

GEORGE LEWIS
Changing With the Times

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In the ontological systems of both Africa and Europe, creation begins with the word in its various oral and gestural manifestations. Music, as an expressive modality, is clearly an extension of word exemplified by ancient African *griots*, the communal historians whose rhythmic chants opened the path to jazz improvisation, where we witness the alchemical effect of speaking in tongues that leads to a process of creative invention.

It was more than fifteen years ago that I first encountered George E. Lewis. He had recently returned home to Chicago, fresh out of the pristine environs of Yale University, and was now, in a duo performance, insinuating the voice of his trombone into the inventive vocabulary of Anthony Braxton. Instead of the big-brass verbosity I had anticipated, Lewis revealed a mellifluous, whispery-staccato voice on the instrument, its minimal amplitude seeming more like vocal utterances, the "signifyin'" voice of a storyteller who uses the vernacular art of word-play to alter the semantic relations of literal or fixed expectations.

In literary canon, the oral and gestural insinuation of voice is a signifier of the power of collective culture to inform personal style. The voice of Lewis has benefited greatly from being nurtured within the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), a Chicago-based jazz collective that for a quarter of a century has incubated the voices of such innovative musicians as the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Muhal Richard Abrams, Anthony Braxton, and Henry Threadgill. Implicit in the Lewis voice is a cross-cultural consciousness that responds to vernacular nuances in the African American oral tradition. The rhetorical strategies of the voice are consonant with traits belonging to the mythological African trickster, Esu, who inspires the art of interpretation and improvisation in all forms of life, particularly in the communicative strategies of art work, dance, music, and storytelling.

It is the voice of literary scholar Henry Gate's "The Signifying Monkey," identified by him as the American analogue to Esu, who possesses "individuality, satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, uncertainty, disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty, closure and disclosure, encasement and rupture,"¹ a collection of traits that resists predictability and conformity to fixed structures. The Signifying Monkey is a trickster who negotiates the blues-matrix of experience with a disregard for the notion of fairness in a noncontradictory social universe, while pursuing the impulse for change in order to improve the conditions of experience and effect personal healing. Such critical changes are made possible by dredging ancestral memory for the encoded insinuations of the "signifyin'" voice revealed in the church and in field hollers, and the verbal dexterity of boasts, toasts, and the dozens, that improvisationally lift the blues and "sorrow songs" of collective experience up from the inertia of melancholic self-pity into enlightened affirmation of spiritual and material aspiration.

In his essay "Ring Shout," African American researcher and archivist Samuel A. Floyd observes that musical practices such as "calls, cries, hollers, riffs, licks, overlapping antiphony," polyrhythm and countermelodies are rhetorical strategies to comment, actually "signify" on themselves, their performances, other performances of the same work, or other works of a different genre. In the

same fashion that Lester Bowie's stylized voicing on trumpet signifies on New Orleans marches, "ragtime signifies on European and early Euro-American dance music, including the march; blues on the ballad; the spiritual on the hymn; jazz on blues and ragtime; gospel on the hymn, the spiritual, and the blues; rhythm and blues on blues and jazz; rock 'n' roll on rhythm and blues; soul on rhythm and blues and rock; funk on soul; rap on funk; bebop on swing, ragtime rhythms, and blues." Floyd further notes that the most classical demonstration of "signifyin'" can be revealed in the performance of the twelve-bar blues which has a two measure vocal call followed by a two measure instrumental response, thus "the instrument performs a kind of sonic mimesis, creating the illusion of speech or narrative conversation."²

Similarly, *Changing With the Times* is a conversation piece, for which George Lewis has assembled a diverse collection of musicians, poets, and storytellers into an organic narrative mode to signify, in style and content, on his personal odyssey through the contradictions and ambiguities of being black in a noncontradictory social universe, America.

The story is told through the orchestrated riffs of signifiers who comment from their particular point of narrative reference: George E. Lewis on trombone; his longtime AACM associate, Douglas Ewart, performing on a variety of instruments including reeds, percussion, shakuhachi, and didjeridu; tokamak, the new-music piano duo of Dan Koppelman and Ruth Neville; the vernacular voice of the blues articulated on piano and organ by the highly certified blues artist, Jeannie Cheatham; Mary Oliver on violin and viola; and Peter Gonzales III on percussion.

Enjoined in the conversation are the voices of poets Quincy Troupe and Jerome Rothenberg; and Bernard Mixon, who renders the epic tale "Changing With The Times," a text written by George T. Lewis, the father of George E. Lewis. Throughout the mostly improvised narrative odyssey, the music supports and enhances the text, offering counter-licks, antiphonal riffs, and parodic groans to amplify the rhetorical persuasion of the oral renderings.

From the outset, Lewis chooses to recall his hometown, Chicago, through the prism of Euro-American modernity, joining Jerome Rothenberg in the rendering of his poem "Chicago Dadagram," orchestrated with the pianistic voices of Koppelman and Neville. With the exception of an antiphonal improvisation by Lewis and Koppelman in the middle section, the entire episode is musically notated in the atonal convention of modern European practices, as if "signifyin'" on both the genre and the ironic sense of detachment, yet inclusion, the blues child of the Thirties experiences among the immigrants arriving in Chicago:

*...the bridges soon filled with moving lines
of people workers armies
in the darkness of first December visit
along the water
bend of the Chicago River....*

Chicago, the modern American city, where whites persecuted in Europe and blacks terrorized in the Southern states seek refuge, staring through the prism of common desire and hope as focused by the poet:

*...look back upon the future of
America and remember
when we both wrote our famous poems called
Modern Times....*

World view is a product of ideological myths forged from stories that preserve the essential metaphors of collective experience. In "So You Say," an elegiac homage composed and written by Lewis in memory of his cousin Linda C. Brailford, who died in a mysterious water accident, the droll voice of Bernard Nixon is introduced to invoke the specter of the Rodney King assault at the hands of Los Angeles policemen:

*I'm going to describe the execution now.
I'm watching the videotape.
My body is reacting exactly as his did.
The blows come quickly.
Thudding, smashing, prodding, crippling.
It could have been me.
It is me.*

Here we have the "signifyin'" voice of the blues bearing witness to the turbulence associated with black oppression in America, resonating what Ralph Ellison identified as "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness":

*I'm going to describe the state of mind of the killers now.
(in the interest of fairness)
His skin was so thick because of that PCP that we had to pierce it.
Everyone else was doing it.
Proper procedure.
Gotta lay off those Twinkies!
That's entertainment!
God, it was fun---doing the Lord's work!*

However painful the experience, Ellison reminds us that the blues voice tends "to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically."³

While the African American experience reveals wide diversity, the shared history of social rupture and dislocation has served to inspire an ethos of common aspiration that urges blacks to secure material and spiritual cohesion. Such is evident in "The View from Skates in Berkeley," a poem written and voiced by Quincy Troupe, set in a new arrangement of Lewis's composition, "Unison." Following a metronomic anthem, the voice of Quincy Troupe heraldically signifies on the apparent anomaly of two black friends from St. Louis---himself and the celebrated painter and sculptor, Oliver Jackson---sitting in the expansive picture window at Skates, unmolested by memories of inner-city turbulence *on a day further back in cobb webs than you care to remember*, finding solace in the *wind driven waves bucking like rodeo horses carrying cowboys*, seduced by the beautiful skyline of San Francisco, *the shining pearl by the bay*. Yet, however serene their surrounding, they still manage to enjoin each

other with familiar volumes of spontaneous laughter:

*...here, where we were what we always thought we were, on this day
when the moment kicked up, the water surging, like our dreams
and we were riding these bucking horse waves breaking across*

*the duned, foaming waters, mirrored and beautiful, we were strong
as we always knew we would be, our view unbrokened from here, in skates
under the dazzling sunlight, of our dreams streaming across the jetstream....*

"Signifyin'" on the text is the counter-riff of Lewis and the Congolese yodel/scat by Bernard Mixon, amplifying the collective reaffirmation of common bonds as the sun sets on the reunion:

*...high up in the turbulent afternoon of our heads, light and luminous
we were homeboys, oliver, on this shimmering, rare day filled with flight....*

One of the storytelling strategies most practiced in the African American oral tradition is the "Toast," an extended epic tale or poem, a precursor to Rap Music, that allows the narrator the freedom to make improvisational modifications and shifts of meter, his commentary of familiar experience decorated in a manner that reveals new ironic twists. Such oral dexterity is akin to the improvisations of blues and jazz where, as noted by Shelly Wong, "improvising becomes a way of keeping the world open to its own potentiality. Jazz articulates meaning through attention to the particulars of the moment, to the work under hand, rather than through any strict adherence to received and preconceived notions of the bar or the line."⁴ In the theatrical rendering of a toast, the narrator dismisses formal or fixed structures in order to mediate fact and fiction in the service of revealing the iconographic significance of immediate experience, a process that enlarges the meaning of the familiar. As in the communicative nuances created in jazz improvisation, it is an occasion to reveal metaphoric relationships through a distribution of culturally coded observations, so that the familiar is revived with new illumination.

"Changing With The Times" is in the oral tradition of the "Toast." The text is a quasi-autobiographical collage of tales, some true, some embellished, others invented, based on a short narrative written by George T. Lewis for an adult education class following his retirement from the post office after 40 years of service. In addition to improvising the musical dirge, his son George E. Lewis constructed the performance narrative with Bernard Mixon who, like a communal *griot*, renders the text with appropriate droll cadence, reflective "signifyin'," groaning, moaning, Congolese yodel, and general disregard for fact or fiction:

*I was born a Tar Heel, on the saturated banks of the muddy Tar River
in the beautiful metropolis of Tarboro, North Carolina. This
handsome boy child (me) was born in the mid-nineteen-twenties.*

*Peoples had every reason to be proud of me. On my first day in
school, the principal came over and said what a fine boy I was. He felt
my head and said I had great potential. Goes to show, even grown-ups
can be wrong.*

That very year I became the school's youngest drop out. I dropped out again in the third and the fifth grade.

Typical of the narrator/trickster, the narrator suspends the negotiation of the painful elements of reality by employing the strategy of self-deprecation as he takes the listener on an excursion from childhood to adulthood, replete with childhood exploits down on the farm ("one year on the farm was worth a life time"), attending County school for Negroes ("the word black was a no-no...you even called black shoes, dark"), lessons in the value of money ("you buy one of those expensive caskets, they drop yo' butt in the ground, and get that casket and sell it to somebody else...he ain't got no use for it...you take that casket, write him a check and tell him, use that when you get to where you goin'"), social values instilled by family role models ("my grandfather was a diehard Republican...he thought that Hoover was the greatest thing that ever lived"), the discovery that trains above the Mason Dixon line did not have Jim Crow cars, self-discovery in Chicago, and the wartime role of blacks in the Navy. The narrator concludes ironically: "*Lord, don't take away my stumbling blocks, but lead me all around...I thank yah!*"

The "stumbling block" continues in "Airplane," where the narrator/trickster, a black musician, circumvents a white traveler's presumption of easy familiarity with crafty resistance. It is the whitewash "block" that reduces blacks to invisibility, unable, even unwilling, to distinguish between black ground and black self: "nothing personal!" Upon leaving the plane, a flight attendant zealously compliments the musician's taste in sweaters: "That looks like a Bill Cosby sweater." Nothing personal, simply the usual kind of personal invasion that most blacks have come to expect from whites, leaving the narrator/trickster to conclude: "*the more things change, the more they remain the same.*"

Finally, the Epilogue finds the narrator as an old man reaffirming his claim to longevity: "fraid to go to a doctor to check something out...they might tell me that I'm already dead." There are few left to engage in conversation as the sojourner approaches journey's end during the twilight years, left alone to converse randomly with himself: "A lot of things I feel like saying, I can only say to myself."

In the end, we are grateful for having made the journey with Lewis, who has assembled a compatible group of "signifyin'" musical and textual voices which were able to coalesce into a blues style that resonates with the depth sounding of his personal experience, revivifying details stored deep in the recesses of collective memory with new illumination.

---Paul Carter Harrison

Paul Carter Harrison *is playwright in residence at Columbia College in Chicago.*

NOTES

1. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. 1988, New York: Oxford University Press.
2. Samuel A. Floyd, "Ring Shout," *Black Music Research Journal*, Fall 1991, pp. 265-287.
3. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*. New York: Signet Books, 1952.
4. Shelly Wong, "Transgressions as Poesis in *The Bluest Eye*," *Callaloo* 13 (1990), pp. 471-481.

George E. Lewis (born in Chicago in 1952) is a composer, performer, and computer/installation artist. He has been a member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians for twenty years. His work as a trombonist is documented on over eighty albums. Mr. Lewis has received several awards from the National Endowment for the Arts in both music and inter-arts categories. His computer compositions have been premiered at the Banff Centre (Canada), IRCAM (Paris), and the Studio voor Elektro-Instrumentale Muziek (Amsterdam). He is currently (1993) Associate Professor of Music at the University of California, San Diego.

Jeannie Cheatham began piano studies at age five and learned both European and African-American literature. She later went on to perform with Big Mama Thornton, Cab Calloway, Dinah Washington, Odetta, and others. She co-leads the Sweet Baby Blues Band with her husband, the trombonist Jimmy Cheatham. Their album *Sweet Baby Blues* was awarded the French Grand Prix du Disque de Jazz in 1985.

Douglas Ewart has been a member of the groups Inventions, Clarinet Choir, Quadraset, and others. He has also performed with many other musicians including Muhal Richard Abrams, Air, Art Ensemble of Chicago, Alvin Curran, Robert Dick, Roscoe Mitchell, Leo Smith and Richard Teitelbaum. Mr. Ewart has recorded for Arawak, Lovely Music, Black Saint, Arista, and Nessa.

Peter Gonzales III completed his undergraduate studies in music at the University of California, San Diego, studying and performing with Jimmy and Jeannie Cheatham, Cecil Lytle, and Steven Schick.

George T. Lewis was born in 1924 in Tarboro, North Carolina. After a stint in the U. S. Navy during World War II he studied radio electronics at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University. After moving to Chicago, he found a job in the Post Office and raised a family, of which George E. Lewis is a member. He retired after nearly forty years of service.

Bernard Mixon made his professional debut with Chicago bandleader Phil Cohran. He has performed with the AACM Big Band, Joseph Jarman, Von Freeman, Anthony Braxton, and others. He is currently (1993) performing with The Moods, a vocal group that performs works of the 1940s and 1950s. Mr. Mixon has also worked in film, television and the theater.

Mary Oliver studied at Mills College, San Francisco State University, and the University of California, San Diego, where she received her Ph.D. in music. She is active in new music as both improviser and interpreter. She has performed with Richard Teitelbaum, George Lewis, and George Coates.

Jerome Rothenberg has written over fifty books of poetry, including *Poland/1931* and *That Dada Strain*, and edited five major assemblages of traditional and contemporary poetry. Since the late 1950s he has been involved in various aspects of poetry performance, including two radio soundplays for WDR Cologne.

tokamak is the duo of Ruth Neville and Daniel Koppelman. Their repertory ranges from traditional two-piano literature to original works for multiple keyboards. tokamak has collaborated with

composers Mel Powell, Rand Steiger, Paul Davies, and Keith Johnson, among others. **Ruth Neville** has appeared as soloist with the Grosse Pointe Symphony, the Pontiac-Oakland Symphony, and with UC San Diego's New Music Ensemble SONOR. She has recorded for Celestial Harmonies and Neuma Records. Ms. Neville holds a Ph.D. from UCSD, where she is on the piano faculty. **Daniel Koppelman** was first prize winner in the National Association of Composers, USA Performers Competition, and the Indiana University Concerto Competition. He has served on the Performance Faculty at the June-in-Buffalo symposium, and is a member of SONOR.

Quincy Troupe is the author of nine volumes of poetry and co-authored *Miles: The Autobiography*. He has also edited *James Baldwin: The Legacy*. He has twice been the recipient of the American Book Award and received a Peabody Award for writing and co-producing the *Miles Davis Radio Project*. Mr. Troupe is currently (1993) Professor of Creative Writing and American and Caribbean Literature at the University of California, San Diego.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

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With Derek Bailey:

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With Anthony Braxton:

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Dortmund (Quartet) 1976. Hat Art 6075.

The Montreux-Berlin Concerts. Arista AL5002.

With Anthony Davis/James Newton Quartet:

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With Anthony Davis:

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With Douglas Ewart:

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GEORGE E. LEWIS

CHANGING WITH THE TIMES

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Chicago Dadagram (Music: George Lewis 1980, revised 1991; Text: Jerome Rothenberg)

tokamak: Daniel Koppelman, Ruth Neville, pianos; George E. Lewis, trombone; Jerome Rothenberg, poet.

So You Say (Music: George Lewis 1978, revised 1993; Text: George Lewis 1993)

Bernard Mixon, speaker; Douglas Ewart, percussion, bass clarinet, shakuhachi; George E. Lewis, trombone; Jeannie Cheatham, piano.

The View From Skates In Berkeley (Music: George Lewis 1978, rev. 1993; Text: Quincy Troupe 1992)

George E. Lewis, trombone; Douglas Ewart, clarinet; Mary Oliver, viola; Peter Gonzales III, percussion; Jeannie Cheatham, piano; Bernard Mixon, singing voice; Quincy Troupe, poet.

Changing With The Times (Music: George Lewis 1993, except "Jeannie's Boogie," music by Jeannie Cheatham 1993; Text: George T. Lewis, George E. Lewis, and Bernard Mixon 1993; Performance adaptation: George E. Lewis)

George E. Lewis, trombone; Douglas Ewart, woodwinds, saxophones, percussion; Mary Oliver, violin, viola; Peter Gonzales III, percussion; Jeannie Cheatham, piano, organ; Bernard Mixon, singing and speaking voice.

Airplane (Music and text: George Lewis 1993)

George E. Lewis, trombone; Douglas Ewart, didgeridu; Mary Oliver, viola, voice; Peter Gonzales III, percussion; Bernard Mixon, speaking voice.

Epilogue (Music: George Lewis 1993; Text: George T. Lewis, George E. Lewis 1993)

George E. Lewis, trombone; Douglas Ewart, clarinet; Mary Oliver, viola; Bernard Mixon, Jeannie Cheatham, speaking voices.

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