

## All-Star Television: Charles Mingus, Cecil Taylor, Ralph Ellison, Martin Williams

Ethan Iverson

Recorded on September 10, 1965 at the Village Gate, but rarely seen until recently, the half-hour program *Jazz: The Experimenters* features music from Charles Mingus and Cecil Taylor alongside commentary by Ralph Ellison and Martin Williams.<sup>1</sup> Mingus's group includes Lonnie Hillyer, Hobart Dotson, Jimmy Owens, Julius Watkins, Howard Johnson, Charles McPherson, and Dannie Richmond. Taylor plays one piece as a duo with Sonny Murray and one in a quartet with Murray, Jimmy Lyons, and Henry Grimes. The music is simply extraordinary, but the critical commentary is also of unusual interest.

MUSIC: "THE ARTS OF TATUM AND FREDDIE WEBSTER" (CHARLES MINGUS)<sup>2</sup>

What an opening! Trumpeter Hobart Dotson is in the lead, declaiming over solemn brass and McPherson's alto. The charismatic vamp eventually resolves into thick horn writing, and it turns out that the chord changes to the familiar standard "Body and Soul" lurk in the background.

Much of Mingus's work contains deliberate references to jazz history. "The Arts of Tatum and Freddie Webster" follows in this vein, and not merely in its title. Mingus worked with Tatum; perhaps they even played "Body and Soul" together. Tatum first recorded "Body and Soul" in 1937, two years before the famous Coleman Hawkins rendition. Many early jazz recordings of "Body and Soul" basically follow the original 1930 sheet music by Johnny Green, but Tatum reworks the song's harmony on the fly, creating a rich tapestry of luxuriant yet

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<sup>1</sup> The program was the third episode in a National Educational Television series titled USA: Music which originally aired on January 16, 1966 ([https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip\\_516-hm52f7ks4x](https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip_516-hm52f7ks4x)). Gene Santoro identifies the date of filming in *Myself When I'm Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 251.

<sup>2</sup> "The Arts of Tatum and Freddie Webster" is how the piece is listed on the album *Music Written for Monterey 1965 (Not Heard... Played in its Entirety, at UCLA)* but the title spoken by Ralph Ellison here is "The Art of Art Tatum and Frederick Webster." On the UCLA recording Mingus says to the audience, "The title should be, 'This is Hobart Dotson,' and it's featuring the arts of Tatum and Freddie Webster as the styles of music."

swinging sound.<sup>3</sup> Mingus's horn harmony in "The Arts of Tatum and Freddie Webster" is more contrapuntal and dissonant than almost any pianist, but the general atmosphere of "complex variations on a torch song" comes straight from Tatum.

Trumpeter Freddie Webster left only a few things on record before dying at an early age but both Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis loved him and claimed him as an influence. In his only *Down Beat* blindfold test, Thelonious Monk asks Leonard Feather if he remembers Freddie Webster, even going so far to request the once-famous early bebop track "I Can Make You Love Me," arranged by Tadd Dameron for Sarah Vaughan and featuring a remarkably lyrical Webster introduction (Bud Powell also supplies some rather Tatum-esque runs).<sup>4</sup> With "The Arts of Tatum and Freddie Webster" Mingus celebrates the romantic, harmonically sophisticated, and melodic side of jazz. Hobart Dotson is in the "Freddie Webster role," and ironically would go on to be nearly as mysterious a figure as Webster.<sup>5</sup>

Both Mingus works heard on *Jazz: The Experimenters* would be played by the same ensemble in California a few weeks later. Mingus conceived a fresh book of music for this idiosyncratic ensemble specifically for the 1965 Monterey Jazz Festival, although the book was not played at Monterey. Instead, it was recorded in lo-fi conditions at UCLA immediately after and released as the album *Music Written for Monterey 1965 (Not Heard... Played in its Entirety, at UCLA)*.<sup>6</sup> *Music Written for Monterey 1965* had a limited release of 200 copies on Mingus's Jazz Workshop label in 1966 and was eventually re-released on Sunnyside in 2006. In my opinion, the versions of the two pieces heard in the *Jazz: The Experimenters* program are more satisfying sonically and musically than the versions documented at UCLA.

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<sup>3</sup> Art Tatum and his Swingsters, "Body and Soul / What will I Tell my Heart," Decca DLA 724, 1937, 78-rpm recording.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard Feather, "Blindfold Test: Thelonious Monk," *Down Beat*, April 21, 1966, 39. Sarah Vaughan, "I Could Make You Love Me / My Kind of Love," Musicraft 398, 1946, 78-rpm recording.

<sup>5</sup> Dotson's phrasing is sensitive and moody, but it's also quite intervallic and high in register, perhaps recalling another trumpeter who died young, Booker Little.

<sup>6</sup> As far as I know, the instrumentation of three trumpets, alto sax, French horn, and tuba (plus bass and drums) has not been used by anyone else before or since.

## COMMENTARY: RALPH ELLISON

*Invisible Man* appears on any list of important twentieth-century literature, but Ralph Ellison also wrote a fair amount about jazz.<sup>7</sup> As the Mingus group's final notes subside, the author jumps in:

I'm Ralph Ellison. The composer of the music that we have just heard is Charles Mingus, and it was played by Mr. Mingus and his group. It was called "The Art of Art Tatum and Frederick Webster," and it is a work from one of the most restless and creative of the modern jazz experimentalists.

Since the beginning, jazz has been nothing if not experimental, and its experimental attitudes sprang from its very creators. As practitioners of an outlaw art, jazz musicians could create free from the concerns of status and respectability. This freedom was expressed in their choice of instruments, their playful manipulation of sound, the wild freedom of harmony and counterpoint, and the ceaseless search for rhythmical variety.

Jazz grew from the attempt to express with musical instrument the sound and the style of the Negro American voice, as raised in prayer, protest, shout, and song. It was an attempt to humanize the world in terms of sound: An effort made with musical means to impose the Negro American sense of time upon the larger society and upon the world of nature. Early jazz was by no means an intellectual music. It was, however, marked by a highly conscious sense of its sources and its own tradition. While it drew from the European musical tradition, it was instinctively aware that its goals were different.

How does the new experimentalism differ from the old? For one thing, jazz today exists in the climate where a certain piety has developed towards the goals of so-called serious music, wherein experimentation is less a means to achieving expressiveness than a value in itself. And for some Negro musicians, it has become a musical route to social respectability, and to a wide acceptance among the cult of jazz intellectuals. For the most serious of these composers, however, the breaking down of the wall between jazz and modern European music has posed a problem of absorbing that music without losing touch with their own tradition. This has created a clash of styles, and one might say that main musical motive of the experimentalism is to absorb—to Americanize—the most recent developments of European classical music.

The music of Cecil Taylor is, I think, a most interesting illustration of that struggle.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Ralph Ellison and Robert O'Meally (ed.), *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 2001).

Ellison's comments are sophisticated and in line with other Ellison statements concerning modern jazz. His wonderful essay on Charlie Parker, "On Bird, Bird-Watching and Jazz," published just three years before this TV appearance, praises Parker's music but critiques Bird's relationship to society. Ellison does not want jazz to give up a commonality to its everyday African American habitat and is troubled by how the intellectual aspects of modern jazz give white society a way to reframe basic jazz material as accessible to anyone "hip." As he remarks in that essay:

Bird was indeed a "white" hero. His greatest significance was for the educated white middle-class youth whose reaction to the inconsistencies of American life was the stance of casting off its education, language, dress, manners and moral standards: a revolt, apolitical in nature, which finds its most dramatic instance in the figure of the so-called white hipster. And whatever its justification, it was, and is, a reaction to the chaos which many youth sense at the center of our society. For the postwar jazznik, Parker was Bird, a suffering, psychically wounded, law-breaking, life-affirming hero. For them he possessed something of the aura of that figure common to certain contemporary novels which R.W.B Lewis describes as the "picaresque saint." He was an obsessed outsider—and Bird was thrice alienated: as Negro, as addict, as exponent of a new and disturbing development in jazz—whose tortured and in many ways criminal striving for personal and moral integration invokes a sense of tragic fellowship in those who saw in his agony a ritualization of their own fears, rebellions, and hunger for creativity.<sup>8</sup>

It is rather bracing to see how Ellison treats this TV program as a platform for his complex discourse. When it is his turn to speak, Martin Williams will simply validate all the musicians seen in the program, which, it must be said, is the expected role. Unlike Williams, Ellison has come ready to interrogate the whole concept of "jazz experimenters."

The thread of Ellison's commentary would be picked up by future African American writers and musicians. Albert Murray, Stanley Crouch, and Wynton Marsalis all regarded Ellison as a touchstone, and Ellison's determination to define jazz, especially to define it in terms of a "Negro American" aesthetic, foreshadows Murray's book-length manifesto *Stompin' the Blues* and the "jazz wars" of the 1980s and '90s, of which Crouch and Marsalis were regular

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<sup>8</sup> Ralph Ellison, *The Saturday Review* (July 28, 1962), 47-49, reprinted in the Ellison anthology *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964).

combatants.<sup>9</sup> The first time I looked at *Jazz: The Experimenters*, I was a bit surprised to see Ellison in the “Stanley Crouch role.” This comment may paint me as naive, but I believe many of my peers also think of Crouch, Wynton, Ken Burns’s *Jazz*, and so forth as a phenomenon of the Jazz at Lincoln Center era. It is edifying to see Ellison take this side of the discourse decades earlier.

Before getting into the weeds further, it is worth making the obvious point that the two styles of music made by Charles Mingus and Cecil Taylor are quite different from each other. Sure, both leaders are “jazz experimenters” as the title of the program suggests, but Mingus is still deep inside the jazz tradition. “The Arts of Tatum and Freddie Webster” swings with a steady beat; it references a standard form, and the horn phrasing is full of blues. In stark contrast, Taylor does not use a steady beat, there are no standard forms, and while it would be too strong to say that there is no blues in Taylor’s conception, the most obvious blues aspect is carried not by the pianist but by the soulful alto saxophone of Jimmy Lyons.

MUSIC: “NUMBER ONE” (CECIL TAYLOR)<sup>10</sup>

For a duo with Sonny Murray, Taylor reaches inside the piano, plucking strings directly with his hands, before moving on to holding a mallet and an implement I can’t identify.

Ellison is correct to see Taylor as profoundly influenced by European modernists, for the brilliant bursts of frantic atonal piano that characterize almost all of Taylor’s performances continue the lineage of post-war European work. The fabulous Piano Sonata of Jean Barraqué (1952) is quite “proto-Cecil” in its basic sonority. However, playing the strings directly has a fair amount of American heritage, especially from composers Henry Cowell and John Cage. Cage’s *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946-48) is a mini-dictionary of prepared piano, and Cage is particularly relevant to Taylor, for Cage is part of the post-war American explosion of avant-garde, experimental, counter-cultural, and conceptual art that included Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Milton Babbitt, William S. Burroughs, and Thomas Pynchon. These figures are all iconoclasts attempting to make a clean break with tradition.

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<sup>9</sup> Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1976). Interestingly, Albert Murray’s name appears in the credits to “Jazz: The Experimenters” as “music consultant.”

<sup>10</sup> “Number One” does not seem to be the same “Number One” heard on the Cecil Taylor album *Air* (Candid Records, 1960).

The way Cecil Taylor begins a television showcase with extended techniques makes his membership of this group exceptionally clear. Thanks in part to the grainy black and white television setting, “Number One” can be paired smoothly with “Water Walk,” the hilarious moment in 1960 when John Cage went on the popular TV show *I’ve Got a Secret*.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Cage even begins “Water Walk” with strumming inside a piano.

Sonny Murray gets credit for discarding tempo at the drums on records with Taylor and Albert Ayler. The key critical document of this historical moment is Amiri Baraka’s *Black Music* (1967), where Baraka writes glowing passages concerning Taylor and Murray separately and together. American experimentalism! Baraka’s vivid prose has a kind of Beat feel. To this day the meld of Murray’s style and Baraka’s prose is unique, for it is hard to think of one without the other. As Baraka describes:

Watching Sonny play, as he swoops and floats, hovers, lunges, above and into the drums, it is immediate... his body-ness, his physicality in the music. Not just as a drum beater but as a conductor of energies, directing them this way and that way. Just scraping a cymbal this time, smashing it the next. Both feet straight out with the bass drums. His rolls and bombs the result of body-mined spirit feel. He wants “natural sounds,” natural rhythms. The drum as a reactor and manifestor of energies coursing through and pouring out of his body. Rhythm as occurrence.<sup>12</sup>

One can do the most experimental sounds over a repeating rhythmic base and a folkloric or dance connection will remain. The pianist Paul Bley, who was an associate of both Mingus and Taylor, called his autobiography *Stopping Time* specifically because Bley thought taking away a steady tempo was the most radical jazz revolution. Bley’s comments in the chapter “Stopping Time: Ayler—Murray—Peacock—Bley” deals specifically with how his then-wife Carla Bley had to write a whole new book for a band with Sunny Murray:

With Ornette, the bass player joined in the fray, but the drummer was always playing metronomic time—not necessarily four to the bar, but at least time. With the advent of Sunny Murray, Paul Motian, and Milford Graves, the drummer joined the bassist in counterpoint. A lot of players managed to handle the absence of chord changes, although for many of them that was traumatic and still is. For myself, when the drummer gave up playing time, the music sounded totally different than it had the week

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<sup>11</sup> <https://youtu.be/gXOIkT1-QWY>

<sup>12</sup> Amiri Baraka [as LeRoi Jones], *Black Music* (William Morrow, 1967; repr. Akashi Classics Renegade Reprint Series, 2010).

before. But for a lot of musicians, not to mention a lot of listeners, the music lost *all* of its meaning.<sup>13</sup>

COMMENTARY: MARTIN WILLIAMS

Writer and critic Martin Williams did a lot to create an intellectual appreciation of jazz amongst fans and academics. In addition to writing numerous reviews and articles, Williams co-founded the short-lived but important magazine *The Jazz Review* (1958-61) with Nat Hentoff and curated the landmark anthology *The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz* (1973). Unlike Ellison, Williams was eager for the latest innovations to dominate the discourse:

My name is Martin Williams. By now, the radical innovations of the 1940s in jazz, the music of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, which sounded so startling when one first heard it, is a part of the mainstream of the music. And it's quite evident, now, in the '60s, that there is a new kind of jazz, that jazz has its avant-garde, just like any other art. It was evident, actually, in the music of Cecil Taylor—quite evident, by 1958, and his music has certainly continued to develop since then.

Cecil Taylor has attended an American academy of music, he knows twentieth-century European composition, but he also knows the jazz tradition thoroughly, and he approaches the music of Duke Ellington or Thelonious Monk with real reverence. His is not typical of the avant-garde at all because Cecil Taylor's is a very individual music, and many of the players in the avant-garde are equally individual. But if I were to say anything about what they all have in common it would be something like this: Jazz players today approach jazz with a new kind of "freedom," if you will. Traditionally, they made their variations by playing on a melody or by playing on a structure that had melody implied, an underlying chord sequence, what you or I might call simply an outline. Today, players want to make up their melodies without necessarily referring to the theme or its outline. They want to feel free to depart, spontaneously, from either of those perhaps inhibiting things. Cecil Taylor's next piece will have its introduction by the composer.

Williams—unlike Ellison—is playing by the rules, explaining the intent of the program in a clear and accessible way. But this clarity of approach is not continued by the next speaker.

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Bley with David Lee, *Stopping Time* (Vehicule Press, 1999).

## COMMENTARY: CECIL TAYLOR

The pianist says:

Music is the building of sound structure. The piece you are about to hear will contain an anacrusis complex: the first statement, the shape of what is to be, its form, the possibility of the other. You will then proceed to areas which will contain melodic and percussive divisions. The unifying link of the piece will be its rhythm, which will consist of regular and irregular measurement of co-existing bodies of sound.

The philosophical premise of this music is based on is that man begins a transliteration of the mean fact towards symbolic representation when mind and body move: recognizing their singularity, therefore their unity, and therefore their sanity. The question is: where the economic and social factors determining an artist's existence, those which permit the expression of time, through time, to one whose consumption is unlimited, or, were they the producers for others?

The name of the piece will be, "Octagonal Skirt and Fancy Pants."

Taylor's commentary provides the most detailed musical explanation of the program so far, and so it is worth addressing a number of these details in turn:

*"The piece you are about to hear will contain an anacrusis complex."*

"Anacrusis" means a pick-up beat or prelude, but the phrase "anacrusis complex" does not return a single Google result; it seems to be original to Taylor. Taylor is noting that the first part of the piece—the melody, or the "head"—sets up the rest of the performance. This is hardly a fresh idea, although his language obscures its basic meaning.

*"The unifying link of the piece will be its rhythm, which will consist of regular and irregular measurement of co-existing bodies of sound."*

This is also an esoteric way of stating something obvious: All music with more than one player has "co-existing bodies of sound." It's a bit surprising that Taylor tells the audience to listen for the rhythm, for (as discussed above) steady rhythm is something that music in this idiom often lacks.

At any rate, Taylor is signaling that his concept is strongly intellectual, if not impenetrable to someone looking in from the outside. Again, this is like Taylor's peers in the worlds of conceptual and visual art from that era. (It is impossible to divorce John Cage's music from highfaluting explanations of his work.)



The “philosophical premise” that Taylor refers to can be read as “against minstrelsy.” Rephrasing Taylor slightly: “Is a Black artist beholden to the racist economic and social construct, producing work for Whitey, or is their production and consumption totally free?” In the aforementioned “On Bird, Bird-Watching and Jazz,” Ellison spends serious time unpacking the idea of minstrelsy in the work of Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, and Charlie Parker. Going further into this topic is beyond the purview of this article, however, it is safe to say that a reaction against the continued popularity of minstrelsy was at least a small part of why Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie played fast, undanceable tempos in the ’40s, why Ahmad Jamal and Miles Davis took a cool and unapproachable stance in the ’50s, and why John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Cecil Taylor embraced avant-garde sounds in the ’60s.

MUSIC: “OCTAGONAL SKIRT AND FANCY PANTS” (CECIL TAYLOR)

“Octagonal Skirt and Fancy Pants” must be one of the best bite-sized servings of Taylor around. There is definitely a “head” that Jimmy Lyons plays, more or less the same way at the beginning and the end of the piece. Apart from that nod to jazz convention, the musicians are off into pure abstract expression. Many recordings of Taylor and Lyons together feature tracks that may have been riveting live but just seem to go on and on when listening at home. The recently issued *Complete, Legendary, Live Return Concert* opens with a performance of Taylor, Lyons, Sirone, and Andrew Cyrille that clocks in at an hour and 28 minutes.<sup>14</sup>

Jimmy Lyons’s attractive sonority and seemingly casual yet resolutely *avant* approach is perpetually underrated. Lyons spent almost his entire working life in Cecil Taylor’s orbit, but one of the best records in this style was made without the pianist, his own *Other Afternoons* with Lester Bowie, Alan Silva, and Andrew Cyrille.<sup>15</sup> Much of Taylor/Lyons/Murray on record is without bass. Present at this taping, however, is Henry Grimes, who is almost certainly the most skilled conventional jazz player in the quartet. To his credit, Taylor makes a slight adjustment when working with a good bass player: after Lyons is done, Taylor’s left hand lightens up. The pianist actually plays quite a few “jazz voicings” (many easily recognizable to students of Herbie Hancock) when improvising. That doesn’t mean that Taylor is holding back, though, for his solo statement is just

<sup>14</sup> “Autumn/Parade” on *Cecil Taylor: The Complete, Legendary, Live Return Concert*, Oblivion Records, recorded at Town Hall in Manhattan on Nov. 4, 1973, released 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Jimmy Lyons, *Other Afternoons*, BYG Records 529.309, 1970, LP.

as burning as ever. Murray knows just when to bring the dynamic down at the end of the piano solo, and Grimes's last note is perfect.

COMMENTARY: MARTIN WILLIAMS

Williams and Mingus were friends, and there's a nice warmth to the following overview.

I'm sure that the name Charles Mingus will be written large in the history of jazz, if only because he is a very great bass player. He is first of all, for me, one of the few bass players in jazz history—certainly not the only, but one of the few—who has the emotional impact and the technique—the presence, to borrow an actor's term—to be a highly effective soloist, one of the very best. He's been called by one man, "the Segovia of the bass," and not without reason.

But Charlie Mingus, in addition to being a great soloist, has re-evaluated the function of his instrument in jazz, particularly in ensemble. Mingus's bass does not often merely accompany the music, but fits into it. He improvises behind the players a melodic line that sometimes is a kind of jazz counterpoint. But at the same time, he is improvising this part, he never interferes. And he can inspire. Oh really, he can inspire almost any musician. I have seen him inspire budding musicians of promise into sounding like very great players.

But Mingus came along in modern jazz after the innovations of the early players—Parker, Gillespie, and their immediate followers—and settled in. And he came along, also, as a composer. What he has is an ensemble style, an idea of jazz composition that goes beyond what the soloist can do. In other words, he came along when modern jazz needed a larger sense of form, and he offered it one. He's not the only such composer to come along in the idiom, one is Thelonious Monk. Monk contributed early to the style, and then was re-discovered as a great composer and player. Another is John Lewis.

Charlie Mingus has said that his music comes from church, Charlie Parker, and Duke Ellington. It also comes from Charles Mingus.

One might quibble with Williams's assertion that Mingus "came along when modern jazz needed a larger sense of form, and he offered it one." If the topic is jazz composition that de-emphasizes the need for many improvised choruses from superb soloists, Mingus is in a very small class alongside Duke Ellington and hardly anybody else. (I personally would not put either Monk or John Lewis in that class.) But many of the greatest jazz records ever made are from the post-war era, by Miles, Coltrane, Rollins, Monk, Ornette, and so many others. On most of those records there are phenomenal tunes and even greater blowing,

usually featuring a group of geniuses interacting spontaneously with each other in real time. Modern jazz was perfect as it was. Longer composed pieces like “The Arts of Tatum and Freddie Webster” were not required to make those records any better.

MUSIC: “THE ARTS OF TATUM AND FREDDIE WEBSTER” (CHARLES MINGUS)

More of the opening work is heard, extending into a brilliant double-time section with spectacular horn backgrounds as Dotson keeps blowing. In the UCLA performance, Mingus plays piano and the ensemble is somewhat ragged; here the horns are tighter, and Dannie Richmond holds the reins perfectly. During the concluding Dotson cadenza, the horns play A-flat dominant, then D major... but what is that curiously choked final chord? Just a low D-flat? Mysterious Mingus!

Mingus was mercurial and prolific. This particular Mingus configuration is not as well known or as well documented as some others, but the quality of this piece and the confidence of the performance makes one wish that Mingus had kept this instrumentation in play beyond the Monterey/UCLA sessions.

COMMENTARY: RALPH ELLISON

Having implied doubt in his comments at the beginning of the program, Ellison closes with a longer, yet even sterner statement:

The question of what is valid (or invalid) experimentation is ultimately unanswerable. Jazz is, by definition, an experimental form. The soloist experimented on given themes, chords, riffs, and rhythms. The composer, arranger, orchestrator, leader (or often he was all of these) experimented with form, harmony, rhythms, tempos, instrumentation, voicing.

Why then, do we refer to the jazz of which Mr. Mingus is an outstanding exponent as new experimentalism?

The newness lies in the matter of consciousness—or, shall we say, the matter of self-consciousness, and in many instances, I am afraid, a matter of false consciousness. For much of the jazz that developed after bop no longer regarded itself from within its own tradition, but from within certain developments taking place in European music. Actually, there had occurred a clash between what are two streams of Western musical tradition: that of American jazz, and that of European classicism.

In the beginning, many listeners from outside the Negro American background thought of jazz as ineptly played military or European dance music. It was assumed that the jazzmen were trying their best to play correctly and with traditional instrumental techniques. The rough sound of

the brasses, for instance, was assumed to be the result of improper training, while in fact even the early conservatory-trained jazzmen bent their techniques quite consciously to give the sound of the Negro blues.

And behind all of these misconceptions lay the belief that jazz was a mere reflection of Americanized European music, rather than a new native music which sought to express other values, and which grew out of most American sense of artistic freedom. And—wonder of wonder, or outrage of outrages—this rowdy, vital, and most compelling music was a product of the most politically and socially un-free group in the United States.

The problem of understanding jazz did not arise because jazz was shy about making its statement. It arose when that statement was interpreted in words. For the jazz background was a non-literary background, whose nuances were best expressed in gesture, attitude, and inflection — in fact, all the complex moods summed up in the term, “Negro American.” Any critic from outside this tradition must, out of necessity, fall back upon his own values, and thus may be unprepared to interpret what he has heard—even though he himself might be a trained musician—for he is likely to confuse the motives of jazz with those of classical European music.

It has been such outsiders—well-meaning to a man—who sponsored the false consciousness of the new experimentalism in jazz. They were also promoters of the cult of intellectuals who impose their romanticism on the new jazz, much as the early pioneers have imposed their own romanticism upon the figure of the American Indian. Now, beneath this romanticism, and beneath all experiments, lies a reality of life and experience which nourishes the beginning of jazz and which will continue to nourish its future life. It is this reality—not withstanding European serious or respectable touchstones—which will provide the true standards of its validity.

Wow! This almost amounts to a direct attack on Martin Williams, for it is easy to guess that Ellison thinks Williams is a “well-meaning outsider sponsoring the false consciousness of the new experimentalism.” According to Arnold Rampersad’s biography of Ellison, Williams was offended by the author’s remarks, and wrote Ellison to tell him so. Rampersad also speculates that Ellison is taking revenge for a sharp critique that Williams published of Ellison’s *Shadow and Act* the previous year.<sup>16</sup> Ellison and Williams did not remain at odds, however. They exchanged friendly correspondence later, with Ellison even going so far to write Williams in 1987, “It is encouraging to find someone as

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<sup>16</sup> Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison* (Vintage, 2008).

knowledgeable as yourself still finds my jazz pieces of interest.”<sup>17</sup> (This burying of the hatchet is not included in Rampersad’s book.)

There has been plenty of pushback against the Ellison/Murray/Crouch/Marsalis strain of thought. Indeed, the first review of this very television show was in 2014 from *New Yorker* critic Richard Brody, who was agitated enough by a viewing at the National Jazz Museum in Harlem to write up an article called, “Why Did Ralph Ellison Despise Modern Jazz?”<sup>18</sup> But the word “despise” seems too strong. Ellison is listening; he’s skeptical, but he’s listening. For “despise,” one might be better off going to Betty Carter’s comments on Sun Ra from Art Taylor’s *Notes and Tones*:

It's supposed to have something to do with stars and Mars, but it's nothing but bullshit. Sun Ra has got whitey going for it. He couldn't go uptown and do that to blackie. He would be chased off the stage in Harlem or Bedford-Stuyvesant.<sup>19</sup>

Any reasonably broad-minded person should be glad that Cecil Taylor and Sun Ra were here and did exactly what they were supposed to do. Ellison should not say that their music was created out of a “false consciousness” and Carter should not call it “bullshit.”

Yet it is also inarguable that Ellison and Carter were proven correct. Despite a few black critical champions like Baraka, avant-garde jazz would *not* be embraced by the African American community at large. Those eager to condemn Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, Stanley Crouch, and Wynton Marsalis as hopelessly conservative may want to stop and learn more about what they were trying to conserve.

Mingus himself was of two minds. While the bassist could unashamedly embrace European modernism as a resource, he was famously volatile and often sharply criticized his peers in public. Like many conventionally skilled jazz players, he worried that key experimental figures just didn’t command the tradition well enough before going “out.” In his 1973 “An Open Letter to the Avant-Garde,” the name of his television co-star appears in passing.

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<sup>17</sup> John F. Callahan and Marc C. Conner (eds.), *The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison* (Random House, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Richard Brody, “Why Did Ralph Ellison Despise Modern Jazz?,” *The New Yorker* Culture Desk, March 20, 2014. (<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/why-did-ralph-ellison-despise-modern-jazz>)

<sup>19</sup> Art Taylor, *Notes and Tones: Musician-to-Musician Interviews* (DaCapo Press, 1977).

Cecil Taylor, I don't know, I've never had a chance to hear him right, I've only heard him when he's plucking inside the piano. I don't listen much to the so-called avant-garde. I would like to hear one of them play "Lush Life."<sup>20</sup>

Billy Strayhorn's "Lush Life" is a rich ballad in D-flat, not that far from Art Tatum's "Body and Soul" and therefore "The Arts of Tatum and Freddie Webster" in basic harmonic content. At the time of writing this "Open Letter," Mingus's pianist was Don Pullen, a brilliant musician who could deliver outrageous torrents of Cecil Taylor-inspired avant soundscapes alongside gorgeous servings of pure ballads and blues.

MUSIC AND SPOKEN WORD: "DON'T LET IT HAPPEN HERE" (CHARLES MINGUS)

For the closing piece, Mingus was directly inspired by Martin Niemöller's famous confession "First They Came...." After he muses a few dark chords on the piano, the brass enter with spacious lines, an eerie texture that suggests a serious film score. Mingus recites:

One day they came and they took the Communist people, and I said nothing because I was not a Communist. Then one day they came and took the people of the Jewish faith, and I said nothing because I was not a Jew. Then one day they took the Unionists, and I said nothing because I was not a Unionist. They burned the Catholic Churches one day, and I said nothing because I was a Protestant. Then one day they came and they took me, and I couldn't say nothin'—because I was as guilty as they were. I was as guilty of genocide as those that killed the 18 million people...along with me.

The music swells, becomes a stomp, Howard Johnson's firm tuba comfortably takes the place of the composer's string bass. Mingus sings/shouts like a country preacher. "Oh yeah, I know!". Thunderous piano clusters cue the dissolution of the music back into eerie lines, and the spoken word finishes:

Yes, I was as guilty of genocide as those who killed the other people with me. And I say the only way to avoid this is to look and speak out now, and don't let it happen here.

It is thrilling to see Mingus interact with his ensemble, cuing them from the piano in subtle ways and shaping a theatrical event. The records, as great as they are, don't always do full justice to this dynamic performer.

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Mingus, "An Open Letter to the Avant-Garde," in *Charles Mingus: More Than a Fakebook* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 1991). A note at the bottom of the page explains, "appeared in *Changes Magazine*, in a slightly longer version, in June, 1973."

The only mention Mingus gets in Baraka's *Black Music* is praise for his political stance. "Fables of Faubus" and "Meditations on Integration" are two of the better-known Mingus pieces that explicitly concern race, while "Don't Let It Happen Here" takes up the cause of resisting fascism. The musical techniques Mingus employs in "Don't Let it Happen Here" are less traditional than in "The Arts of Tatum and Freddie Webster." Still, even with the addition of spoken word and a call to political action, Mingus doesn't fit comfortably into the postwar Pollock-Cage experimental continuum. Indeed, the central collective improvisation on "Don't Let it Happen Here" is the closest that any music on *Jazz: The Experimenters* gets to the black church.

Charles Mingus and Cecil Taylor are authentic jazz giants, and for these few precious moments in 1965, the cameras caught Mingus at a mature peak and Taylor during the first flush of his revolutionary breakthrough. The commentary is provided by two of the most thoughtful critics of the era, and, as a bonus, Ralph Ellison and Martin Williams take opposing sides. Since being uploaded to YouTube for the Mingus centennial earlier in 2022, *Jazz: The Experimenters* has been viewed over 140,000 times, a remarkable number for an old arty black and white TV show, and quite possibly far more than the number of people who watched when first broadcast.<sup>21</sup> It isn't surprising that the program has struck a chord with contemporary audiences, for the sounds are still fresh and the debates remain unresolved.

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<sup>21</sup> Brad Linde had found the show on a post from Flashbak, a Facebook group that "features forgotten gems, stories and visual art" and shared that post with me. I downloaded it from that source, and on Mingus's birthday (the centennial) spontaneously sent it along to Brian Krock, who has an active YouTube channel (<https://youtu.be/T2KDM6TA6ow>).

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

ETHAN IVERSON is a pianist, composer, and writer living in Brooklyn. While best-known for being a founding member of the Bad Plus, he has also published articles about jazz in the *New Yorker*, NPR, *The Nation*, and *JazzTimes*. His website, Do the Math, includes almost 50 interviews with celebrated musicians.