant for playing Chopin on a baby grand in her parlor, she would've been called a lady. But those (whites) of that era who responded to jazz were "fans," "jazz babies," "kooks," and similar terms that mythologize the lurches of mass-media attention span—in the face of which it's tempting to adopt the alternatives Barthes comes up with, ideology or poetry. But these terms actu-

ally represent a choice between past and future, albeit with this distinction: poetry provokes a future steeped (like tea) in the past, while ideology recreates (already a contradiction) the future on behalf of a future perfect—i.e., what will have been, a future conceived in the idiom of the past.

Barthes's *Mythologies* is, I think, a desperate work, or a work that revels in its desperation (how else can you take his characterization of the mythologist: "His connection with the world is of the order of sarcasm"). Not that I hold this against him—I'm sure the same would apply to anyone today with the fortitude to address, month after month, our equivalents of wrestling, detergents, and the brain of Einstein. In fact, the last sentence of his preface is this: "What I claim is to live to the full the contradiction of my time, which may well make sarcasm the condition of truth." I'll set the destiny of sarcasm aside to get at what's most to the point here. Barthes has just finished affirming a desire to combine scientific objectivity with creative subjectivity and, before that, intimating that "myth" is not quite what he took it to be—namely, any instance of the "falsely obvious"—myth as ideology and ideology as special pleading with power on its side, speaking to the converted with a cudgel. But he senses, under the presumption, another option he wants to affirm (later it traverses many names, from the grain of the voice to the pleasure of the text): namely, that any affirmative gesture is itself a form of myth-making. He discovers the making in myth. "I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn," he reflects, "and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there." I hear as antidote to "what goes without saying" Charles Olson's version of myth—*muthos* via Ellen Harrison and Heraclitus—as "what is said of what is said," which is what could and should be said of jazz. In this most patently original art, its originality is challenged every step of the way by two opposing forces: 1) the cultural expectation of novelty, the tacit moral of which is "nothing new under the sun," and 2) the existential novelty of culture itself, which may be collectively prepared and packaged to the nth degree, right up to the point the solo's taken, the bridge takes hold, or the horns ride out the theme over the effortless paroxysm of the beat, and at that point, as the saying goes, all bets are off. Originality and repetition are two sides of the same coin—or, better yet, the same side of a very different coin indeed, one that doesn't fit through the slot in the Coke machine.

BHE: I've been musing, Jed, over your apt description of Barthes's *Mythologies* as "a desperate work, or a work that revels in its desperation." I agree that Olson's *muthos* can provide an "antidote" to Barthes's premature reduction of myth to common sense ("what-goes-without-saying"). But rather than take that detour, I'm tempted to explore the productive qualities of writerly desperation—that is, the

ways that conceptual constriction might be said to be the condition of possibility of innovation. How would one track his gravitation toward those “options he wants to affirm,” toward the proliferation (in his later work) of means of egress under the names you began to list—“grain,” “pleasure of the text,” “punctum,” “signifiante,” etc.?

Because my class has been partly a writing workshop, our discussions have regularly returned to issues of writerly strategy—tricks of the trade. So we spent a good deal of time trying to figure out what Barthes means by that sentence you mention, at the end of the preface: “What I claim is to live to the full the contradiction of my time, which may well make sarcasm the condition of truth.” If that’s the case, how does sarcasm register in the writing? Where do you see it? It’s worth noting first of all that if the medium of *Mythologies* might be described as the *periodical*—the pieces were almost all originally published in *Les lettres nouvelles*, and they time and time again involve readings of popular print culture (*Elle*, *l’Express*, *Astra*, *le Figaro*)—the particularity of its intervention is somewhat distorted in the 1972 English translation, which offers only a selection from the French original. (Interestingly, a number of the omissions involve pieces on race and colonialism, such as “Bichon chez les Nègres” and “Grammaire africaine,” but neither are we provided the delight of Barthes’s observations on the global aspirations of American evangelism in “Billy Graham au Vel’ d’Hiv”!)

One possible answer, for me, occurs in the essay on “The Great Family of Man,” the mid-1950s photography exhibition that aimed to show, as Barthes puts it, “the universality of human actions in the daily life of all the countries of the world.” In the process of dismantling the pretensions of the exhibition, he makes recourse to a stunning parenthetical: “This myth of the human ‘condition’ rests on a very old mystification, which always consists in placing Nature at the bottom of History. Any classic humanism postulates that in scratching the history of men a little, the relativity of their institutions or the superficial diversity of their skins (but why not ask the parents of Emmett Till, the young Negro assassinated by the Whites, what *they* think of The Great Family of Man?), one very quickly reaches the solid rock of a universal human nature.” Is that sarcasm? The gesture is caustic but reticent: it is devastating in no small part because Barthes refuses to provide full historical detail about the Till lynching. That the interjected rhetorical question is fleeting and parenthetical, lurching into the sentence and vanishing just as quickly, has much to do with its force and the “truth” it strives to articulate: the difference that difference makes in human history. The reader is forced to see it as method rather than momentary self-indulgence or special pleading when it happens again on the next page, as Barthes comments about the putative universality of human labor that “it will never be fair to confuse in a purely gestural identity the colonial

and the Western worker (let us also ask the North African workers of the Goutte d'Or district in Paris what they think of The Great Family of Man)."

This might mean that critical innovation, here for Barthes, at least, starts with the imperative of interruption: an attempt in reading myth to disturb or unhinge its "constantly moving turnstile" between form and meaning. But it's a special kind of interruption—not unrelated, as I understand it, to what you suggest about "some aural equivalence of peripheral vision" at work when one recognizes "signature traits of a performance" in listening to music. To invoke Emmett Till in the midst of a discussion of the photography exhibition is, in this sense, not just to interrupt but also to look to one side. The sarcasm is necessary, is a "condition of truth," because the sneering tone of the parenthetical is meant to deflate the puffery of the direct object it defers ("universal human nature"). In other words, Barthes—despite his own structuralist predilections—is doing something much more subtle here than setting up a binary distinction between poetry and ideology: instead, he is trying to compel, through the construction of his prose (or, perhaps, to adopt your term, through its "ambiance"), his French reader toward the cultivation of something like peripheral vision as a mode of political critique.

To ask how jazz, or an orientation toward listening called forth by jazz, can instill peripheral hearing is also to ask what kind of archive jazz represents. This is a question I've raised before. And of course it's one of your questions, too, especially in an essay I've found extraordinarily useful for my own work on the music: "The Media of Memory: The Seductive Menace of Records in Jazz History," which appears in Krin Gabbard's collection *Jazz among the Discourses*. I've always found it bewildering that there is so little reflection on what you call the "status of recordings," given their primacy as "testimony" in the writing of jazz history. One is driven to collect a small pile of supplementary scholarship, which for me includes the Martin Williams essay I've brought up before as well as work not always directly related to jazz, such as Adorno's "The Form of the Phonograph Record," Evan Eisenberg's *The Recording Angel*, Mark Katz's *Capturing Sound*, and Charles Hirschkind's recent *The Ethical Soundscape*, a study of the circulation of Islamic sermons on cassette in Egypt that has a good deal to say about the ways a medium of recording can shape listening practice. But as you point out, there are issues specific to jazz that historians have hardly begun to take up, above all the perverse way that recordings are taken as evidence of a "living tradition" of jazz performance that is defined as resistant to or exorbitant to the very technology of recording.

My current research on the "loft jazz" scene in 1970s New York has forced me to contend with one of the starker claims you make in the essay: "With jazz there are only two kinds of documents: recordings, and testimony (either written or transcribed from oral report)." It's true, as you admit, that concerts clearly pro-

vide another sort of documentation, but this doesn't get us very far because one wouldn't want to found a historiography on the model of "Shows I Have Seen." (Though some have tried.) I do think it's possible to expand the definition of both of your "kinds of documents," however.

On the one hand, if one is trying to make sense of the models the music offers for the practice of writing, then it seems imperative to consider the jazz musicians who have themselves written about the music. When Muhal Richard Abrams tells a journalist that he considers himself "a music historian as well as a practicing musician," what does that mean? It is a refusal, first of all, to be taken as anyone's "testimony" (and thus close to the strategies of "verbal evasion" you identify in the speech habits of musicians such as Duke Ellington and Lester Young). But it also claims disciplinary authority: history is the jazz player's proper province as much as the bandstand. This is to remind us that it is possible to find alternative models for historiographic practice not only in the literary examples you cite (Michael Ondaatje, Ishmael Reed, Nathaniel Mackey) but also in the historical and meta-historical texts written by musicians themselves, from Danny Barker to Anthony Braxton, from Mary Lou Williams to George Lewis. This is another variant, in another medium, of the historicist impulse I mentioned earlier, which resides within the music itself. (For me, this historicism is not reactive—not something that arises only in response to the emergence of jazz criticism and history—but instead marks a self-reflexivity that is native to the music.)

On the other hand, it should be possible to wrench open the very category of "menace": the record, and the particular materiality of inscription it implies. I don't mean simply that one needs to historicize the technology of recording (in order to consider the ways that Louis Armstrong's single of "West End Blues" and an MP3 of Vijay Iyer are very different kinds of "recorded" artifacts). I also mean that not all recording is commercial recording. In your essay, you mention in passing the "grotesque" example of Dean Benedetti, the Charlie Parker fan who strove to record as many of Bird's solos in concert as possible. But to me the more challenging example—because, again, it runs through the entire history of the music—is the counterarchive of recordings made by musicians themselves. This isn't a phenomenon that starts only in the digital age. From Armstrong to Ellington to Sun Ra and beyond, there are innumerable examples of jazz musicians who have recorded themselves. Sometimes this recording practice is linked to an entrepreneurial intervention in the industry (as with Mingus's Debut Records, Sun Ra's El-Saturn, or Betty Carter's Bet-Car); sometimes it is not (as with Armstrong's collection of hundreds of reel-to-reels in his home in Queens). But the overarching theme is autoarchivization: an active claim, part and parcel of the practice of the music, made on the media of jazz's preservation and circulation.

Researching the “lofts” run by musicians in Soho and Noho in the 1970s, I’ve been surprised not at the paucity of the archive but, on the contrary, at its excess. Almost every musician I’ve interviewed has (often literally in the closet) extensive documentation of the period, including not only print material and photographs but also homemade reel-to-reel and cassette recordings, and even video. Even if one approaches this excess only as “testimony”—that is, as raw material to be mined for the purposes of normative evolutionary historiography (in the business-as-usual you so soundly critique in your essay)—it is paralyzing in its sheer materiality. As you put it, “even if every rendition of every tune at every public and private performance were available to the historian, there would be a problem of *selection*.” (This is not even to raise the issues of quality and documentation: once one enters this messy field, recording can no longer be called a “clean material realm,” as you phrase it in describing commercial recordings.) For me, as I try to figure out how to write jazz history differently, the excess necessarily throws into question the very status of evidence.

Obviously, these are all loaded questions because of the (non-) place in the history of jazz of the 1970s, a period marked both by a decline in the support for the music at the major commercial record labels and by a (concomitant) explosion of institution-building—often below the radar even of local journalistic media—among musicians themselves. (I found it interesting that you conclude your piece with a discussion of Frank Tirro’s 1977 *Jazz: A History* and its inability to extend its evolutionary history of the music into the fusion-dominated decade of its publication.) But to me, writing in the wake of your essay, it is only by wrestling with such questions that we can take account of the ways jazz is, as you say, not only an inspiration and an object of study but also itself an “ongoing medium of history.”

We must have been in peripheral range when you were writing about “anticipatory diaspora” because it’s something I’ve been thinking about, too, for a while now—and I’ve been involved in two discussions since the beginning of December where it came up! I’ve just published an essay called “Langston Hughes and the Futures of Diaspora,” and the title is meant to raise a question both about the ongoing utility of the term as a unit of analysis and to propose that diaspora can be prospective or proleptic—a matter of futurity, rather than simply a matter of shared origin and memory. The scholarly conversation that is pushing diaspora in this direction seems to be emerging above all in work on Asian diasporas and queer theory (the title of Lok Siu’s book on Chinese migrant communities in Panama is one particularly suggestive formulation that refuses to allow kinship to be unbound from negotiation: *Memories of a Future Home*).

It goes without saying that the structure of our exchange has been proleptic, as well: grounded not just in our partial familiarity with each other’s work but

also and more deeply in the conviction—starting with a fragile common trust in Catherine’s judgment and proven only later, in the *mise-en-oeuvre* of the conversation—that we somehow share a space. What is this back-and-forth, if not the negotiation of that shared ground (like the title of that Audre Lorde poem, “Walking Our Boundaries”), a duet composed at a distance that makes chancy anticipation—sidelong glances, hearing around corners, or, as you say, “making a sound or leaving an imprint that others recognize”—the only means of rendez-vous?

It seems appropriate to me that I am writing this on the last teaching day of my semester (Mackey’s *Splay Anthem*, Roberson’s *City Eclogue*, and pizza from a restaurant named—felicitously for a discussion of poetry so intimately concerned with the intimation of diasporic community, with the rehabilitation of the commons—Famiglia), since this exchange for me has shadowed the ephemeral, invaluable comings-together that happen only in the classroom. That temporality of togetherness is here, too, in the breaks. It has been a pleasure—to appropriate a wonderfully resonant figure from Harryette Mullen’s *Muse and Drudge* (which I taught last week) to describe our correspondence—to be your “stray companion” for a spell.

JR: The elegance of your last posting should really be the last word, though I can’t help wanting to leap in as if it were a unison passage, two horns blowing over a steady backbeat into the fadeout. So thanks for that and the exquisite provocations, including your memorable essay/story on Lester Bowie’s encounter with Fela-talk about stray companions! Anyway, the imperative of interruption calls: so, with the accompanying croon of cowboy Roy Rogers singing “Happy Trails” in my head (his blue and red and yellow 45s were the first records I ever got, age four)—Until we meet again. . . .

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