

## John Arthur “Jaki” Byard: A Centennial Tribute to an Original Eclectic

Scott E. Brown

Jaki Byard always seemed to take joy in playing with the past.

On April 2, 1968, the pianist led a recording date for Prestige Records in their New York studio. The new album was entitled *Jaki Byard — With Strings!* (Prestige 7573). With such a name, one might expect that Byard would be accompanied by a symphony orchestra in a move reminiscent of Charlie Parker’s seminal 1950 *with Strings* sessions. Instead of a symphonic backdrop, Byard’s “string section” consists of four jazz virtuoso soloists: Ray Nance on violin, George Benson on guitar, Ron Carter on cello, and Richard Davis on bass—with Alan Dawson rounding out the rhythm section on drums and vibraharp.

Among the original compositions Byard recorded for the album was “Cat’s Cradle Conference Rag.” Here again, the title suggests some sort of throwback piece. And while “Cat’s Cradle” begins with eight bars of a Byard striding left hand set against punchy right-hand figures, it quickly moves beyond expectation, leaning into the “conference” referenced in the title, and away from the “rag.” For the first ensemble chorus, Byard instructed each of the musicians in the group to “confer” by playing a different tune with ostensibly the same chord changes.<sup>1</sup> Byard plays “Take the A Train,” Nance “Jersey Bounce,” Benson “Darktown Strutter’s Ball,” Davis “Intermission Riff,” Dawson “Ring Dem Bells,” and Carter “Desafinado.” They each then take a solo. In the middle of the run-throughs on this tune, recording engineer Richard Alderson wondered, “What is Jaki Byard going to do next? You never know.” Martin Williams soon found the answer:

Byard was not quite through with this arrangement. “For the last chorus,” he announced, moving from his keyboard to the center of the strings, “everybody play harmonics in C. Al, play up high. And everybody go for

---

<sup>1</sup> Martin Williams observed the session, and documented Byard’s approach to the arrangement. This and all further descriptions of the rehearsal and recording process from Martin Williams, “Bash It—A Recording Date with Jaki Byard,” *Down Beat*, July 11, 1968, 23.



himself on the bridge. Try it.” They did, and the effect was stunning—the only way to end a performance that had begun like this one.

After listening to the playback in the booth, Byard re-entered the studio smiling and announced, “Well, we’ll continue making history.”

“Cat’s Cradle Conference Rag” and *With Strings* may or may not have made history. That said, in taking on the commercial culture industry with a subversive “with Strings” reference, engaging with and recontextualizing song writing across decades, and playing with audience expectations by tugging at threads of jazz history and its genre distinctions, they do tell us much about Byard’s essential methodology, clearly demonstrating many of the features of Jaki Byard’s character and musicianship that have tantalized jazz fans for decades.

Years later, in an on-air interview for her radio program *Piano Jazz*, Marian McPartland credited Byard’s success to the “intuitive ease” and “certain elegance” with which he composes and performs. She then asked him if her introduction was to his liking. He felt compelled to add, “You forgot that he’s eclectic, whatever that means.”<sup>2</sup> In attempting to reconcile the ostensible randomness of his approach to composition and performance, Byard was often labeled an “eclectic” by critics and fans. In other words, to these commentators at least, Byard’s work took on the appearance of one-dimensional pastiche, of an artist seeking variety for variety’s sake. To the uncritical eye, this would be enough justification to frame, and provide sufficient meaning for, Byard’s use of far-ranging musical sources. Byard’s jocular response to McPartland invites us to contemplate the nature of his eclecticism and ambiguities about the term itself.

Byard’s own embrace of the “eclectic” label varied from time to time and he, over the years and in different settings, offered contradictory explanations of his musical intentions. At times, he suggested that his wide-ranging output was little more than the result of a straightforward penchant for variety.<sup>3</sup> More often than not, however, when speaking to his students and colleagues (but less often to listeners and critics), he connected his musical eclecticism to beliefs about social and cultural injustice, historicism, innovation, and value judgement. For Byard, eclecticism was not a technique to be exploited, like one might employ a 32-bar song form or iambic pentameter, but rather a way he organized his responses to

<sup>2</sup> Marian McPartland’s *Piano Jazz*, NPR, Spring 1995.

<https://www.npr.org/2015/11/06/454989491/jaki-byard-on-piano-jazz>; accessed February 21, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Thom Horning and Bill Anderson, “A Discussion with Jaki Byard,” *Tri-C Jazz Fest Cleveland*, April 1985. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6hz6qIkiDA>, accessed March 11, 2021.

the musical and social traditions that he participated in over the course of his lifetime. In this regard, I contend, Byard's inquisitiveness about and internalization of disparate musical references appears to align with more complex and classical notions of eclecticism beyond "variety for variety's sake."<sup>4</sup>

Byard, by virtue of the timing of his birth, witnessed the evolution of jazz in the twentieth century nearly from its beginnings to the end of the millennium. He absorbed everything from ragtime to no time and, unlike many others who pass through multiple stylistic developments and eventually land on a particular, signature style, he retained the diverse elements he was exposed to like a musical lint brush. Once mastered, they remained in his armamentarium. He drew from them at will, and often in unusual ways, producing an *oeuvre* that for many writers defied strict genre categorization and confounded attempts to place him in an orderly narrative. By simultaneously resisting and adopting conventions of style, we can see Byard as both an iconoclast and traditionalist wrapped up in one.

We need just return to "Cat's Cradle" to see Byard's eclectic, historicist, iconoclast methodology at work. In just under twelve minutes of music, Byard brings us the history of jazz—from ragtime and stride through swing to free jazz—not in a backward looking, revivalist sampling, but as a statement that points toward a future post-modern aesthetic that would exert tremendous influence in the jazz world. How he arrived at such a methodology, however, requires a detailed look at Byard's biography.

#### BYARD'S EARLY LIFE AND WORK

John Arthur "Jaki" Byard was born in Worcester, Massachusetts on June 15, 1922. This put him solidly in the generation of musicians who were old enough to have heard the first generation of jazz musicians playing in their prime, and young enough to have been part of the sea change that, as conventional histories inform us, separated "traditional" from "modern" jazz.

His first exposure to music came from family, including extended family, who filled in for him nearly every corner of the music world at the time. His maternal grandmother, Melvina Hannibal, was born in 1878 and accompanied silent movies on piano with a repertoire of ragtime and light classics. Byard told National Public Radio, "My grandmother used to play. She used to play for the movie houses. That's how we got the piano because after the [silent] movie

---

<sup>4</sup> A point addressed at length later in this article. For more about classical eclecticism, see John M. Dillon and A.A. Long (Ed.), *The Question of "Eclecticism"* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988).

industry folded up, they gave her the piano. And my grandmother gave my mother the piano. They put the piano in my house, and that's how I got started."<sup>5</sup> His mother Geraldine was also a pianist and played for the Zion A.M.E. church. His father, John, Sr., was a horn player in both local brass bands and in jazz bands from the early 1920s. The elder John Bayard taught Jaki—a gifted multi-instrumentalist—trumpet fingering, the challenges of the baritone horn, and how to play the trombone by learning Sousa marches. The blues was also a prominent sound at home. He recalled, "The blues rocked our house as a kid. I'll never forget it."<sup>6</sup> His first formal lessons in classical music were with local teacher Grace Johnson Brown starting around age five.<sup>7</sup> She also taught him the rudiments of jazz using popular tunes like "Stardust" at the urging of his mother. Despite her strong church ties, and because her husband was playing it, Byard's mother found nothing objectionable in jazz.

Perhaps most importantly, Byard encountered stride piano from other relatives. He said in an interview with *Worcester Magazine*, "I remember, this is maybe 50, 60 years ago, my uncle used to rehearse at the house. [He] used to play what they called 'stride' or left-hand accompaniment, I called it. I used to watch him do it and I more or less copped what he was doing."<sup>8</sup> Byard attended rent parties with his grandmother, recalling, "I used to dig rent parties. There was a cat named Walter Henderson who used to play at rent parties around Hartford, Conn., and I used to go down there to visit my grandmother who lived there. I'd go all around to these parties with my parents. I used to sit right by the piano... this Henderson would get that thing going in F#, it was a lot of fun."<sup>9</sup> Byard learned from piano rolls as a teenager in Worcester, and forty years later, he and Rahsaan Roland Kirk continued to study them. Byard recalled, "[Kirk] used to buy old piano rolls and play along with them. When he was living in Philadelphia, he'd call me up, 'Hey, listen to this...' It would be someone like Jelly Roll [Morton], Pete Johnson, or James P. Johnson. He'd make a guessing game out of it. That was our socializing."<sup>10</sup>

Byard devised his own autodidactic methodology of learning. He partook of the musical bounty of touring bands who played at nearby Quinsigamond Lake that included pianist/band leaders such as Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Claude

---

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Chet Williamson, *Falling Rains of Life — The Jaki Bayard Story* (Holliston, MA: Projects Publishing, 2018), 19.

<sup>6</sup> Art Snyder, "Jaki Bayard Brings Royal Sound to Jazz," *Dayton Daily News*, May 19, 1988, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Williamson, 20.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>9</sup> David A. Himmelstein, Liner notes to *Jaki Bayard Out Front*. Prestige OJCCD 1842-2 (P-7397), 1964, 1994. Compact Disc.

<sup>10</sup> Len Lyons, *The Great Jazz Pianists* (New York: Quill, 1983), 190.

Hopkins, Fletcher Henderson and especially Earl “Fatha” Hines and Fats Waller. “In 1939 you could get to hear [Waller] for fifty cents,” he remarked. He checked out records of classical composers including Chopin, Beethoven, Ravel, and Stravinsky at the public library.<sup>11</sup> In some respects, Byard was an accidental pianist. Because his father had given him instruction on brass instruments, he began playing with Freddy Bates and his Nighthawks on trumpet around age fourteen. The regular pianist with the band, Pete Price, played in the then-popular Waller style. When Price and a brief successor both retired, Byard, who had already mastered that style on piano, took the piano chair. “That’s when my career as a piano player started. I was about sixteen then,” recalled Byard.<sup>12</sup> Pianist and writer Don Asher recalled he first heard Byard during the summer of 1940. Immediately after, Asher, a classically trained high school freshman, arranged to study with Byard, who was himself still a senior at Commerce High School. Byard was a serious student of the music and a craftsman driven to develop unmatched pianistic competency. At the Saxtrum Club in Worcester, he practiced at the expense of sleep and other necessities. Asher noted the marathon nature of Byard’s practice routine, recalling,

on nights when there were no sessions at the Saxtrum, he’d lock the door early from the inside. Neighbors reported the practicing went on all night—scales and exercises, octave runs, random improvisations, Bach inventions and Chopin etudes. At 7:30, he’d emerge to make his first high school class; the club floor would be littered with cigarette butts and empty Pepsi bottles.<sup>13</sup>

If he knew he had an audience outside the door, especially of other youngsters, he indulged in, “some whomping way-back whore-house piano, a big, pumping, joyous sound” that sparked the imaginations of his admirers as “being present at a spectacular parade, hearing a whole history of the music from the New Orleans cribs and levees on up the river.”<sup>14</sup>

Byard was drafted into the army in April 1943 and played the trombone in the 337<sup>th</sup> band. At some point, his roommates included pianist Ernie Washington and drummer Kenny Clarke. Before being drafted, Clarke had

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 190.

<sup>12</sup> Stuart Troup, “Byard Leads Trio at Sonny’s Place,” *Newsday*, May 15, 1984.

<sup>13</sup> Don Asher, “Jazz Emperor’ Jaki Byard’s Rare S.F. Appearance,” *The San Francisco Examiner*, August 6, 1978, 244.

<sup>14</sup> Don Asher, *Notes From a Battered Grand* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 10-11.

worked with Thelonious Monk in the house band at Minton's Playhouse.<sup>15</sup> In 1941, Minton's was inhabited by swing musicians, but bebop was also being incubated, and Monk and Clarke were on the innovative edge of the proceedings there. Bayard was eventually stationed in Florida when he was introduced to a local band that included two youngsters, Nat and older brother Julian "Cannonball" Adderley. The younger Adderley recalls Bayard mentored them for several months and introduced them to a new music that was coming into vogue in the jazz community after the recording ban of 1942-1944. Nat describes their first exposure to the new music through Bayard, which they later came to know as bebop:

A few years later we were playing during the war and they had an army base near where we were and a man named Jaki Bayard was in the army. He was a trombone player. He came and he heard our little band and said, "These little guys got a chance." So he took us—me and Cannonball—he took us to a little, what we call a greasy spoon, right, and they had a record on the juke box, ["Sorta Kinda."] Trummy Young, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, and Jaki Bayard said, "Sit here and listen to these." He said to Cannon, "You listen to the alto player," and to me, "You listen to the trumpet player and get what it is they have." He spent about two or three months working with us, showing us, you know. We were just kids and he was in the service, a soldier, and that was a very important part of our development because we had never heard of Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker until Jaki Bayard took us. Then he introduced us to Wardell Gray and Dexter Gordon and Billy Eckstine's big bands then became important because we knew who the players were and that's how we got into bebop, from Jaki Bayard.<sup>16</sup>

The Gillespie/Parker recording of "Sorta Kinda" was recorded on January 4, 1945, in a session led by trombone player and composer of the tune, James "Trummy" Young.<sup>17</sup> It is the first meeting of Gillespie and Parker on record, and although the tune is rendered as a small-group swing novelty with lyrics sung by Young, Gillespie and Parker's brief solos display their bebop stylings, which would become even more prominent on record when they recorded together again the next month. Nat Adderley would have been about fourteen years old, and Cannonball, seventeen. Despite the potential for post hoc revisionism, their anecdote reveals Bayard's deep-seated natural musical

---

<sup>15</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Thelonious Monk—The Life and Times of an American Original* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 64.

<sup>16</sup> Nat Adderley quoted in Alwyn Lewis and Laurie Lewis, "Nat Adderley Interview," *Cadence*, March 1992, 6-7.

<sup>17</sup> Tom Lord, The Jazz Discography Online. <https://www.lordisco.com/tjd/CoverFrame>.



inquisitiveness and his immense maturity in recognizing revolutionary stylists at the dawn of their influence. Bebop as a descriptor for the new music had just been coined when “Sorta Kinda” was released. Although Clarke may have conveyed to him something of what had been happening at Minton’s, Byard was drawn to the innovations he could hear in Gillespie and Parker, essentially hearing it only on record. His inclination as didact drew him to mentor the young Adderleys. He was only 23 years old himself.

After his discharge from the army in 1946 and very brief stint on 52nd Street in New York, he returned to Boston. Denied a place at the New England Conservatory, purportedly due to veterans’ quotas (although one can’t help but think race may have played a role), he undertook serious private study mirroring the NEC curriculum using local libraries. He played and toured for several years with Earl Bostic, although the association was musically incompatible. He said, “My guys on piano were Bud Powell and Erroll Garner, who played behind the beat, while Bostic liked to go forward. We didn’t get along too well.”<sup>18</sup> More to his liking, Byard congregated with a group of musicians fully dedicated to bebop that included Sam Rivers, Gigi Gryce, and bandleader Jimmie Martin. Byard played trombone and arranged for Martin with his band renamed the Boston Beboppers.<sup>19</sup> Charlie Parker was a frequent guest when in town. Byard became fully immersed in the bebop ethos, including adopting the accoutrements of fashion such as wearing a beret. He credits the inquisitiveness of the bebop originators who were exploring the music of Stravinsky and Bartok as inspiring his own interest in modern classical music. Boston became a crucible for talent, and these young players rendered high-quality music for the local scene, but their modern bent was not broadly popular. There Byard began to refocus on piano when he worked with saxophone player Charlie Mariano. Byard could do it all, and Mariano reflected on his experience with Byard, saying, “I learned a lot simply by playing with Jaki. Jaki’s playing brought to life the whole, great history of jazz piano, from Fats Waller via Art Tatum to Bud Powell. Although he copies none of them. His playing is all himself. He simply is aware of what’s been before, what’s beside of him, and he’s able to merge it.”<sup>20</sup> Although smitten by the new sound of bebop, Byard found value in the historical continuum and had a unique ability to “merge” into a cohesive offering what was at the time thought of as different musics.

This group of young Boston musicians created the Jazz Workshop, an informal music school of sorts where students played all day with the “faculty”

---

<sup>18</sup> Williamson, 76.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 86.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

rather than employ formal instruction with classes and theory assignments. Bayard opened his own music studio on Newbury Street in Boston, and with other staff, offered "advanced composition and instrument technique." At some point, the overlapping staff of the Schillinger House and the Jazz Workshop merged and became the Berklee College of Music. Trumpet player Herb Pomeroy was one of the creators and founded a thirteen-piece rehearsal band that included Bayard. Sadly never recorded, Bayard described the band as "fiery."<sup>21</sup> They featured one of his most enduring pieces, "Aluminum Baby." When Bayard later joined Pomeroy's orchestra in the mid-1950s, they did commercially record the tune. Bayard played saxophone and contributed many of the arrangements but was apparently forced out by other members of the sax section for his unconventional solos.<sup>22</sup>

Of particular importance in Bayard's time with Pomeroy was a concert program entitled, "A Living History of Jazz." Pomeroy had been commissioned by the women of the Smith College Club of Wellesley, MA, to create this historical overview as a scholarship fundraiser and an educational endeavor for their suburban audience. Local disc jockey John McLellan provided a narration of the history.<sup>23</sup> The goal was to be both "entertaining and educational." Bayard wrote all original music, demonstrating the styles of jazz from the beginning to that time, the mid-1950s. The first half of the program began with work songs and religious hymns, and proceeded chronologically through New Orleans jazz and the swing era, providing "imitations" of major figures, including Armstrong, Beiderbecke, Ellington, Lunceford, Goodman, and Basie. The second half picked up in 1941, showcasing Bayard's renderings of Parker, Gillespie, Davis, Woody Herman, and Gerry Mulligan. The program concluded with the Pomeroy band playing their own book which included Bayard's arrangements. The future of jazz was represented by a Bayard original, "Jazz Suite Opus 3," described as "atonal."<sup>24</sup> The presentation relied on a linear, "great man" narrative, but within that construct of a jazz tradition, Bayard resisted the canonical approach by writing his own music. Nonetheless, these original conceptions respected, indeed highlighted, genre distinctions for an audience that may have had at best only passing familiarity with what distinguished the sound of one artist and style from another.

While Bayard liberally drew on historical elements of jazz in his playing and composing, he nonetheless sought to push the limits of time, structure, and

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 100-101.

<sup>23</sup> *Down Beat*, October 3, 1956, 9.

<sup>24</sup> "A Living History of Jazz," *The Boston Globe*, January 6, 1957, 79.



improvisation in ways that would later become defined as “free jazz.” To encapsulate the stylistic range in his playing, critics would often invoke a span of influence ranging from “[stride pianist] James P. Johnson to [avant-gardist] Cecil Taylor.”<sup>25</sup> He would make clear, however, that unlike his integration of stylistic conceptions of others up to that point, the avant-garde approach that came to be associated with Taylor was actually of Byard’s own design. Taylor, born in 1929, began study at the New England Conservatory in 1952, where he spent three years.<sup>26</sup> Reed player Michael Marcus, a close friend and bandmate of Byard’s later in life, remembers Byard’s recollections of Taylor as a youngster, noting, “Cecil’s father used to bring Cecil to hear Jaki when he was like sixteen years old.”<sup>27</sup> He paraphrased Byard, “Man Cecil Taylor, I invented that style of playing.” “I would play that style [James P. Johnson, Erroll Garner, Earl Hines] with my left hand and then I’d play Charles Ives and Stravinsky in my right. I was playing free like that ten years before Cecil. I invented that style.”<sup>28</sup> Marcus concluded that Byard did not evince bitterness but rather frustration that he was not acknowledged as the originator of this new conception.<sup>29</sup> Byard made no recordings for most of the 1950s, so there is no aural evidence available to evaluate Byard’s claim that he had pioneered an idiosyncratic, avant-garde methodology before Cecil Taylor. Byard’s description of juxtaposing traditional left-hand figures against right-hand forms taken from other sources was not the innovation conceived by Taylor. By 1960, Byard had adopted some of Taylor’s highly percussive, high-energy abstractions, a practice that reinforced the characterization of Byard as eclectic. Giddins, however, points out Taylor was “profoundly anti-eclectic,” concluding, “every note and method in a Taylor performance is instantly recognizable as uniquely his own.”<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, Byard’s mosaics convey his unique voice in their constructed whole. Taylor had immense affection for Byard, and it is possible, if not likely, that Byard’s inimitable juxtapositions were of some influence on Taylor, but we may still be left with a chicken-and-egg conundrum in ascribing influence.

The 1960s were fruitful times for Byard as a sideman in modern jazz. His association with Rahsaan Roland Kirk was especially satisfying, since Kirk, like Byard, shared respect and interest in music and musicians who came before. He called Byard “The Living Emperor of Jazz Piano.”<sup>31</sup> His most important

---

<sup>25</sup> Gary Giddins, “Weather Bird-Jaki Byard, 1922-1999,” *Village Voice*, March 16, 1999, 78.

<sup>26</sup> Gary Giddins, *Visions of Jazz* (New York: Oxford, 1998), 458.

<sup>27</sup> Williamson, 250.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 459.

<sup>31</sup> Asher, 1992, 301.

association during that time, by far, was with Charles Mingus. Of his recruitment, Bayard recalled, "Mingus had to get a piano player that could play 'old-fashioned' for his Town Hall concert. There ain't too many cats that can go that way, play stride..."<sup>32</sup> Bayard and Mingus were the same age, and shared aspirations as composers and improvisers, along with a reverence for the earlier music. Mingus loved Bayard's integration of undisguised stride piano and, especially during their *Jazz Workshop* tour in 1964, gave Bayard premier opportunities for solo playing to highlight this. On several occasions, the set would open with Bayard playing his own composition "A.T.F.W.," a tribute to Art Tatum and Fats Waller.<sup>33</sup> In one filmed *Workshop* performance in Norway, we can see Mingus smiling in the middle of Bayard's stride solo on "Take the A Train."<sup>34</sup>

By the 1970s, Bayard had become seriously disenchanted with the commercial recording industry, as well as the infrastructure that supported live music.<sup>35</sup> Despite the acclaim and adulation he earned from jazz insiders for his work with Mingus, Dolphy, Kirk, and others, his own star had failed to rise. Filmmaker Dan Algrant, while still only a student at Harvard, undertook to provide a glimpse into Bayard's greatness, complexity, and obscurity. He began his effort in the fall of 1978 and included interviews with Ron Carter and Bill Evans, conversations and performance footage with Bayard, and Bayard's own home movies. It is a poignant view into Bayard the man and musician, bringing into relief the complex elements that made him unique, the same elements that undermined popular and commercial success. John S. Wilson reviewed Algrant's film *Anything for Jazz* in the *New York Times* and noted, "This intimate half-hour view of the pianist Jaki Bayard shows a warm and charming man, open and unpretentious, with very strong family ties."<sup>36</sup> Bayard often conveyed his dislike for comparisons. In the film he says, "I don't like to compete against a person, and that's what some people do, they put you up, set you up to compete. And they talk about you. Man, so and so tore it up, he broke it up. That's not too

---

<sup>32</sup> Himmelstein, Liner notes to *Jaki Bayard Out Front*.

<sup>33</sup> Brian Priestley and Sue Mingus, Liner notes to *Charles Mingus, The Jazz Workshop Concerts, 1964-65*, Mosaic, MD7-253, 2012, Compact Disc.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Mingus, *Charles Mingus Sextet*, "Take The A Train," April 12, 1964, Norway. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAn\\_gyNcvN4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAn_gyNcvN4), accessed March 7, 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Tom Everett, "A Short Talk with Jaki Bayard," Transcribed by Bob Rusch. *Cadence*, February 1976, 5.

<sup>36</sup> Williamson, 229.

cool.”<sup>37</sup> Writer Fred Bouchard recalled the blindfold test for *Down Beat* that he did with Byard in 1981, noting, “he insisted that everyone get five stars before I dropped the needle. ‘They’re all stars! Heck,’ he harrumphed, ‘I’m a star myself.’”<sup>38</sup> The value judgments implicit in comparisons and competition seemed off-putting to him, a feeling that appears tangibly evident in his duo piano ventures, especially with Earl Hines: When Hines embarks on his brand of pianistic pyrotechnics during their Jazz Piano Workshop duet in 1965, Byard avoids the temptation to respond.<sup>39</sup>

#### BYARD’S TEACHING

As Byard became soured on the culture surrounding jazz performance and recording, an opportunity arose that would enable him to tap another vital component of his abilities. Byard was hired by Gunther Schuller to teach arranging and improvisation in the newly founded “Afro-American Music” program at the New England Conservatory in 1969. Although Byard was always instinctively drawn to teaching, his formal hire at NEC and at other music schools was also one of financial necessity. But Byard fit well into Schuller’s vision for his budding department. Susan Lee Calkins notes that Byard “managed to combine his creative abilities and personal convictions by infusing topics of cultural history into his musical instruction—a living example of Schuller’s ‘complete musician.’”<sup>40</sup> He taught at NEC until 1984. At the behest of Jackie McLean, he was brought on to the faculty of the Hartt College of Music at the University of Hartford in 1975. Over the years, he also taught at the New School, Manhattan School of Music (from 1989 until his death in 1999), Northeastern University, The University of Massachusetts, Bennington College, the Alms Lewis School of Fine Arts (in 1980), the Brooklyn Conservatory, Harvard University, Yale University (which awarded him their Duke Ellington Fellowship award in 1977<sup>41</sup>), and yearly at Bismarck State

<sup>37</sup> Dan Algrant, *Anything for Jazz*, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, 1979, film documentary, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNBv9nXSKPE>, accessed August 31, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Williamson, 328.

<sup>39</sup> Jazz Piano Workshop, Jaki Byard trio with Reggie Workman, Alan Dawson, duet with Earl Hines, Berlin, 1965, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9fzgUgEnNE>, accessed September 2, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Susan Lee Calkins, “A History of Jazz Studies at New England Conservatory, 1969-2009: The Legacy of Gunther Schuller,” Boston University, dissertation, Doctor of Musical Arts, 2012, 124.

<sup>41</sup> “Jaki Byard In Concert at Museum Theater,” *Echoes-Sentinel* (Warren Township, New Jersey), February 2, 1978, 36.

College in North Dakota (for 25 years until 1996). He gave many one-off "master appearances" for both high school and college students.<sup>42</sup> John Ronsheim, director of the Antioch College music department, had sponsored Byard there and proclaimed, "Byard is the finest jazz piano teacher alive."<sup>43</sup>

Byard had an ability to allay student anxieties in line with his own aversion to competition, comparison, and value judgment. When a student musician confessed her status as an apprentice, Byard responded with, "I am too."<sup>44</sup> He thought of himself as a perpetual student who learned through the process of teaching.<sup>45</sup> Joe Berkovitz encountered a similar response, delivered by Byard with his characteristic humor. He asked his teacher what he should work on, and Byard responded, "Well, how should I know? You're the student."<sup>46</sup> Byard's ability to decipher jazz and impart information drew many students. Jason Moran, one of his most prominent students, studied with Byard for four years at the Manhattan School, and said, "He wanted me to understand things about technique, harmony, and rhythm, but then he also wanted me to understand things about life. He seemed to blend those things together pretty seamlessly so I didn't even know all of it was happening."<sup>47</sup> He encouraged his students to search for their unique voice. Although he was not a trained pedagogue or academic, teaching had been of natural interest to him since his high school days. Fred Hersch notes, "He worked at it. He wanted to pass on the knowledge."<sup>48</sup>

"Jazz in my language is a four-letter word spelled L-O-V-E," he told a newspaper reporter,<sup>49</sup> revealing his personal and emotional connection to the music. Byard's love for jazz expressed itself in the generosity he brought to his teaching. Bob Merrill, who was a student at NEC and played in Byard's big band, the Apollo Stompers, recalled his experience with Byard, noting, "Jaki was so warm and inclusive. He would introduce all the guys, all the soloists. He just wanted people to get into the act."<sup>50</sup> Writer John F. Goodman observed, "Jaki could conceive and execute most anything on the piano, but the music came

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Snyder, 31.

<sup>44</sup> Owen McNally, "Jamming at Artists Collective," *Hartford Courant*, February 20, 1977, 171.

<sup>45</sup> Snyder, 31.

<sup>46</sup> Joe Berkovitz, "Jaki Byard Testimonials," New England Conservatory, <https://necmusic.edu/archives/jaki-byard-testimonials>, accessed February 20, 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Williamson, 199.

<sup>48</sup> Fred Hersch, Interview with author, November 15, 2019, apartment of Fred Hersch.

<sup>49</sup> Irwin Block, "Piano Man Jaki Byard Shows His Love of Jazz," *The Gazette* (Montreal, Quebec, Canada), July 4, 1986, 33.

<sup>50</sup> Williamson, 170.

ultimately from his soul, not his fingers.”<sup>51</sup> Byard wrote tribute pieces for each of his family members, including their dog, who was killed by a drunk driver.<sup>52</sup> Steve Davis, a student at Hartt, recalled, “Jaki was very kind. He was very down to earth. As I remember, he was pretty eccentric, or at least could be, but he was also very pleasant and encouraging to the students.”<sup>53</sup> In his eulogy to Byard, Ervin Ely, director of the jazz ensemble at Bismarck State College, noted, “He’d come to Bismarck every year and perform with the students like he was in New York City. And such a gentleman. Always made them feel they were head and shoulders above where they were. He never put anyone down.”<sup>54</sup> Byard told an interviewer, “I believe music is the best therapy for mankind. You got all that laying on couches, dope and medicines, but music beats ’em all.”<sup>55</sup>

Foreshadowing his advice to later students, Byard told Don Asher, his first student in the early 1940s, “Listen to the rags, Hines and the early striders,’ he told me during that first lesson 50 years ago. ‘That’s where it all comes from.’”<sup>56</sup> Fifty years later, in the early 1990s, pianist Pierre Christophe studied with Byard in New York and recalled Byard’s essential pedagogic message. “You had to study the old masters from Scott Joplin to James P. Johnson, Fats Waller, Earl Hines and so on,” recalled Christophe. The directive was one of full engagement. He concluded, “I have to say, in four years with him we never had time to study be-bop. He was very open-minded and loved all the great players from Fats Waller to Chick Corea, but he said as piano students we were supposed to study the masters from the beginning of jazz,” reflecting his view that any serious student couldn’t start in the middle.<sup>57</sup> A committed jazz player needed not only academic knowledge of the tradition, but pianistic fluency in its languages. In many ways, he foreshadowed a comment by James P. Johnson, who wrote in 1947, “The most important point that I can see is that the jazz musicians of the future will have to be able to play all different kinds of jazz—in all its treatments—just like the classical musician who, in one concert, might range from Bach to Copland.”<sup>58</sup> Johnson wrote his comment as a response to bebop, and the rejection of older styles. The nineteenth century German historian Leopold Von Ranke (1795-1886), thought of as an essential figure in

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>52</sup> Haynes interview. Graham Haynes, Phone interview with author, October 8, 2019.

<sup>53</sup> Williamson, 195.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 241.

<sup>55</sup> “Jaki Byard at Maybeck,” Concord Jazz Press Release, May 12, 1992.

<sup>56</sup> Don Asher, Liner notes to *Jaki Byard, At Maybeck*, Concord Jazz CCD- 4511, 1992, Compact Disc.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Williamson, 293.

<sup>58</sup> James P. Johnson, “I Like Anything That’s Good,” *The Jazz Record*, April 1947, 13-14.

the establishment of modern historiography, rejected the relativistic value judgments inherent in chronological comparisons that equate “new” with better. Helmut Berding summarizes Ranke’s notion of “historical individuality” as a classical approach to historicism, that every epoch:

must be seen as something valid for itself, which has its value in its own existence and is not merely a transition stage in a process of development to a more complete state. From this perspective, the treatment of the individual life in history receives “a completely unique fascination.” The task of the historian is to bring to light, first, “the particular tendency” and the ‘distinctive ideal’ that each epoch possess, and “secondly, also the difference between the individual epochs.”<sup>59</sup>

Byard adopted this philosophy early on and was the model for its actualization.

#### BYARD’S SIGNATURE STYLE

Byard ultimately landed on a personal style through a synthesis not only of the multiple musical idioms he integrated, but also non-musical aspects of his personal nature and inherent talents. An important factor that helped shape his philosophy and presentation was his humor. Byard had by nature a humorous spirit that was frequently evident in his personal as well as his professional life. “He was a funny guy, a hilarious guy,” noted Graham Haynes, for whom Byard was like a second father.<sup>60</sup> He has been described as “old school” when it came to his penchant for adding non-musical antics to his stage presence.<sup>61</sup> Byard frequently evinced what could be construed as irreverence. Tenor player Mike Kaplan quotes Byard’s patter for one of their set closers as follows: “We’re gonna play this tune as fast as we can. So, we can take a break as fast as we can. So, we can hit the bar as fast as we can. So, we can get back and play the last set as fast as we can. So, we can go home and get some shut eye as fast as we can.”<sup>62</sup>

Byard’s humor often articulated wry, coded swipes at political, social, commercial, and racial realities. He adopted a series of consonant nouns with the common suffix “tion,” most with sociopolitical implications. He adopted these role descriptors a musician needed to navigate in a rap-like poetic discourse—utilization, politician, presentation, execution, obligation. Byard said “Jazz is teaching the art of improvisation. In order to improvise, musicians have

---

<sup>59</sup> Helmut Berding, “Leopold von Ranke,” in *The Discovery of Historicity in German Idealism and Historicism*, ed. Peter Koslowski (Berlin, Springer-Verlag, 2005). 44.

<sup>60</sup> Haynes interview.

<sup>61</sup> Williamson, 100.

<sup>62</sup> Williamson, 296.



to deal with a thousand ‘tion’ words that deal with jazz.”<sup>63</sup> He named his trio with Al Francis and Ray Olivieri, both white musicians, “Jaki Byard & AFRO.”<sup>64</sup> Hankus Netsky, a Byard student who became chair of the New England Conservatory jazz department from the mid-80s through the mid-90s, singles out Byard’s annual history of jazz lecture. He recalled,

He would remind us that when he was a child, Paul Whiteman was the “King of Jazz,” Benny Goodman was the “King of Swing,” and Duke Ellington was the “King of Jungle Music.” The irony of these classifications was, of course, lost on no one in the class. Jaki would open the door of the classroom, let us take in a little of whatever Brahms or Chopin was being played down the hall, and close the door in mock disgust, complaining about being surrounded by “saloon music.”<sup>65</sup>

His NEC faculty colleague Ran Blake dissected Byard’s multifaceted humor, describing it as part anger—both personal and cultural, part self-deprecating, part instinctive, and part an expression of affection.<sup>66</sup>

Critics have often tagged Byard’s use of pre-bebop styles as tongue-in-cheek digression. Thelonious Monk was also critically assessed as employing caricature when he dug up stride piano from the depths of his musical upbringing. Byard rejected this motive, telling one writer that he, “never played anything tongue-in-cheek.”<sup>67</sup> The natural humorous proclivities of a Byard or a Monk become indistinguishable from parody (in the sense of ridicule) in the eyes and ears of jazz critics. The music can be humorous and playful without being degrading, and Byard was often insistent that his intentions were of consequence, saying “I might do it with humor, but it’s still serious because I mean what I’m doing.”<sup>68</sup> Kevin Whitehead commented, “Playing stride piano was no gimmick for Byard. It was part of the arsenal of techniques and styles on call, whenever he sat at the

---

<sup>63</sup> Janet Marvel, “Jazzy Vocabulary Jaki Byard Builds His Own Musical Dictionary.” *The Post-Star* (Glens Falls, NY), September 9, 1988, 31.

<sup>64</sup> Williamson, 112.

<sup>65</sup> Hankus Netsky, “Jaki Byard Testimonials,” New England Conservatory, <https://necmusic.edu/archives/jaki-byard-testimonials>, accessed February 20, 2021.

<sup>66</sup> Ran Blake, “Jaki Byard Testimonials,” New England Conservatory, <https://necmusic.edu/archives/jaki-byard-testimonials>, accessed February 20, 2021.

<sup>67</sup> Bob Porter, “‘Spotlight’- Album of the Month.” *Jazz Digest*, September–October 1972, 30.

<sup>68</sup> Richard Brown, “Jaki Byard: Romping, Stomping, and Waiting for the Break.” *Down Beat*, March 8, 1979, 16.

keys. A modernist who valued the innovations of any age, Bayard could play new and old ideas at the same time."<sup>69</sup>

Bayard's rationale for continuous, additive, musical integration was multifaceted, and his articulation of it, to some degree, depended on who was asking. It could be utilitarian or academic, entertaining or self-fulfilling. Jazz writer Tom Reney postulates, "Like a kid in the proverbial candy store, he embraced and utilized everything, including classical music, but the extraordinary ability he had to internalize it all and make it his own spoke not of self-indulgence but of the 'ruminations of a genius,' as Bad Plus co-founder Ethan Iverson wrote in 2014."<sup>70</sup> In a similar vein, Boston jazz historian Richard Vacca notes that Bayard demonstrated "a rather remarkable facility for integrating bits and pieces from across the spectrum into his improvisations, combining and recombining these elements to create passages wholly new."<sup>71</sup> Bayard was not a revivalist nor was he drawn to a repertory approach in his own performances. While avoiding the cannon of stride piano, the style pervades his solo work. He insisted, however, that his students learn something from the canon. Fred Hersch learned Eubie Blake's "Charleston Rag."<sup>72</sup>

Gary Giddins referred to Bayard's style as "his own and unmistakable, by turns hard, percussive, witty, sentimental, sardonic, whimsical, subversive, ebullient, anguished."<sup>73</sup> Further, he notes Bayard's operational use of broad styles as "tools to make improvisations engaging and lucid" but also to produce receptive outcomes for an audience potentially polarized by partisan jazz divisions. Commenting on a live performance of "C-Jam Blues" by Bayard and saxophonist Eric Kloss, Giddins points out how the juxtaposition of Dixieland and free jazz reduces hardened sectarian inclinations, writing, "The contrast between the beginning and end of jazz, rather than the rapprochement between the two that avant-gardists often aim for, enhanced both. To modernist ears, Dixieland lost the stigma of old-timeyness; to traditionalist ears, new music became accessible."<sup>74</sup> With this deconstruction of "tunnel vision," Giddins considers Bayard "the father of the new tolerance."<sup>75</sup> Writer Howard Litwak acknowledged

<sup>69</sup> Kevin Whitehead, "Jaki Bayard, A Post-Bebop Pianist Who Was A Master of Stride Piano." Fresh Air, NPR, August 8, 2014. <https://www.npr.org/2014/08/08/338867826/jaki-byard-a-post-bebop-pianist-who-was-a-master-of-stride-piano>, accessed March 28, 2021.

<sup>70</sup> Williamson, 8.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Vacca, *The Boston Jazz Chronicles*, (Concord, Massachusetts: Troy Street Publishing, 2012), 192.

<sup>72</sup> Hersch Interview.

<sup>73</sup> Giddins, 1999, 78.

<sup>74</sup> Gary Giddins, "Virtuosity and a Thumbed Nose," *Village Voice*, March 16, 1999, 78.

<sup>75</sup> Gary Giddins, "Jaki Bayard Spreads the New Tolerance." *The Voice*, March 27, 1978, 56.

that Byard was a “rewarding musical thinker and teacher,” and his synthesis of diverse idioms was expressed “without sounding either academic or frivolous.”<sup>76</sup> Dr. Billy Taylor reconciled Byard’s “abstract and traditional techniques,” noting that he could demonstrate “the compatibility and validity of both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ approaches to jazz” in his own personal style.<sup>77</sup> He also noted Byard’s skill at spontaneity, opining, “He does the things that he has in mind in and of the moment.”<sup>78</sup>

Byard’s personal and musical depth enabled him to play with anyone. He recorded with several pianists in duo piano format. His partners spanned decades of jazz piano style including Earl Hines, Tommy Flanagan, and Ran Blake. Byard’s command of what his partners were doing, combined with his respect for them, avoids any potential musical maelstrom and the breakdown in the coherence of their performances. Byard never recorded in studio with Ellington, but after he substituted for him when he was ill in 1973, Ellington, after he returned, insisted that Byard stay on, and the two played duets in concert. Byard also at times played with Barry Harris at Harris’ Jazz Cultural Theater, where Byard featured his band the Apollo Stompers.

#### BYARD’S JAZZ TRADITION

Byard’s stalwart role in maintaining the flame of the jazz tradition within the mainstream (as opposed to the “trad” community) was eventually credited with influencing the neoclassical (or “neotrad”) juggernaut spearheaded by Wynton Marsalis, Albert Murray, Stanley Crouch, and others in the 1980s. Byard was flattered and outwardly pleased about the recognition, noting, “Gary Giddins, I think it was, paid me a compliment. He said I was partly responsible for this trend, for getting people to think like that.”<sup>79</sup>

Byard’s use of stride piano has often been characterized as channeling or re-creating Fats Waller, a simplistic attribution to the best-known historical practitioner of the style. Giddins notes the inaccuracy of this frequent misperception common among critics. In a review of a Byard performance, he writes, “Various stride passages underscored the fact that Byard’s use of lateral left-hand rhythm can no longer be described as homage, implicit or otherwise, to Fats Waller. His stride patterns are as different from Waller’s as Waller’s were from James P. Johnson’s; his rhythmic figures in the right hand and his

<sup>76</sup> Howard Litwak, “Jaki Byard: Phantastic,” *The Boston Phoenix*, March 18, 1986.

<sup>77</sup> Billy Taylor, *Jazz Piano—A History* (Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown, 1983), 193.

<sup>78</sup> Williamson, 289.

<sup>79</sup> Lyons, 191.

harmonies in both bespeak an entirely different sensibility—proving that stride ... did not petrify 50 years ago.”<sup>80</sup> Although writer Dan Lander joins the all-too-prevalent view that Byard’s use of older identifiable styles is “humorously quaint at best,” he concludes, “Byard’s grasp and integration of historical forms, his ability to embrace tradition and risk taking, was visionary, impacting on a new generation of jazz musicians who understood the history of jazz as a material to build on and work with, at the service of creating something new, rather than as an unmovable weight fixing them to the past.”<sup>81</sup> As his early life illuminates, Byard recognized the social and historical context of stride piano, and deploying it was not simply a nod to a musical style important to jazz history. Byard’s use of stride evokes various images and emotions from blues to rent parties. He also found the cross-cultural connections of musical idioms that exploded notions of essentialism, telling a student who asked him about stride, “...it was no big deal, that you could find it in classical music, that it was all part of the piano repertoire.”<sup>82</sup> Byard’s adoption of free jazz, adding it to the string of other styles he incorporated into his playing, set him apart from the neoclassicist movement he was credited with signaling.

Byard’s jazz tradition was a continuous, constructed process of inclusion. His representations reflect components of both the “neotrad” and “antitrad” activists in the debate over defining what constitutes the core and boundaries of the jazz tradition. David Cospers refers to his notion of “creative anachronism” as Byard’s methodology for disrupting linearity in performance.<sup>83</sup> “With his gestures toward identifiable but inconsistent and nonsequential historical styles, he seems to take advantage of a listener’s motivation to find stylistic coherence, and then alternately to frustrate and fulfill those expectations.”<sup>84</sup> Cospers situates Byard among the avant-garde historicists that include Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Charles Mingus, Sun Ra, and to a lesser degree, Eric Dolphy. He posits that their use of historical forms was in some way a response to the pressure of both (or either) a historical canon and narrative. His models, adopted mostly from literary theory, offer intriguing interpretive insights into Byard’s intentions. Byard certainly was negotiating canon, historical narrative, and cultural memory, and relished the ability to surprise and confound listener expectation, but he was not simply helicoptered into the early 1960s with a deep toolbox of historical references

<sup>80</sup> Gary Giddins, “Close Encounters of the Jazz Kind,” *Village Voice*. April 2, 1985.

<sup>81</sup> Dan Lander, “Jaki Byard,” in *Music Is Rapid Transportation...from the Beatles to Xenakis*, Kernohen, Daniel (ed.) (Etobicoke, Canada: Charivari, 2010), 124.

<sup>82</sup> Giddins, “Weather Bird-Jaki Byard, 1922-1999.” 1999, 78.

<sup>83</sup> David Cospers, “Breaking (from) the History: Postmodern Narrativity in the Music of Jaki Byard,” *Jazz Perspectives*, 2013, 181-200.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 197.

with which to “respond” to conundrums of narrative reconciliation. Even more than his contemporaries with similar inclinations and exposure, Byard’s approach to cultural memory and narrative grew organically as part of his own journey of linearity, encountering, integrating, and mastering jazz form and identities which he never discarded. Anachronistic tensions had been present in the 1940s. His “creative anachronism” was built in continuity and continuously over time. He felt it imperative to keep the historical “burden” front and center, not only in the music but how it was presented. The tradition, with all its musical, historical, cultural, and commercial offerings was not something to be overcome. His innate humor and humanity added dimensions to his work product, rendering results that his listeners need to reconcile for themselves. Byard responded to the tension created from the binary view that music is either traditional or innovative with an elastic frame of reference, exemplified in such compositions as “The Avant-Garde of 1921” and indirectly in his overall approach of mining the breadth of jazz style to suit his intentions for any particular composition or at any given moment while playing. Although we have little recorded evidence before 1960 of his evolution, testimony from fellow musicians and students corroborate this notion.

#### BYARD’S ECLECTICISM

Ecclecticism has a long, complex intellectual history that goes well beyond modern, vernacular understanding of the term. As Donald Kelley notes, “Eclecticism was not a mere accumulation of knowledge or even a reconciliation of doctrines but rather ... a method of separating truth from opinion and falsehood, science from superstition, and so a process of intellectual enlightenment and human progress.”<sup>85</sup> Denis Diderot wrote in the eighteenth century that “the eclectic goes back to the clearest general principles, examines them, discusses them, admits nothing except on the evidence of his own experience and reason.”<sup>86</sup> In the early nineteenth century, French philosopher Victor Cousin further elevated eclecticism by introducing the notion that the intent is “to select in all what appears to be true and good [in addition to beautiful], and consequently everlasting.”<sup>87</sup> By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, eclecticism had fallen out of favor as a philosophical discipline, its critics claiming that it represented a “decline of intellectual vigor,” a “loss of

---

<sup>85</sup> Donald R. Kelley, “Eclecticism and the History of Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, October 2001, 579.

<sup>86</sup> Dillon, 5.

<sup>87</sup> Kelley, 577, 579.

creativity,” and that it was “second rate, dull and largely from the past in its perspectives.”<sup>88</sup> As a result, the term was increasingly used to describe any artistic methodology that incorporated variety without critical underpinnings.

Byard’s eclecticism draws its spirit from the classical, philosophical intentions and functions, as musical rather than verbal discourse, knitting together a coherent and idealized version of a jazz tradition. Byard’s emotional connection with history leads us to believe he indeed sought truth, goodness, and beauty which he learned from a variety of masters. As new lessons were learned in their temporally continuous development, he integrated them into a stylistic amalgam that changed incrementally. By doing so, as Giddins suggests, Byard’s music disarms tendencies for dogmatic errors and sectarian disputes about stylistic application. Byard also knew the limits of how deeply he could mine his vein of truths when playing with other musicians. He recognized the scope of his approach was not always congruent with others with whom he was playing, noting, “Of course, to some guys Fats Waller’s music is just a point of amusement. When I worked for Eric Dolphy and Booker Ervin, on their dates, they were interested in music only from bebop on. You never played Fats for them. But with Mingus or Rahsaan, they took delight in hearing the way the piano used to be played.”<sup>89</sup> Aside from the aforementioned glib accusations of comic novelty and random sampling, there is scant negative critical appraisal of Byard’s use of the oldest ideas in the jazz tradition, even during the 1960s era of the avant-garde. He could mediate and curate his work product as his personal or community needs demanded. From an early age, Byard’s reluctance to abandon earlier styles in a tradition that prioritizes innovation and the “new thing” exemplifies the virtues of classical eclecticism, highlighting his intellectual enlightenment and maturity. He never apologized for his approach. He didn’t need to. As his style developed, he did adopt the “new thing,” and he was as respected in the free jazz community as he was admired for his authentic application of older styles, a striking one-man exemplar of artistic excellences. And the result of his efforts, while never achieving widespread popular appeal during his lifetime, have clearly had lasting impact. These are the lessons he imparted to his students, the many dozens of whom carry on this notion. Jason Moran reflected on Byard’s lessons:

He was constantly challenging those bounds of what could be possible with traditional elements. And that gave me a great respect for tradition from him, and how important it was to study and how important it was to be really knowledgeable about it—and still feel like you’re making your

---

<sup>88</sup> Dillon, 2.

<sup>89</sup> Lyons, 191.



contribution today. Because I'll never be able to play as good as Earl Hines at all. And what pianists used to do back then is extremely more technically savvy than people are doing today. And so I just thought that a lot of the techniques that the pianists were using you could use today and it would sound like it was new, but it was really, really old.<sup>90</sup>

Jaki sent me 50 stride tunes. "Hmm! Maybe I should learn this stuff. Maybe I should be able to understand how this is built, and find the freedom within that."<sup>91</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Jaki Byard was murdered on February 11, 1999, as he sat in his living room. The circumstances were unusual. At first glance, he appeared to have a nosebleed which would have been indicative of a death by natural causes, but a single bullet entry was quickly identified on his nose. As no gun was found on the scene, and Byard did not have a documented history of depression, suicide was ruled out. That said, Graham Haynes, who knew him very well personally, had observed some changes in Byard's psychological well-being after the death of his wife Louise five years earlier from cancer. He became more detached, less present, less enthusiastic. Even with his music he seemed only to "go through the motions." Haynes observed a diminution of Byard's pianistic abilities as he entered his mid-70s.<sup>92</sup> The case remains unsolved, despite several periods of renewed interest by the authorities over the years.<sup>93</sup>

Jaki Byard remains one of the most respected voices in jazz history despite the challenges his music has posed to academic theorists, critics, and the more casual listener. Byard was a complex mix of historian, comedian, pedagogue, and storyteller, traits he layered on to extraordinary musicianship. His musical inclinations were served up with both verbal and musical humor and executed with a stunning virtuosity. He was one of the few prominent musicians who learned and absorbed jazz in real time as it was developing. He relished variety, but (usually) not simply for variety's sake. His choices were informed by his deep-rooted respect for the musicians who came before him, and the value of

---

<sup>90</sup> Bill Beuttler, "Jason Moran, " *Make It New-Reshaping Jazz in the 21st Century* (Amherst, MS: Lever Press, 2019), 36-37.

<sup>91</sup> Ted Panken. "The Dozens: Jason Moran Selects 12 Classic Jaki Byard Tracks." <https://web.archive.org/web/20100210030206/http://jazz.com/dozens/moran-selects-byard>, accessed March 17, 2021.

<sup>92</sup> Haynes interview.

<sup>93</sup> The authorities believe the assailant was known to him. Linda Yglesias, "Bullet Silences Jaki's Jazz," *New York Daily News*, February 28, 1999, 941.

their contributions. And he kept adding to the reservoir of options well into the 1980s. Bayard challenged a strict, chronologically derived definition of innovation. He never discarded his influences, but rather picked from them in a manner that challenged the evaluative process and confounded attempts to identify narrativity in his performances. This "organic" process of accretion has led to the characterization of his method as eclectic, a term he at times disavowed as a simplistic descriptor for his avoidance of a stylistic uniformity. The appearance of incongruity in his work challenged notions of cohesion for listeners confined by a static evaluative conception. The perception has been that this leaves him out of the usual framing of a developing tradition, and thus has undermined an attempt to find a place for him as an innovator. I view his approach to antecedent styles as not one of replication, but rather one of flexible remodeling out of which came an original, organizing conception of handling jazz as an artistic tradition.

Bayard's evaluative framework for making musical choices was broad, a reflection of his propensity for inclusion and his aversion to comparative value judgments. His use of humor, verbal and musical, confounded critics and audiences. Despite criticisms that he was often unserious, a charge that badly irked him, humor was part of his nature that he never avoided. Bayard insisted that everything he did was intentional, a requisite understanding for listeners and critics. His intentionality demanded respect. Bayard was a harbinger of postmodern sensibilities, challenging both conventional notions of stylistic unity and congruity as the vehicle for coherence, and traditional expectations of narrativity. He was unpredictable in music and in life. In an era when narrative was the prevailing evaluative yardstick, Bayard was respected precisely for proposing his *own* yardstick. Bayard's historical fluency, and his ability to modify and improvise on it with virtuosic facility, dispels any notion of dabbling. As a teacher, Bayard took seriously the import of his catholic approach, but as Henry Martin points out, developing expertise at everything is daunting and perhaps beyond most aspiring musicians.<sup>94</sup> Many of his students, even those destined for great careers, recognized this. But they took to heart his admonition to find their own voice while studying if not mastering the tradition as Bayard did.

Jaki Bayard was one of a kind, and the last of a kind. If "eclectic" is the single descriptor that best ascribes meaning to his work—and I believe it is, we must recognize it as more than an easy handle. His life story, and tunes such as "Cat's Cradle," demonstrate that his eclecticism was born out of the opportunity to acquire his unique approach to constructing a musical message while the jazz tradition was developing. As such, he was able to approach his influences as

---

<sup>94</sup> Henry Martin, Personal communication, March 30, 2021.

points of light with a plurality of meanings that would not extinguish by absorption, but rather allowed to remain eternally lit and celebrated. Considering this classical approach to eclecticism as more than one-dimensional can provide a more satisfying model for understanding his music. As we reflect on the centennial of the man who passed through the first century of jazz, absorbing its lifeblood and creating his own voice, perhaps the best yardstick of his success is how his humanity shone through his music and persona. With this in mind, Jaki Byard should have the last word: “I’m against all those that talk hate,” he once said. “I don’t hate them, I pity them. I pity their poor souls. I’m against what they’re talking about. If they spent more time trying to spread more happiness, express good music, good thoughts and clean language they would accomplish more as a family, as Americans.”<sup>95</sup>

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

“A Living History of Jazz,” *The Boston Globe*, January 6, 1957.

Algrant, Dan. *Anything for Jazz*. Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, 1979, film documentary, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNBv9nXSKPE>, accessed August 31, 2019.

Asher, Don. “Jazz Emperor’ Jaki Byard’s Rare S.F. Appearance.” *The San Francisco Examiner*, August 6, 1978.

Asher, Don. Liner notes to *Jaki Byard, At Maybeck*, Concord Jazz CCD- 4511, 1992, Compact Disc.

Asher, Don. *Notes from a Battered Grand*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.

Berding, Helmut. “Leopold von Ranke.” In *The Discovery of Historicity in German Idealism and Historism*, edited by Peter Koslowski. Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2005.

Berkovitz, Joe. “Jaki Byard Testimonials,” New England Conservatory, <https://necmusic.edu/archives/jaki-byard-testimonials>, accessed February 20, 2021.

---

<sup>95</sup> Himmelstein, 1994.

Beuttler, Bill. *Make It New-Reshaping Jazz in the 21st Century*. Amherst, MS: Lever Press, 2019.

Blake, Ran. "Jaki Byard Testimonials." New England Conservatory. <https://necmusic.edu/archives/jaki-byard-testimonials>, accessed February 20, 2021.

Block, Irwin. "Piano Man Jaki Byard Shows His Love of Jazz." *The Gazette* (Montreal, Quebec, Canada), July 4, 1986.

Brown, Richard. "Jaki Byard: Romping, Stomping, and Waiting for the Break." *Down Beat*, March 8, 1979.

Calkins, Susan Lee. "A History of Jazz Studies at New England Conservatory, 1969-2009: The Legacy of Gunther Schuller." Boston University, dissertation, Doctor of Musical Arts, 2012.

Cosper, David. "Breaking (from) the History: Postmodern Narrativity in the Music of Jaki Byard," *Jazz Perspectives*, 2013.

Dillon, John M., and A.A. Long (Ed.), *The Question of "Eclecticism."* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

*Down Beat*, October 3, 1956.

Everett, Tom. "A Short Talk with Jaki Byard." Transcribed by Bob Rusch. *Cadence*, February 1976.

Giddins, Gary. "Close Encounters of the Jazz Kind." *Village Voice*. April 2, 1985.

Giddins, Gary. "Jaki Byard Spreads the New Tolerance." *The Voice*, March 27, 1978.

Giddins, Gary. "Virtuosity and a Thumbed Nose." *Village Voice*, March 16, 1999.

Giddins, Gary. "Weather Bird-Jaki Byard, 1922-1999." *Village Voice*, March 16, 1999.

Giddins, Gary. *Visions of Jazz*. New York: Oxford, 1998.

- Haynes, Graham. Phone interview by the author, October 8, 2019, digital recording.
- Hersch, Fred. Interview by the author. November 15, 2019, New York, apartment of Fred Hersch, digital recording.
- Himmelstein, David A. Liner notes to *Jaki Byard Out Front*. Prestige OJCCD 1842-2 (P-7397), 1964, 1994. Compact Disc.
- Horning, Thom and Bill Anderson. "A Discussion with Jaki Byard." *Tri-C Jazz Fest Cleveland*, April 1985.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6hz6qIkidA>, accessed March 11, 2021.
- "Jaki Byard at Maybeck," Concord Jazz Press Release, May 12, 1992.
- "Jaki Byard In Concert at Museum Theater," *Echoes-Sentinel* (Warren Township, New Jersey), February 2, 1978.
- Jazz Piano Workshop*. Jaki Byard trio with Reggie Workman, Alan Dawson, duet with Earl Hines. Berlin, 1965,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9fzgUgEnNE>, accessed September 2, 2019.
- Johnson, James P. "I Like Anything That's Good." *The Jazz Record*, April 1947.
- Kelley, Donald R. "Eclecticism and the History of Ideas." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, October 2001.
- Kelley, Robin D.G. *Thelonious Monk — The Life and Times of an American Original*. New York: Free Press, 2009.
- Lander, Dan. "Jaki Byard," in *Music Is Rapid Transportation...from the Beatles to Xenakis*. Edited by Daniel Kernohen. Etobicoke, Canada: Charivari, 2010.
- Lewis, Alwyn and Laurie Lewis. "Nat Adderley Interview." *Cadence*, March 1992.
- Litwak, Howard. "Jaki Byard: Phantastic." *The Boston Phoenix*, March 18, 1986.

- Lord, Tom. *The Jazz Discography Online*.  
<https://www.lordisco.com/tjd/CoverFrame>.
- Lyons, Len. *The Great Jazz Pianists*. New York: Quill, 1983.
- Martin, Henry. Personal communication, March 30, 2021.
- Marvel, Janet. "Jazzy Vocabulary Jaki Byard Builds His Own Musical Dictionary." *The Post-Star* (Glens Falls, NY), September 9, 1988.
- McNally, Owen. "Jamming at Artists Collective." *Hartford Courant*, February 20, 1977.
- McPartland, Marian. *Marian McPartland's Piano Jazz*. NPR, Spring 1995.  
<https://www.npr.org/2015/11/06/454989491/jaki-byard-on-piano-jazz>; accessed February 21, 2021.
- Mingus, Charles. *Charles Mingus Sextet*, "Take The A Train." April 12, 1964, Norway. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAn\\_gyNcvN4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAn_gyNcvN4), accessed March 7, 2021.
- Monson, Ingrid. "Doubleness and Jazz Improvisation: Irony, Parody, and Ethnomusicology." *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1994.
- Monson, Ingrid. *Saying Something*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Netsky, Hankus. "Jaki Byard Testimonials." New England Conservatory.  
<https://necmusic.edu/archives/jaki-byard-testimonials>,  
accessed February 20, 2021.
- Panken, Ted. "The Dozens: Jason Moran Selects 12 Classic Jaki Byard Tracks."  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20100210030206/http://jazz.com/dozens/moran-selects-byard>, accessed March 17, 2021.
- Porter, Bob. "'Spotlight' - Album of the Month." *Jazz Digest*, September-October 1972.
- Priestly, Brian and Sue Mingus. Liner notes to *Charles Mingus, The Jazz Workshop Concerts, 1964-65*. Mosaic, MD7-253, 2012, Compact Disc.



- Snyder, Art. "Jaki Byard Brings Royal Sound to Jazz." *Dayton Daily News*, May 19, 1988.
- Taylor, Billy. *Jazz Piano—A History*. Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown, 1983.
- Troup, Stuart. "Byard Leads Trio at Sonny's Place." *Newsday*, May 15, 1984.
- Vacca, Richard. *The Boston Jazz Chronicles*. Concord, Massachusetts: Troy Street Publishing, 2012.
- Whitehead, Kevin. "Jaki Byard, A Post-Bebop Pianist Who Was A Master of Stride Piano." *Fresh Air*, NPR, August 8, 2014.  
<https://www.npr.org/2014/08/08/338867826/jaki-byard-a-post-bebop-pianist-who-was-a-master-of-stride-piano>, accessed March 28, 2021.
- Williams, Martin. "Bash It—A Recording Date with Jaki Byard." *Down Beat*, July 11, 1968.
- Williamson, Chet. *Falling Rains of Life — The Jaki Byard Story*. Holliston, MA: Projects Publishing, 2018.
- Ygleias, Linda. "Bullet Silences Jaki's Jazz." *New York Daily News*, February 28, 1999.

#### ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

SCOTT E. BROWN, M.D., M.A., is an independent jazz researcher and the biographer of James P. Johnson. He received his B.A. degree from Yale where he wrote his first book on Johnson, *A Case of Mistaken Identity*, published in 1987 by the Rutgers Institute of Jazz Studies and Scarecrow Press. His new biography of Johnson is pending publication. He holds a Masters degree in jazz history and research from Rutgers-Newark, and is also a graduate of Rutgers Medical School, New Brunswick. Dr. Brown is chairman of the department of physical medicine and rehabilitation at Sinai Hospital/LifeBridge Health in Baltimore.