

CECIL TAYLOR

New World Records 80201

The World of Cecil Taylor

Spencer Richards and Ramsey Ameen

I met Cecil Taylor on August 2, 1978. Over a couple of brews, we talked about many of the facets of his world: jazz personalities, Duke Ellington's greatness, Lena Home's enormous talent, being black and talented in America, Taylor's recent visit to the White House. I sought no secrets about his music; he told me none. We talked of his having heard Chick Webb drum when he was a child and the subsequent effect the drum had on his percussive style of piano playing. He talked about finding, while artist-in-residence at the University of Wisconsin, a Bosendorfer piano locked up in the basement and coming afoul of authorities there for holding late sessions. We talked also of the all-too-familiar obstacles and misunderstandings that must be finally overcome simply by continuing to make music.

—S.R.

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Because in fact he has continued to make music of overwhelming originality, Cecil Taylor has been increasingly successful in exercising his right to determine the working conditions such music requires—in particular, pianos of the best quality, and extensive practice and rehearsal. Listen to the sound of the piano on this record. It is the instrument Taylor requested, a remarkable ninety-six-key Bosendorfer that he describes as possessing a mellow lower register, being rich in overtones, and having a powerful action that “will stop you cold if you're not ready.” The readiness of which he speaks is, in the broader sense, the subtle relationship one must maintain with one's instrument, with one's fellow musicians, with the economics of the music business, with the technology of the recording studio, and ultimately with music as one lives it. This record was prepared under Taylor's artistic direction and is a document not only of his power of musical expression but also of the success of the comprehensive working methods and the fierce independence he has developed and maintained during the past quarter of a century.

For Cecil Taylor, success is the freedom to choose the paths one is gifted to follow, to assume the responsibilities and share the treasures encountered along these paths. This factor of success does not enter into the equations of market research, yet it has enabled the great jazz musicians to engage imaginations throughout the world. Certainly it is the success of this music in transmitting the authentic dignity of the free human spirit that so enthralled President Carter during a stunning five-minute Taylor solo performance at the White House a few months after this recording was made.

Nonetheless, some well-known impresarios, arbiters of musical taste, and wizards of the music market have remained unmoved. Traditionally, the jazz artist has had to depend on these people for the privilege of making it into a circus-like arena of notoriety, commercial gimmickry, and artistic repression by contract. A great many other beloved musicians of genius have paid and are paying with their lives to find some little sustenance within that chaos. Cecil Taylor's longstanding refusal to surrender professional self-determination inevitably confounds the mercenaries in the midst of their agendas.

The problem was underscored by Taylor's July 28, 1978, concert at the Delacorte Theater in New York's Central Park. This was a historic event in the cultural life of the jazz capital of the world,

produced under the auspices of Joseph Papp and the New York Shakespeare Festival. Papp had recently begun to apply the considerable energies of his multifaceted organization to the presentation of contemporary jazz, maintained his standards on this occasion. The concert was free to the audience of two thousand. A Steinway concert grand stood in the midst of a whimsical and beautifully illuminated stage setting; the range and nuances of Taylor's keyboard art were finally done justice in New York by a superb sound system. Although Richard Sudholter's lengthy article and interview appeared in the *Post* the day before the concert, there was not a single review in the New York papers.

What is at issue here is not press coverage of a specific event but rather the all-too-fugitive movement of this music and its practitioners through the American landscape. This recording, like the Delacorte Theater concert, addresses the issue by purposefully setting new production standards for the authentic documentation of the work of a consummate artist and the greater creative community he represents.

—R.A.

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Cecil Taylor is a musical genius. No one else on this planet plays piano the way he does. His unique percussive style enables him to juxtapose sounds in multitudes of layers with blinding speed and dexterity. His work requires that you listen well, and because music is an attempt at communication/vibration between the composer-player and the listener, one must appreciate not only what Taylor is trying to communicate but how he communicates it.

Several schools of music have helped shape Taylor's work; however, his music is uniquely American. There is a multitude of cultural influences here, from hambone to caviar; the presence of one does not mean the absence of the other. In 1958 Taylor said,

Everything I've lived, I am...I'm not afraid of European influences. The point is to use them— as Ellington did—as part of my life as an American Negro.¹

In listening to Cecil Taylor's music one should be aware of the structured improvisation that he describes as

A tool of refinement,
An attempt to capture “dark” instinct.
Cultivation of the acculturated
To learn one's nature in response to
Group (society) first hearing “beat”
As it exists in each living organism.²

Gunther Schuller wrote:

Improvisation is a venerable art. . . a skeletal score or blueprint with basic harmonic changes, rhythms, and melodic lines preset but all other details of performance determined in a onetime, not necessarily-to-be-repeated form *at the moment of performance*.³

Over the past two decades, while disbelievers and skeptics have groped hopelessly for the safety of comparison, Taylor has continued to sculpt sound in his own fashion. Picture a large smooth slab of rock that represents the wall of sound on which Taylor carves his intricate music.

This record presents further evidence of his genius and awesome ability to work within the group context, in which he furthers his exploration of the piano as catalyst feeding material to soloists in all registers.”⁴ This music at times gets very intense. It will take you down forgotten little streams in your mind and swell them with rivers of sound as Taylor pours notes on your ears. Listen.

—S.R.

When Spencer Richards offers us the image of a wall of rock carved intricately and powerfully by Cecil Taylor's music, he by no means suggests a museum artifact encased in glass and available for detached perusal during visiting hours. On the contrary, he is evoking the monumental impact on our lives of the great work of a contemporary Afro-American artist. The wall Richards envisions is no barrier; it is a temple pylon whose architecture reaches out to touch us, whose hieroglyphic inscriptions speak to each of us in the language of our own inner voice.

Richards' preparation of the notes for this album involved not only careful review of the master tapes of this session but also concentrated listening to every Cecil Taylor recording. In the article and commentaries that follow, Richards intentionally avoids the rheumatic historical-anatomical musicology too often interposed between the listener and the music. His preferred focus is the wonderful gift of hearing in its sympathetic essence: listening.

He provides other listeners with a map of his pilgrimage of listening and invites us to explore for ourselves the Hypostyle Hall, the Colonnade of the Great Court, and the Avenue of the Sphinxes. He bids us sit in the shade of twenty sycamores planted around a silent pool, and finally to dance, embracing the lyric of the ancient harpist: “Make the singers come to you!”

If you approach this music with the archaeologist's shovel, you will find yourself among temple ruins. Should you, however, journey into this music with your gift of hearing, you will discover the enduring promise of an inscription carved in stone, addressed to the sun: “Come, you will see your temple. When you rise above the horizon, it blazes gold in your face.”

—RA.

THE RECORDINGS OF CECIL TAYLOR

Cecil Taylor's music has always been challenging and demanding but never inaccessible. As early as 1955, in his first recording session (*In Transition*) he played a solo version of Cole Porter's “You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To,” and played it so beautifully one could at last know what the lyrics meant. His distinctive approach to piano playing had been established. Listen to him play “Sweet and Lovely,” and you will hear his unique gift of coordination. “Charge 'Em Blues” displays his compositional ability. Throughout the fifties, Taylor's music continued to explore uncharted ground, despite the rancor of a recalcitrant press, few playing dates, and fewer recording opportunities. His band, which included at the time drummer Dennis Charles, bassist Buell Neidlinger, and soprano saxist Steve Lacy, recorded a landmark version of Billy Strayhorn's “Johnny Come Lately.”

On *Looking Ahead*—a masterpiece—Taylor's uncompromising energy and composing ability are once more in evidence; the interplay among piano, vibes, bass, and drums has been unmatched, although this format has not been repeated. That same year, he shared a record date with another giant who was also awakening from the slumber of other folks' tired ideas—John Coltrane (*Coltrane Time*). This was followed in 1959 by another quintet date, on which a young Ted Curson contributed some inventive trumpet work, with ample support from Bill Barron, Chris White, and Rudy Collins (*In Transition*).

The fifties ended with Taylor firmly decided that he would

retain the artistic prerogative of ultimate choice, functioning from the basis of always having the absolute aesthetic choice as the determining agent in the role that one's art and, finally, one's life's being represented.⁵

His 1960 version of “This Nearly Was Mine” is pure joy—you can dance to it. Taylor also exhibited here his uncanny ability to elicit beautiful solos from his sidemen: Archie Shepp's solo on “Lazy Afternoon remains a classic, and the driving drums of Dennis Charles and terrific bass playing by Neidlinger are further evidence (*Air*). Recording dates were still sparse, and Taylor's next work surfaced on a Gil Evans record in 1961. This also marked the entrance of alto saxist Jimmy Lyons, who displayed at once the ability to blend in with the Taylor vibration (*Into the Hot*). By 1962 the trio format emerged, and some dazzling performances are documented from a session recorded at the Cafe' Montmartre in Copenhagen (*Nefertiti, the Beautiful One, Has Come*). Europe at that time was more receptive than America to Taylor's music.

There are no Cecil Taylor recordings from 1963 to 1966.

The seminal record *Unit Structures* came next. The Unit was expanded to include two basses, trumpet, alto sax (oboe and bass clarinet), drums, and Taylor playing piano and bells. If, as he claimed, “ballet is the studied manipulation of extremities,”⁶ then his fingers danced on the piano keys. A quote from Taylor's own liner note:

The player advances to the area, an unknown totality, made whole through self analysis (improvisation), the conscious manipulation of known material; each piece is choice; architecture particular in grain, the specifics question-layers are disposed-deposits arrangements, group activity establishing the plain.⁷

Next came *Conquistador*, in which the second reed was replaced by the unique Bill Dixon on trumpet but the two-bass concept was kept. The Unit crafted delicate pieces under Taylor's guidance on this album.

The year 1968 signaled yet another new direction. Taylor recorded with Mike Mantler's large orchestra and played superbly on “Communications # 11” (*The Jazz Composer's Orchestra*). His interaction with the other players is amazing. The call-and-response passages with drummer Andrew Cyrille will floor you. At this time Taylor's energy and speed increased; his statements became more urgent. In constructing a solo, he would seemingly ask himself rhetorical questions with one hand, answer them with the other, and give several more alternative answers with what sounds like a third hand.

Under the auspices of the Maeght Foundation, as part of the concert series “Nuits de la Fondation Maeght,” in July, 1969, he recorded the “Second Act of A” (*The Great Concert of Cecil Taylor*). This quartet/unit represented yet another vehicle with which Taylor displayed his talent as composer-improviser, and the record captures that special experience of a Taylor concert by documenting nearly two hours of uninterrupted improvisation. The awesome horns of Jimmy Lyons and Sam Rivers blend well with Taylor's piano style. However, it is the piano-vocal-drums interaction on the third side that will haunt you—it is simply majestic. Playing on their respective percussive instruments, Cyrille and Taylor intuitively send messages to each other that they had heard someplace long, long ago.

There are no Cecil Taylor recordings from 1970 to 1973.

The dogs barked but the caravan continued, and in 1973 Taylor returned to the recording scene with *Indent*. This was produced and issued by Taylor himself, as was *Spring of Two Blue-J's*. Taylor's solo talents, which were in embryo in 1955, were now fully grown; he had made another indent with his layers of sound. Two months later he recorded the Unit in *Akisakila*. Suffice it to say that superlatives are in order here. The next year his extraordinary *Silent Tongues* won the title “Jazz Album of the Year” in the *Down Beat* International Critics Poll. This performance stands as an especially personal statement and a lasting experience for the listener. *Dark to Themselves* presented a new Unit, including the consistently creative Jimmy Lyons and a gifted newcomer on trumpet, Raphe Malik, along with drummer Marc Edwards and energetic tenor player David Ware. This group blasted inscriptions on that wall of sound.

On August 20, 1976, Taylor recorded at an outdoor festival at the Mooshah Castle in Austria, playing a Bösendorfer grand (*Air Above the Mountains [Buildings Within]*). This was an astonishing display of unity of man and instrument; the piano was now an extension of Taylor.

In 1977 he played on two occasions with another piano present: with Mary Lou Williams on *Embraced* and, in a rare appearance with a European musician, with Friedrich Gulda on *Nachricht vom Lande*.

In recent years the breadth and scope of Taylor's composition and performance have not been properly documented by any of the media. Pieces involving varied instrumentation, voices, and movement can be enjoyed only in the memories of those who were in the audience. These past few years have also been marked by intense rehearsal and practice.

A brief account of a recent five-hour rehearsal at Taylor's house may illustrate the well-developed process of Unit work. Raphe Malik sat playing what I thought were random notes; then I realized that he was reading from a music stand. Violinist Ramsey Ameen was also reading from a stand. It surprised me to see that the musicians referred to scores. What followed was some of the most incredible music/sound I have ever heard. Taylor sat at the piano, playing around the clear tones of Malik's trumpet. The violin wove multiple notes/colors within and through the texture of their sounds. Lyons, who came in later, stood off in a corner fingering notes on the alto, gauging his cue. Taylor signaled him, and off they flew. The intensity increased; piano, trumpet, alto, and violin talked and chanted with each other, celebrating the joy of this music. What gorgeous sounds they made that afternoon!

This album is the result of the same dedicated practice I witnessed during that rehearsal. The session took place from April 3 to 6, 1978. The compositions had been extensively rehearsed, and the

Taylor strategy was to gather momentum during the four days in order to transcend the studio environment. The takes issued here are from the last two sessions. The true acoustic balance of the band is preserved in these tracks by the dedicated and sympathetic contributions of engineer Don Puluse and producer Sam Parkins, who have utilized the most advanced recording technology to authentically document the sound of this music.

This album is the first of two that New World Records will present of Taylor's compositions; the second will be issued in the first half of 1979.

—S.R.

¹ Liner note to *Looking Ahead*. Contemporary S7562.

² Liner note to *Air Above the Mountains (Buildings Within)*. Inner City 3021.

³ Liner note to *Loxodonta Africana: The Jazz Sound of Ricky Ford*. New World Records 80204-2.

⁴ Liner note to *Unit Structures*. Blue Note BST-8437.

⁵ Interview, *Down Beat*, April 10, 1975.

⁶ Liner note to *Unit Structures*.

⁷ *Ibid.*

THE RECORDINGS

Idut

Fragmented lines punctuate this composition, with the piano as “catalyst feeding material.” The Unit moves down sound paths that Taylor propels as he shifts the pieces/players in different combinations. The ensemble's sound ebbs and flows gently, creating beautiful patterns; then Taylor ends the encounter with some very pretty, delicate piano playing.

Serdab

The mood is gentler and more relaxed, although the piece has moments of intensity. A few soft lines by the piano begin the process; then the other pieces fall gradually into place, soulfully connecting with each other. They enter and leave at different levels on the tiers of sound that Taylor constantly builds with his brief interplay with each instrument. The piece ends with soft notes falling into eternity.

Holiday en Masque

In brief exchanges with the drummer, Taylor demonstrates once again that the piano is a percussive instrument. He clearly touches another range of auditory sensitivity with his interplay with the violin. Malik's trumpet notes burst like fireworks and blend into a design that Taylor has created. The pattern returns with some mournful violin notes and some blistering alto work. The bass and drums fall perfectly in place as the integration of the musical structures becomes more concentrated. There is disciplined interrelation among the musicians, who are now really playing Taylor's material. They chant together; alto sax, violin, bass, drums, and trumpet feed off each other and tell each other stories. Taylor's piano sustains the energy and focus of this masterful achievement in ensemble playing. This work is carved with truth, and the vision emerges from the power and dexterity of many working as one.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

1950s

In Transition. Blue Note BN-LA458.
Looking Ahead. Contemporary S-7562.

1960s

Air. Barnaby Z-30562.
Coltrane Time. United Artists UAS-5638.
Conquistador. Blue Note BST-84260.
Into the Hot. Impulse A-9.
The Jazz Composer's Orchestra. Jazz Composer's Orchestra Association. JCOA LP-1001/2.
Nefertiti, the Beautiful One, Has Come. Arista 1905.
Nuits de la Fondation Maeght, Vols. I-IV. Shandar 83509. Reissued as *The Great Concert of Cecil Taylor*.
Prestige 34003.
Unit Structures. Blue Note BST-84237.

1970s

Air Above the Mountains (Buildings Within). Inner City 3021.
Akisakila. Trio 3004/5.
Dark to Themselves. Inner City 3001.
Embraced. Pablo 2620-108.
Indent. Unit Core. Reissued on Arista 1038.
Nachricht vom Lände. Brain 500-018.
Silent Tongues. Arista 1005.
Spring of Two Blue-J's. Unit Core 30551. Out of print.
3 Phasis. New World 80303-2

Cecil Taylor was receiving his first piano lessons by the age of five; his mother was his first music teacher. He studied composition and harmony at New York College of Music, and spent the next four years earning a degree in composition at the New England Conservatory of Music. His first club dates, jazz festivals, and recordings—both at home and overseas—came in the following years. By 1966, the Bureau of Research ORTF was listing Cecil Taylor in its modern music category. Taylor was at the University of Wisconsin in 1971, where he taught black music to the largest registered class in the history of that school. He spent 1972-73 with Jimmy Lyons and Andrew Cyrille as artists-in-residence at Antioch College. During the 1970s he began to enjoy a new level of recognition, as evidenced by a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1973 and an Honorary Doctorate of Music from the New England Conservatory in 1977.

Jimmy Lyons is a man of unassailable dignity; he is as careful about his words and actions as he is about his music. His first youthful encounter with the essence of jazz occurred when he heard such musicians as Bud Powell, Elmo Hope, and Thelonious Monk play for each other at a neighbor's house. Al Walker, a fine pianist who played regularly at those private sessions, began to work with and encourage Jimmy's musicality, generously sharing his technical knowledge and sense of tradition. Jimmy remembers realizing, when he was in his early teens, the power of a music that could transform life's anxieties into beauty. During his high school years, he maintained the discipline of a minimum of three hours of practice every day without fail. Throughout the intervening years he has relied on the rigors of practice to sustain the continued growth that he

demands of himself. His musical association with Cecil Taylor began in 1961. He recorded with his own quartet in Paris in 1969 (*Other Afternoons*, on the BYG label), taught at Antioch College with Taylor for two years, conducted his own twenty-five piece ensemble at Bennington College in 1975, and in 1978 was awarded a CAPS grant for an orchestral composition written and performed at Bennington. Since 1972 he has appeared occasionally in New York with his own group.

Raphé Malik began music lessons at the age of three, and has been playing professionally since childhood. His formal academic training was in literature, and his poetry was published during his college years. He met Cecil Taylor and Jimmy Lyons at Antioch College, where he studied intensively with them for two years. He joined Jimmy's band in 1973 and Cecil's in 1976. He practices indefatigably, striving for technically precise individuality of expression. He cites Fats Navarro and Miles Davis as his major influences on trumpet.

Ramsey Ameen began to study violin at the suggestion of his father, who often spoke of a friend in his native Egypt who “used to make the violin talk.” The violin sang to Ramsey for years, but it never talked until he heard Ornette Coleman play it, in the late 1960s. His formal musical education reached a critical point when his professors informed him that jazz was a superficial art form, serving primarily to entertain. He subsequently understood that being self-taught means accepting the responsibility to learn from all one's teachers, especially the entertaining ones. He had worked with Cecil Taylor for about six months before making this recording, his first. He plays without the aid of fashionable electric pick-ups, insisting that his instrument “refuses to talk to him on the telephone.”

Sirone's dynamic personal energy and sense of destiny are reflected in the dramatic power of his playing. His first recorded collaboration with Cecil Taylor (*Spring of Two Blue-J's*) is unfortunately out of print. Readily available, however, is the excellent series of recordings produced by the Revolutionary Ensemble, a unique musical adventure collectively shared for seven years by Sirone, violinist Leroy Jenkins, and drummer Jerome Cooper. Sirone's early music-making was on the trombone, under the guidance of a gifted music teacher who felt that young black children in Georgia ought to learn jazz standards and chord changes, rather than military marches. His style on bass evolved during the turbulent 1960s. Today he is on the frontier of extended improvisation. Sirone lives on a farm in Pennsylvania with his wife and daughter.

Ronald Shannon Jackson grew up in Fort Worth, Texas, amid the sounds of black people's music of every kind, from rhythm 'n' blues, to gospel, to big bands and bebop. He decided to play drums when he was five. During his school years he was “touched by the aura of Ornette Coleman,” less than ten years his senior, who was already a local legend. Ronald came to New York in 1967 and worked with Albert Ayler. Most recently, he has been featured with Ornette Coleman's band, “Prime Time.” He has enriched his mastery of the rhythms of Afro-American music by studying the cultures of Africa and Asia. He and his wife make their home in New York.

Cecil Taylor, piano

Jimmy Lyons, alto saxophone

Raphé Malik, trumpet

Ramsey Ameen, violin

Sirone, bass

Ronald Shannon Jackson, drums

1. Idut (Cecil Taylor) 14:40
2. Serdab (Cecil Taylor) 14:13
3. Holiday En Masque (Cecil Taylor) 29:41

(All selections publ. Mayflower Music Corp.)

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Coordinator: Kay Blackburn

Recording, editing, and mixing engineer: Don Puluse

Assistant recording engineer: Ken Robertson

Compact Disc Mastering: Judith Sherman, and E. Amelia Rogers/Soundmirror, Inc.

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