

**CECIL TAYLOR, PIANO JIMMY LYONS, ALTO SAXOPHONE RAPH. MALIK,
TRUMPET RAMSEY AMEEN, VIOLIN SIRONE, BASS RONALD SHANNON
JACKSON, DRUMS CECIL TAYLOR**

New World Records 80303-2

THE MUSIC OF CECIL TAYLOR

by Gary Giddins

More than any one else in contemporary music, Cecil Taylor has successfully reconciled the traditions of jazz and the academy. To no one's surprise, least of all his own, the accomplishment is not universally celebrated. The classical avant-garde views it with the suspicion it turns on all jazz-related developments, while the jazz traditionalists are disaffected by Taylor's abandonment of swing orthodoxies. Yet the achievement is unmistakable: Taylor's music gives emotional satisfaction; it enlarges the language and potential of musical expression; it makes us hear deeper and better. After two decades of uncompromising dedication, Taylor has earned a passionate international following. His art remains difficult for the novice to grasp, but time has proved that those difficulties are not insurmountable.

To understand the impact of Taylor's innovations, it is useful to recall the state of American music in the nineteen-fifties, when his influence was first felt. At the time of his debut recording in 1955, the structure of a jazz performance was rigidly codified. Jazz improvisation and composition were based on a cyclical form—that is, the soloist and the composer worked with a predetermined structure, usually the twelve-bar blues or the thirty-two-bar popular song, which served as a harmonic and rhythmic pattern to be repeated over and over for the duration of a performance. Each cycle, or chorus, had the same harmonic progression and number of measures; the melodies had to conform to the harmonic outline, and the rhythms to the time signature. The bop movement of the forties (see New World Records NW 271, *Bebop*) had expressed radical discontent among younger musicians, but although bebop may be said to have altered jazz from a diatonic to a chromatic music, it remained satisfied with the cyclical form. During the next ten years, jazz leaders experimented with a variety of seemingly modernist techniques, many of them having traditional origins (for example New Orleans polyphony, fugal counterpoint, modality, expressive timbral effects), in an attempt to broaden the music's scope. Inevitably, the most adventurous of the new breed began asking fundamental questions: Jazz has become mired in harmonic labyrinths; why not do away with chord progressions and concentrate on the melodic content of the improvisations? Rhythm-section players are technically sophisticated beyond the dreams of their predecessors; why not liberate them from the duties of timekeeping and have them participate as equals with the horns? Once the areas of melody, harmony, and rhythm were reevaluated, the structural basis would have to be reconsidered as well the traditional cyclical blues and pop songs were no longer necessary or sufficient, were in fact debilitating.

One result was free improvisation, which found its ultimate expression in Ornette Coleman's 1960 *Free Jazz* (Atlantic S-1364). Another was the assimilation of techniques and procedures pioneered in modern classical music. Earlier generations of jazz players

were usually grounded in the classics by virtue of their first music lessons; by the fifties, that grounding was increasingly extended to the conservatory level. A cross-fertilization of the two worlds was inevitable. Igor Stravinsky wrote the *Ebony* Concerto for Woody Herman's orchestra in 1946, and a few years later George Russell suggested a cultural exchange between Stravinsky and Charlie Parker in "A Bird in Igor's Yard" (recorded by Capitol and suppressed for twenty-five years). In the fifties, composer and critic Gunther Schuller even coined a phrase, "third stream" (see New World Records NW 216, *Avant-Garde and Third-Stream Jazz*), to describe a new school that would incorporate elements of jazz and classical music. Yet most of the works produced under that self-conscious banner betrayed seams and stitching and lacked passion. Occasionally, the result was merely the marshaling of European instrumentation and dissonant melodic fragments as a backdrop for a relatively orthodox jazz solo. Some delightful music was produced, but the ultimate impression was less of a stream than of two puddles—one water, the other oil.

Cecil Taylor's synthesis isn't contrived. It's a natural extension of the man, and consequently it embodies a truer reconciliation. A student of both piano and percussion in his boyhood, Taylor studied for three years at the New England Conservatory in Boston, spending much of his nonacademic time listening to the jazz greats who lived in or visited the area. Although Taylor evades specific questions about his development as a musician, his art proves that he heard and assimilated an astonishing variety of music. It is difficult to think of another avant-garde composer whose work calls to mind so many antecedents. Indeed, a considerable body of the criticism written about him is occupied in comparing him with Romantic and modernist composers on the one hand and stride-piano and bebop practitioners on the other. The frame of reference suggested by his music is enormous. Yet "eclectic" is the last word one would use to describe him; every note and procedure in a Taylor performance is immediately recognizable as uniquely his own.

In *Free Jazz*, the only musicological survey of avantgarde jazz yet published, Ekkehard Jost demonstrates that the major area of Taylor's innovation is rhythm. He shows that Taylor's earliest work is characterized by a regular accentuation of strong beats, resulting in rhythmic predictability, and suggests that Taylor compensated for what might have developed into a chronic stiffness of phrasing with "a kind of playing whose dynamic impetus arose not from offbeat phrasing but from combining the parameters of time, intensity and pitch, thereby creating a new musical quality, *energy*." Jost argues that Taylor uses energy as a replacement for traditional modes of swing. "Energy" is a slippery word to use in a discussion of musical technique, but the velocity, the urgency, the almost intolerable tension Taylor creates on the piano (and, by extension, with his ensemble) defies the usual terminology; the energy with which he attacks the instrument defines his rhythms, which accelerate and decelerate precipitously and frequently in a performance. He approaches the instrument armed with a stunning technique based on the use of tone clusters (for which he is historically indebted to the pianist and composer Henry Cowell [NW 285], though what Taylor does with them far surpasses Cowell's own pianistic abilities), but his sensibility is closely related to that of a drummer. The piano is a sounding board for his rhythms no less than his melodies, which are often bewitchingly

lovely and are always played with a digital precision that would be the envy of any pianist.

Taylor's energy is closely entwined with his stamina, and in fact the most persistent criticism of his work concerns the length of his performances. Possibly no composer since Beethoven has created such a stir over duration. Taylor, whose penchant for rehearsals is legendary, gives more of himself in performance than any other living musician. In the tidal wave of sound that is a Taylor concert, the care with which he shapes a performance may be overlooked at first, but with practiced listening one learns to appreciate Taylor's structural innovations no less than his breathtaking keyboard technique.

Nowhere is the merging of jazz and classical elements more apparent than in Taylor's ensemble presentations. The cyclical structure of jazz is done away with, replaced by a series of short, preconceived figures; these create a new overall structure, but the form is mutable. The amount of embellishment or improvisation that may exist between the figures (or, in Taylor's phrase, unit structures) changes with every performance. The framework is elastic. Usually the transition from one theme or section to another takes a canonic form, because Taylor will trigger the change with a phrase on the piano, which one or more of the musicians in his ensemble will take up and develop.

The most pleasurable qualities of a Taylor performance result from the close participation of the musicians. In training his instrumentalists, Taylor presents his material by playing it. There is little talking at his rehearsals, and minimal dependence on the extensive notation. Taylor plays a melody; the other musicians pick it up and work with it; and he and his players proceed to the next. In performance, the duration of a piece will depend on the chemistry between the musicians at the moment. The amalgamation of influences—the sonorous images that multiply and clash—in a Taylor presentation combine in a folklorism of the musical past: depending on the background one brings to the music, one may hear Brahms, Liszt, Stravinsky, Bartók, Mahler, Cowell, Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, Bud Powell, Lennie Tristano, Thelonious Monk, Horace Silver, and who knows how many others. But they are all transubstantiated, and the result is never a pastiche. The islets of musical thought are joined in an immense, radiant landscape. What was theory for the third-stream composers becomes vivid, idiomatic reality in Taylor's music.

3 Phasis is a masterwork, a testament to the perfectionism and unpredictability that go hand in hand in Taylor's music. It was recorded at the last of the four evening sessions in April, 1978, that also produced Taylor's previous album for New World Records (80201-2). At the session, *3 Phasis*, not yet titled, was simply referred to as "the suite." The performance chosen for release was the last and sixth take; ironically, it started shortly before the official end of the session and ran into overtime. Previous takes had averaged twenty to thirty minutes and seemed to get tighter each time. The fifth take produced a splendid array of dynamics and a rollicking dance exuberance, but saxophonist Jimmy Lyons was dissatisfied with his solo, and there was a general feeling that an earlier take had been more successful. Taylor decided to work on some of the other pieces, and it

wasn't until midnight that they returned to the suite. From the first notes, there was an excitement in the studio, an electricity, and after about twenty minutes producer Sam Parkins said, "This is the best yet by far. If Jimmy Lyons holds up in the shuffle, I don't care how long it goes." Later Parkins noted, "This is more of a piano concerto than the others." A significant difference between this and earlier versions was that Sirone, the bassist, who had previously played mostly against the rhythm, now fell into a steady 4/4 shuffle meter (heard in the second half). Taylor conducted the music from the piano without eye contact, as the others stood poised. Lyons, awaiting his entrance, lit a cigarette. Then the shuffle started: Taylor instigated a rocking stomp with chords in both hands; Sirone bore down on the time; drummer Ronald Shannon Jackson alternated between mallets and sticks; Lyons steamed through like a train. After about forty minutes, Parkins exulted, "We've got a record now!"—but ten minutes later he was worried about whether Taylor would stop in time: "I hope he stops pretty soon, because I'd hate to cut this. I've never been to anything like this before, have you?" Taylor punched out a riff, his hands leaping as fast and deft as a cheetah, his arms almost akimbo. Everyone was eyeing the clock nervously and laughing with giddy excitement. And then, nearing fifty-seven minutes, just short of the maximum playing time for a long-playing album, Taylor began to wind down for a dramatic finish. Observers burst into the studio with excited praise, and the laconic Taylor was heard to say, "Well, you know we knew it was good, too."

In a 1962 radio interview, Duke Ellington described his orchestra as an accumulation of personalities, tonal devices. As a result of a certain musician applied to a certain instrument you get a definite tonal character." Taylor's music may also be characterized by the tonal personalities involved. With what is essentially standard Dixieland instrumentation—horns, strings, piano, drums—the potential for textural variety is considerable, and a particular joy of *3 Phasis* is the constant shifting of focus as different combinations of the instruments come to the fore. Listen to each of the voices and the way they interact; listen particularly to the response of the five sidemen to the piano, and the speed and grace with which they extend the motivic material. You might find it rewarding to outline the developments, stopwatch in hand, as a means of understanding Taylor's methodology. For example: *3 Phasis* begins with solo piano. At 00:13, the horns state a mournful theme, establishing the tonal and emotional character of the piece, with bowed bass and violin intertwined, and periodic crescendos in the drums. The piano introduces a second theme at 1:34, which leads to a brief horn riff at 2:00 and three fast unit structures for the piano at 2:18, 2:53, and 3:14. At 3:22, bass and violin echo the piano, picking up additional material at 3:35. The piano feeds the violin more ideas at 3:55 and 4:05, at which point a diminuendo leads into the entrance of the horns. The piano gives new material to the horns (4:43); the violin cries suddenly (4:55); the piano introduces a bass-clef figure (5:10), picked up by the violin. After a pause, horns and strings sustain notes and tremolos (5:45), building to a climax, a restatement of the theme (6:35), and some free embellishment. And so on.

There are larger sections that are especially rewarding—the beautiful trebly piano solo that begins at 20:25, and the ensuing chiaroscuro designed by piano, violin, bass, and drums, leading at 26:05 to full-scale polyphony. Taylor's Romantic persuasion is evident

at 29:35, but it is countered to some extent by blue notes at 33:22. The pretty tune at 32:40, relayed from piano to alto, leads seamlessly to a bebopped extension (33:22). Immediately thereafter comes the shuffle section, an unforgettable flight of rhythmic fancy that is reasserted several times during the remainder of the piece. And so on. In his autobiography *Treat It Gentle* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960; reprinted New York: Da Capo Press, 1978), Sidney Bechet, that wise and poetic prophet of New Orleans jazz, wrote, "You got to be in the sun to feel the sun. It's that way with music too: 'The more you listen, the more you hear. For me, there is sometimes the impression of an inspired wizard and his five disciples conversing at midnight, chewing over ideas, rephrasing them, listening; at other times, I'm attracted chiefly to the cathartic, exquisitely controlled violence. Cecil Taylor has brought to music a synthesis we've long waited for 3 Phasis is one of its landmarks.

Gary Giddins covers jazz for *The Village Voice*. He is the founder and artistic director of the American Jazz Orchestra and the author, most recently, of *Celebrating Bird: The Triumph of Charlie Parker* (Beech Tree Books).

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.

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3 Phasis. New World 80303-2

Cecil Taylor, piano Jimmy Lyons, alto saxophone Raphé Malik, trumpet Ramsey Ameen, violin Sirone, bass Ronald Shannon Jackson, drums

3 Phasis (57:20)

1. 11:10

2. 9:17

3. 11:52

4. 11:55

5. 13:06

(All selections publ.Mayflower Music Corp.)

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Engineer: Don Puluse

Assistant recording engineer: Ken Robertson

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NEW WORLD RECORDS
16 Penn Plaza #835
NEW YORK, NY 10001-1820
TEL 212.290-1680 FAX 212.290-1685
Website: www.newworldrecords.org
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