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"'High Energy' Jazz and Sex": Listening for Gender in Rahsaan Roland Kirk's Performances

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This article considers the intersections among gender, sexuality, race, and disability in the works of jazz multi-instrumentalist Rahsaan Roland Kirk (1935–1977). Kirk is primarily known for playing multiple saxophones simultaneously, as well as sirens, whistles, and other unusual instruments. As a blind man, Kirk performs disability by presenting a "deviant" musical body. He achieves this by performing on several odd-looking instruments at once, utilizing unconventional techniques and sounds (like playing through the nose), and executing feats of almost superhuman circular breathing. However, we can also think of these characteristics as constituting a performance of gender and sexuality that is a response to both the feminization of the disabled body (after Garland-Thomson 1997) and dominant stereotypes of Black masculinity during the 1960s and 70s (after hooks 2004 and Wallace 1979).[1]

After providing a brief overview of Kirk's performance of disability, I examine how Kirk performs masculinity sonically through his presentation of musical sounds that epitomize stereotypes of strength and virility, such as his (multiple) saxophone playing, his circular breathing technique, and the "breath-a-thons" he staged to draw attention to his physical stamina. Kirk (over)performs the stereotype of the hypersexualized Black man, which can be seen as a way of reacting against both the historical oppression of Black men in the US and the dehumanization he experienced as a person with a disability. Further, Kirk affirms his masculinity and sexuality through sexually suggestive spoken comments in his music, as well as in his flute playing, counteracting notions of the flute as a feminine-coded instrument. Altogether, these characteristics resulted in the perception of his work as gendered and sexual, causing one reviewer to characterize Kirk's performances as "the embodiment of his extreme horniness."[2] In addition, Kirk's manipulation of Black masculine stereotypes

[1] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1997), 9; bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, (Routledge, 2004), 74; and Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (Verso, 1990), 25.

[2] Bert Stratton, "Roland Kirk: 'High Energy' Jazz and Sex," *Michigan Daily*, February 5, 1970.

reveals how he pushed back against misconceptions regarding his abilities as a blind person. To support these arguments, I analyze Kirk's performance of several works, including "Volunteered Slavery," "Here Comes the Whistleman," "Three for the Festival," and the album *Natural Black Inventions: Root Strata*.

PERFORMING DISABILITY

Kirk's musical performances are closely intertwined with his identity as a blind man or, in his words, "a man that doesn't see too well."[3] In another work in progress that focuses solely on this topic, I argue that Kirk performs disability in various ways, which I will briefly discuss here. Contemporary audiences most readily reacted to Kirk's arresting visual appearance—a blind man, playing three saxophones simultaneously, with a battery of other strange instruments hanging around his neck. Augmented by his outfits (he would sometimes wear a long robe and unusual hats), the various curiosities that adorned Kirk's body can be read as a representation of outlandish excess that calls to mind stereotypes of junk dealers. Remarkably, Kirk even references junk dealers in the title of his tune, "The Ragman and the Junkman Ran from the Businessman They Laughed and He Cried."[4]

The combination of Kirk's unusual appearance, his blindness, and his ability to play three horns at once, caused audiences to perceive him as a freak. As disability scholars have demonstrated, the image of the freak has often been associated with disability, as evidenced by freak shows whose main attractions were frequently people with some type of physical deformity.[5] Kirk's performances fit a narrative that Rosemarie Garland-Thomson describes as "enfreakment," a process which turns subjects into freaks.[6] Part of Kirk's enfreakment occurs through his presentation of a disfigured musical body. In contrast to the normative images of musicians who perform on one saxophone at a time, Kirk's musical body is disfigured—his cheeks puffed, three saxophones crammed into one mouth, an array of unusual instruments dangling from his

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[3] Rahsaan Roland Kirk, *Soul!*, Performed September 22, 1972, Aired October 4, 1972, 5:13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nb51eJs1X94.

[4] Rahsaan Roland Kirk, *Natural Black Inventions: Root Strata*, Atlantic SD 1578, 1971, LP.

[5] See Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York University Press, 1996) and Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[6] Garland-Thomson, *Freakery*, 7, 10. The term "enfreakment" was initially used by David Hevey to describe how the foregrounding of bodily deviances in photography can turn people into freaks. David Hevey, *The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery* (Routledge, 1992), 53-74.

neck and shoulders. He also played instruments in unorthodox ways, such as playing the flute and recorder simultaneously, one through the mouth, the other through the nose. Kirk's body exemplifies Garland-Thomson's definition of monsters, whose "violations in shape give us… unusually formed beings whose bodies are simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary."[7] Further, the unusually shaped instruments that Kirk played intensified the disfigurement of his musical body. This is especially true of the stritch, a straight-bodied alto saxophone which Kirk modified by attaching the bell from a French horn with tape, thus transforming it into a kind of Frankenstein-style instrument.

Kirk sonically performs disability by creating nonnormative musical sounds. He achieves this in part through the use of unusual instruments, including the music box and siren, as well as instruments of his own creation, like the black mystery pipes. But even among normative instruments, Kirk employs a nonnormative aesthetic and technique, for example, buzzing into a reedless saxophone or singing and grunting while playing his flute. Kirk's playing of two or three saxophones simultaneously is also representative of this aesthetic, as the sound of multiple horns coming from one body possesses a quality that is quite distinct from that of three separate musicians playing each instrument together. In addition, Kirk relies heavily on circular breathing, a technique that he mastered on all instruments, but that must have been particularly difficult to achieve while playing three saxophones together due to the large quantities of air required, especially at loud dynamic levels. As Terry Rowden has noted, Kirk's circular breathing contributes to the narrative of Kirk as freak.[8] Kirk turned this technique into another aspect to be showcased, something that audiences would marvel at during his concerts.[9] He would refer to his circular breathing as a "miracle," and to himself as "the miracle of the tenor sax."[10] This, along with his repeated telling of how the idea to play three horns simultaneously originated from a dream, suggests Kirk's keen awareness of how he could appeal to audiences, underscoring Joseph Straus's observation that one of the ways that

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[7] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 163.

[8] Terry Rowden, *The Songs of Blind Folk: African American Musicians and the Cultures of Blindness* (University of Michigan Press, 2009), 94.

[9] The sense of awe that Kirk inspired in audiences through his playing of multiple instruments and his circular breathing is described by Garland-Thomson, with respect to performers with visible disabilities, as "the wondrous mode, [which] directs the viewer to look up in awe of difference." Quoted in Joseph N. Straus, *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 131.

[10] John Kruth, *Bright Moments: The Life and Legacy of Rahsaan Roland Kirk* (Welcome Rain Publishers, 2000), 275, and Robert P. Woods, "An Eternal Bright Moment: Rahsaan Lives," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 4, 1978.

people understand creativity in a person with disabilities is through the notion of "divine inspiration."[11]

PERFORMING GENDER

Sherrie Tucker has long advocated for a jazz studies where scholars use "big ears," listening for gender, along with other social categories like sexuality and race, to gain a richer understanding of the music and its practitioners.[12] As a Black man with a disability, Kirk presents an opportunity to examine several social categories as parts of a whole that work together and are contingent on one another. I will show how listening for disability, gender, sexuality, and race can provide a more nuanced view of Kirk and his music by exploring how he navigates these categories as part of his larger performance persona.

Kirk's comments on the 1972 television program *Soul!* demonstrate the inseparability of disability and gender from his identity. In an interview with Ellis Haizlip that introduced viewers to Kirk before his performance, Kirk discussed the indignities of being treated as inferior, describing some insulting situations he encountered in his daily life:

> If I'm with someone, they'll ask the person, "Does he want this?" or… "Can he pick up his drink, to drink it?" and things like this, you know. In other words, instead of talking right to me, they seem—[It's] fear, they seem like their eyes are telling them to talk to the person that's with me… I feel like it's a disrespect, to me, as a, being a man. 'Cause that's what I am, a man first, and a man that doesn't see too well, second… It's a superior thing, and it feels, it's just a drag. I have to constantly tell people, you know, like on airplanes, I get on with my saxophone case, you know. They're not sure

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[11] Straus, *Extraordinary Measures*, 6, 16-18. For more on Kirk's dream, see "My Gimmick?—Hard Work, Says Roland Kirk," *Crescendo*, October 1964. Kirk can be seen telling this story in a 1964 interview with BBC Television, where he refers to not just one dream, but "a whole lot of different dreams that I was having." *The Case of the Three Sided Dream*, directed by Adam Kahan (2014; Syndicado), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzelUgSdQ84. The dream also served as inspiration for some of Kirk's music, including as the overarching concept of the 1972 album *The Case of the 3 Sided Dream in Audio Color*, which demonstrates clear links between the dream and divine inspiration—the album opens and closes with an enactment of a conversation between Kirk and God, and features several dream sequences interspersed between tracks. The album only contains three sides of material, with the fourth side left blank, a form of disfigurement of the traditional double LP, and can thus be interpreted as another expression of disability. Rahsaan Roland Kirk, *The Case of the 3 Sided Dream in Audio Color*, Atlantic 8122765982, n.d. [1975], compact disc.

[12] Sherrie Tucker, "Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies," *Current Musicology* 71-73 (Spring 2001-Spring 2002).

> whether I'm strong enough to hold this case. One of these airline stewardesses feels like she wants to pick it up, you know. Well, that's, to me, it's taking away from *my*, you know, strength, that the man upstairs has given *me*.[13]

Kirk's identity as a man is clearly important to him here, but that identity is continually informed by his disability—not because of any internal conflict, but because others deny him his agency and autonomy by perceiving him as constantly in need of assistance.

Kirk is disturbed that people assume that because he "doesn't see too well," he also lacks physical strength—a quality that Kirk equates with masculinity and his sense of manhood (see especially his comments about "disrespect" and "being a man" in the quote above). The challenge to Kirk's masculinity is congruent with Garland-Thomson's work on disability and feminism, especially her contention that "the non-normate status accorded disability feminizes all disabled figures."[14] In her article "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," Garland-Thomson expands on this idea, noting that "Western thought has long conflated femaleness and disability, understanding both as defective departures from a valued standard." Adding race as another category, she later continues: "Female, disabled, and dark bodies are supposed to be dependent, incomplete, vulnerable, and incompetent bodies."[15] As a Black man, Kirk had to deal with oppression on multiple fronts. He was, of course, subject to the same abuse as other African Americans, but this was compounded by his disability. The fact that a waitress assumed that Kirk could not order on his own or pick up his drink, or that an airline stewardess saw him as unable to carry his own instrument, are clear examples of how Kirk's disability feminized and even infantilized him to others. In a 1966 interview, Kirk brought up another situation that illustrates how the denigration he endured was not only emasculating, but also dehumanizing: "People who can see have a funny way of addressing a blind person… In some restaurants they say, 'sit him down over there.' Like a dog."[16]

Kirk subverts such misinterpretations of his abilities by turning to traditional Western notions of masculinity, (over)performing his gender in ways that

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[13] Kirk, *Soul!*, 4:37-6:11.

[14] Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 9. The term "normate," coined by Garland-Thomson, refers to "the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them" (*Extraordinary Bodies*, 8).

[15] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 4th ed., ed. Lennard J. Davis (Routledge, 2013), 337-338.

[16] "Roland Kirk: Modern One-Man Band," *Ebony*, May 1966.

conform to society's expectations of manliness. Many of the ways in which Kirk performs disability can also be understood as performances of masculinity, showing how the two categories are intertwined. First, Kirk cultivates a tough and imposing presence while playing three saxophones simultaneously. Playing so many instruments together obviously requires strength and great physical dexterity. Kirk's three saxophones most likely weighed a total of fifteen pounds, probably even more with the French horn bell on his stritch.[17] This is not including the flute, which usually rested inside the bell of his tenor sax, or all the other instruments he hung around his neck or picked up periodically to play, such as the recorder or clarinet. By holding up all these instruments together, Kirk presents himself as having considerable strength and skill, consequently challenging the helplessly weak figure perceived by the airline stewardess or waitress from the incidents he described.

Kirk must have also had incredible lung capacity to be able to move so much air through three instruments, especially because of the remarkably powerful sound he was able to produce.[18] Again, strength plays an important role here. To be able to play in that manner without resorting to short phrases, Kirk employed the circular breathing technique, which became crucial to his musical aesthetic.[19] Although there is nothing inherently masculine about circular breathing, Kirk presented his circular breathing abilities as quasi-Herculean feats of strength by staging what he called "breath-a-thons."[20] Through these events, Kirk linked his circular breathing to athletic ability, drawing attention to his strength and stamina by comparing himself to a long-distance runner. Like an athlete, Kirk attempted to set a world record in his discipline while playing

[17] A 1928 ad for a Buescher straight alto saxophone (this is the instrument that Kirk renamed the stritch) lists its weight as 5lbs 3oz, http://www.saxpics.com/buescher/truetone/straight-altonsoprano.htm. The 1927 King saxophone catalog lists the King saxello (which Kirk renamed the manzello) with a weight of 2 lbs 4.5oz, while the 1963 King catalog lists the King Super-20 tenor saxophone (just for reference, as I'm not sure what kind of tenor Kirk played) with a weight of 7lbs 4oz, https://www.hnwhite.com/saxophonepage.

[18] This power is on display, for example, in the first part of the theme to the "Inflated Tear." Roland Kirk, *The Inflated Tear*, Atlantic 81227 3614-2, 2002 [1968], compact disc.

[19] I do not mean to oversimplify Kirk's circular breathing by focusing on his powerful sound. More than anything, Kirk used the technique for phrasing, whether loud or soft, and used it equally when playing only one instrument, including the flute. In addition, Kirk said that what he did was different than circular breathing; he referred to his system as "'Spherical Breathing,'" and claimed that he could breathe through his ears. Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 277. Kirk draws attention to this aspect of his playing in the titles of his pieces, such as "Breath-A-Thon" and "One Breath Beyond." Rahsaan Roland Kirk, "Breath-A-Thon," *Root Strata*; Rahsaan Roland Kirk, "One Breath Beyond," *Prepare Thyself to Deal with a Miracle*, Atlantic SD 1640, 1973, LP.

[20] Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 278-279.

at Ronnie Scott's jazz club in London in the early 1970s; he apparently played for two hours and twenty-one minutes without taking a single breath. (Unfortunately, the officials for the Guinness Book of World Records did not show up for the occasion.[21]) The concept of the breath-a-thon was the basis for the 1973 album *Prepare Thyself to Deal with a Miracle*, which was recorded soon after the Ronnie Scott's date. Although circular breathing is not easy to master, Kirk was not the only musician who utilized this skill. As a purely musical tool, he did not have to draw attention to it, but he instead insisted that he was doing something spectacular, possibly even heroic and miraculous (as indicated by his title for that particular album). So, there is certainly an air of hypermasculinity about the way he promoted this ability, and his fans seem to have perceived it that way as well. Kirk's biographer John Kruth describes Kirk's circular breathing in clearly gendered terms: "Ian Anderson's song title 'Locomotive Breath' might be the perfect metaphor for Rahsaan's… technique. When you see Kirk with a full head of steam and the pistons pounding in his chest you might have to wonder if you weren't about to be flattened by a runaway human express."[22]

Just in case playing so many instruments and performing breath-a-thons was too subtle a display of strength for some audiences, Kirk put on a physical show of brute force that became a part of several performances in the 1970s, including the performance on *Soul!* At the end of his spiritual rendition of "Old Rugged Cross," Kirk's sidemen play chaotically while he proceeds to pick up a chair and bang it against the floor to destroy it. On other occasions, such as at the 1972 Montreux Jazz Festival, the chairs were made of wood, and Kirk could dispose of them relatively quickly.[23] But the metal frame of this chair posed a special

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[21] Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 278-279. For reference, the world record for holding the longest pitch on a saxophone through circular breathing is 47 minutes 5.5 seconds, which is far from Kirk's apparent 141 minutes. Further, Kirk didn't just play a single note. As Ronnie Scott remembered, "Kirk 'displayed tremendous stamina, while at the same time making absolutely valid music.'" Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 279. In any case, the category was discontinued by Guinness because circular breathing was deemed too dangerous, since it "can stop oxygen getting into the brain and can even lead to death." Vicki Newman, "Why Record-Breaking 47-Minute Saxophone Note Is Too Dangerous to Outdo," Guinness World Records, April 28, 2023, https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2023/4/why-record-breaking-47-minute-saxophone-note-is-too-dangerous-to-outdo-745398.

[22] Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 277.

[23] Rahsaan Roland Kirk, *The One Man Twins* (1972; Rhino Home Video, 1996), VHS, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqCCo1bDhj4. The chair breaking at Montreux took place at the end of "Volunteered Slavery." Several of Kirk's sidemen and acquaintances, including Robert Shy, the drummer at both the Montreux and *Soul!* dates, recall that the chair-breaking spectacle was a regular part of Kirk's performances at the time. See Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 166-168.

problem. Kirk would not be deterred. After trying for about forty seconds to break the chair, Kirk unzips a bag that hangs on his shoulder and reaches for something sharp. Once he rips into the fabric cushion attached to the chair, he begins working on removing the fabric and, using his hands, legs, and feet, eventually pulls out the entire cushion. The crowd cheers in excitement as Kirk holds up the cushion victoriously. After banging the cushion on the ground a few more times, he makes quick work of the chair's backrest. Kirk then goes back to slamming the remaining metal frame against the stage for another twenty seconds, bangs on a gong several times, then blows a conch shell in triumph as the crowd gives him a standing ovation.[24] Altogether, the chair-destroying portion of the piece lasted three minutes.[25]

Artist Danilo Jans emphasized the simultaneously superhuman, hypermasculine, and freakish elements of Kirk's persona in a fantastical cover-art image for a bootleg reissue of a 1962 performance at the Newport Jazz Festival.[26] On the right side of this black and white image, we see a giant-sized Kirk towering over the buildings of a city while playing his three horns. Just in front of him, Godzilla crushes a train with his sharp teeth as he stands over a pile of mangled train tracks and other wreckage. In this scene, adapted from the 1956 film *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!*, Kirk is at once a monster and superhero.[27] The image is reminiscent of Godzilla's many on-screen battles with the likes of King Kong and Mothra. Perhaps in Jans's version, Kirk will vanquish Godzilla by pitting his breathing abilities and the powerful sound of his three horns against Godzilla's famous atomic breath. Jans's adaptation illustrates how we can benefit from considering how Kirk simultaneously navigates both gender and disability by conforming to or subverting dominant stereotypes in his performances. In everyday life, Kirk was subject to forms of discrimination routinely faced by people with disabilities, but when he could control the narrative as a performer, Kirk became a larger-than life, heroic figure, capable of

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[24] As Gayle Wald observes, Kirk's chair-breaking spectacle in *Soul!* also evokes civil-right-era riots and political protests, as well as the destruction of instruments by counterculture icons like Jimi Hendrix. See Gayle Wald, *It's Been Beautiful:* Soul! *and Black Power Television* (Duke University Press, 2015), 122-127.

[25] Trombonist Dick Griffin recalls other occasions when Kirk fought with a chair for up to twenty minutes. Griffin remembers Kirk trying to break a chair for fifteen minutes on *Soul!*, but he must have been referring to a different occasion, since Griffin did not perform on the show (Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 166).

[26] Danilo Jans, album cover art for *Roland Kirk, Newport Jazz Festival, 1962*, Rock Rare Collection Fetish. Image available at https://it.pinterest.com/pin/574631233686446981/.

[27] The original image from the film can be found at https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/radioactive-monster-godzilla-stomps-through-a-city-and-eats-news-photo/3471215.

destroying the assumptions and stigmas that often follow people with disabilities.

SEXUALITY AND RACE

Kirk's performance of gender at times invokes longstanding stereotypes of Black men in the United States. A good example is Kirk's spoken commentary in his political protest song "Volunteered Slavery" (1969), which presents the contemporaneous United States as a modern system of slavery that is an outgrowth of the past, where materialism, greed, money, and power are like "an invisible whip" that drives society.[28] While the band sings the theme in unison—"Oh, volunteered slavery is something that we all know"—in the background we hear rattling bells and tambourine jingles, which depict the sound of an enslaved person's chains (0:51). Kirk responds with a defiant energy: "Get them chains outta here, boy! I'm gonna get outta them chains!" Created by one of the most politically outspoken musicians in jazz, the song is clearly a product of the civil rights and Black Power movements. However, Kirk also takes this performance as an opportunity to assert his masculinity and heterosexuality by continuing with a message that exudes macho bravado: "If you want to know how it is to be free, women… you got to spend all day in bed with me, oh, yeah!" Taken in context with the rest of the song, the associations Kirk makes between sex and freedom bring to mind some of bell hooks's thoughts on masculinity in the civil rights era. As hooks notes, in this era "sex becomes the ultimate playing field, where the quest for freedom can be pursued in a world that denies black males access to other forms of liberating power."[29] This idea becomes doubly compounded with Kirk, who was denied power not only as a Black man, but also as a man with a disability.

At the same time, Kirk's suggestion that women spend all day in bed with him as a way to find true freedom could be related to the "Bed-ins for Peace" of Yoko Ono and John Lennon, which took place during two separate weeks at the end of March and end of May, 1969, not long before "Volunteered Slavery" was recorded in July.[30] The connections between Kirk's remarks in his protest song and Ono and Lennon's widely publicized protests against the Vietnam war may

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[28] Liner notes to Roland Kirk, *Volunteered Slavery*, Atlantic 8122731732, n.d. [1969], compact disc.

[29] hooks, *We Real Cool*, 74.

[30] Jonathan Harris, "'Bed-in' as *Gesamtkunstwerk*: A Typical Morning in the Quest for World Peace," in *The Utopian Globalists: Artists of Worldwide Revolution, 1919–2009* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 212-217.

seem like just an interesting coincidence.[31] However, Kirk makes a strong musical reference to the Beatles by interpolating the second part of "Hey Jude," what Alan Pollack refers to as "the Jamming Phrase," into his improvisation.[32] The reference is not a typical quotation that is integrated seamlessly and quickly into an ongoing improvisation, a common practice among jazz musicians. Rather, Kirk plays the melody three times (from 3:18 to 4:09) during the extended vamp section that follows the statement of the "Volunteered Slavery" head. Although the connection to the "Bed-ins" could have been made in solidarity with Ono and Lennon's non-violent form of protest, it is also possible that Kirk was taking a jab at Lennon (who did not actually have sex with Ono during the protest, as some mistakenly expected) and white male sexuality more generally by drawing attention to his (the Black man's) sexual superiority.

The hypersexualized image that Kirk presents in "Volunteered Slavery" perpetuates the stereotype of the Buck, which Michele Wallace identifies as a man who is "brutal, violent, virile, tough, strong—and finds white women especially appealing…. [The Buck] is the personification of the black threat to white womanhood and, more importantly, to white male authority and dominance."[33] Given that this is the Black stereotype that was most threatening to a white patriarchal society, Kirk's message in "Volunteered Slavery," which emerged during a time of great political upheaval, is a defiant stance against the injustice and oppression suffered by African Americans. Kirk's performance also resonates with Wallace's observation that the civil rights and Black Power movements were not only about equal rights and freedom for African Americans, but also about the Black man reclaiming his manhood:

> There was more to the protest and furor of the sixties and seventies than an attempt to correct the concrete problems of black people. The real key was the carrot the white man had held just beyond the black man's nose for many generations, that imaginary resolution of all the black man's woes and discontent, something called manhood. It was the pursuit of manhood that stirred the collective imagination of the masses of blacks in this country and led them to almost turn America upside down.[34]

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[31] Lennon and Ono's protests were more broadly a call for world peace based on what they referred to as the "'power of love'" (also synonymous with sex). Harris, "'Bed-in' as *Gesamtkunstwerk*," 213, 217. Thank you to the anonymous reviewer of this article for pointing out this possible connection.

[32] Alan W. Pollack, "Notes on 'Hey Jude,'" "*Notes On" Series* no. 14.1, 2000, The "Official" rec.music.beatles Home Page, https://www.recmusicbeatles.com/public/files/awp/hj-1.html.

[33] Wallace, *Black Macho*, 25.

[34] Wallace, *Black Macho*, 33.

Kirk's presentation of a sexually aggressive persona, then, can also be seen as an affirmation of his identity as a Black man, standing in solidarity with his fellow Black men on the political front lines.

On March 28, 1968, a year before Kirk recorded "Volunteered Slavery," Black men participated in a march led by Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike, holding up signs that read "I Am a Man." As Steve Estes notes, this slogan was a response to the then current and historical denial of Black manhood, as well as an overall call for Black people to be treated with dignity and humanity.[35] In their speeches, King and other strike leaders called attention to the emasculation of men caused by low wages, which did not allow them to fulfill their gender-expected roles as familial providers.[36] They also reacted against the treatment of Black men as "boys." Bill Lucy, a high-ranking leader of the workers' union, drew attention to the paternalism exhibited by Memphis mayor Henry Loeb, saying "He's treating you like children, and this day is over because you are men and must stand together as men and demand what you want."[37] These concerns echo the feelings expressed by Kirk during his 1972 interview with Haizlip, in which he discussed the child-like treatment he commonly experienced, and expressed his desire to be treated as "a man first." Again, Kirk's emphasis on his sexuality in "Volunteered Slavery" can be interpreted not only as a reaction to his own experiences as a blind Black man, but as a broader assertion of manhood for all Black men that acted in dialogue with events like the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike. As Dick Griffin recalled, Kirk "was a rebel and always conscious of the civil rights movement."[38]

Another example of Kirk using sexual references is heard in his spoken introduction to "Here Comes the Whistleman" (1965), a political work that is a critique on the complacency of American society—"what we do every day in America [is] whistle, you know, make things happy, pretend that we're happy."[39] To go along with his whistling of the tune, Kirk hands out whistles for audience members to blow during the performance. His instructions for when to blow the instruments are clearly amusing for his listeners: "When I get the climax built up in your mind [laughter from audience]… You know, when I come in on the saxophone and the spirit hits you… It's just like making love… whenever you

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[35] Steve Estes, *I Am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 131-132. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer of this article for bringing to my attention the similarities between the concerns raised by Kirk and the demands of Black men during the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike.

[36] Estes, *I Am a Man!*, 138-139.

[37] Estes, *I Am a Man!*, 136.

[38] Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 166.

[39] Roland Kirk, *Here Comes the Whistleman*, Atlantic SD 3007, 1967, LP.

feel it, let it go, you know [more laughter]." Although these remarks are slightly more subtle than those in "Volunteered Slavery," Kirk still presents himself as an individual with sexual experience, which, again, functions to assert his masculinity and at the same time pushes back against dominant notions that view people with disabilities as asexual.[40] This aspect of Kirk's performances may also be related to demonstrating Black authenticity in order to maintain a certain appeal for white audiences. As Ingrid Monson notes,

> African American performers have frequently been caught in a bind with respect to self-presentation, for the image of 'unabashed badness' and sexual transgression has sold extremely well in the twentieth century, thanks in part to white fascination with it. Male jazz musicians have not infrequently enjoyed their reputations for virility and have constructed accounts of themselves that play into the market for this image and its transgressive aspects.[41]

MASCULINIZING THE FLUTE

Kirk's flute playing is a particularly rich site for examining his performances of gender and sexuality. It is not by coincidence that the flute, an instrument historically coded feminine, is not as pervasive in jazz as some other wind instruments. In Kirk's time, many male jazz musicians performed on instruments that allowed them to execute the supposedly "manly" aspects of jazz well, especially playing with a loud, strong, and even aggressive sound. As Tucker and Suzuki have noted, the gendered implications of instruments were real for women as well, with female saxophone or trumpet players often assumed to be lesbians because they played a "masculine" instrument.[42]

Although the piano is a standard part of the jazz rhythm section, some musicians in the early days of jazz worried about being labeled as homosexuals

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[40] As Linton, Rueda, and Williams note, "People with disabilities are commonly perceived as 'asexual,' and if they exhibit sexual behavior, it is often viewed as less acceptable, unsafe, or inappropriate." Kristen Faye Linton, Heidi Adams Rueda, and Lela Rankin Williams, *Disability, Intimacy, and Sexual Health: A Social Work Perspective* (NASW Press, 2017), 8. See also Allison Leadley, ed., *Theorizing Sex and Disability: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2016), vii-viii.

[41] Ingrid Monson, "The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 419.

[42] See Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Duke University Press, 2000), 21-23, and Yoko Suzuki, "Gender, Sexuality, and Jazz Saxophone Performance," in *The Routledge Companion to Jazz and Gender*, ed. James Reddan, Monika Herzig, and Michael Kahr (Routledge, 2022), 159-161.

because they played the piano—an instrument linked to domesticity and femininity. Jeffrey Taylor describes how early jazz pianists "developed a highly competitive, hypermasculine subculture of 'ticklers' or 'professors'," in which pianists showcased their virtuosity in competition against each other during cutting contests. Taylor suggests that this subculture may have come about from "the fact that many early ragtime and jazz pianists were gay," citing that drummer Harry Dial recalled that even straight pianists "were called 'mother' because of the stereotype of their sexuality." Earl Hines apparently adopted the nickname "Fatha" to counter this narrative.[43] In describing the competitive environment of 1940s bebop, David Ake writes that even earlier, New Orleans jazz musicians were concerned with "displaying a hearty and unambiguous heterosexual masculinity," and notes that when Jelly Roll Morton started playing the piano, he worried about being associated with "those of 'questionable' tendencies" due to his choice of instrument.[44]

Some musicians may have had similar feelings about playing the flute. Herbie Mann, who had a long and lucrative career as a flute player, expressed concern regarding the associations between loud, exuberant performance and masculinity. Rather than looking up to other jazz flutists, Mann credited Miles Davis with showing him that the flute could be a jazz instrument. In Mann's opinion, Davis exuded masculinity while simultaneously displaying vulnerability through his trumpet. "The attraction of Miles to me as a flutist," Mann said, "was that he could be masculine, could communicate strong feeling with his horn and still be subtle and rarely sound beyond the volume level of the flute. He proved you don't have to yell and scream on your instrument to project feeling."[45] Mann's thinking demonstrates that he associated the flute with feminine qualities and needed someone like Davis to validate his choice of instrument.

Kirk used many kinds of sounds and instruments, so it's no surprise that he would add the flute to his palette of sonic possibilities. But given his disability and his struggles to be respected as a man, it seems that his unique brand of flute playing was a way, at least in part, to counteract the strong associations of the instrument with femininity. Kirk's flute work, then, provides a rich site for understanding how his performance of disability intersects with his gender and sexuality. The characteristics that make his flute sound anomalous (at least

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[43] Jeffrey Taylor, "With Lovie and Lil: Rediscovering Two Chicago Pianists of the 1920s," in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, ed. Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker (Duke University Press, 2008), 55-56.

[44] David Ake, "Regendering Jazz: Ornette Coleman and the New York Scene in the Late 1950s," in *Jazz Cultures* (University of California Press, 2002), 66-67.

[45] Cited in Hazel V. Carby, "Playin' the Changes," in *Race Men* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 156.

relative to the more typical sound of a classical flutist or other jazz flutists) can also be considered reflections of Kirk's masculinity, in addition to being sonic markers of disability. In particular, the aggressive nature of Kirk's flute playing, especially his grunting and screaming into the instrument, is a far cry from the gentle, quiet, and delicate sound that most audiences come to expect from the flute. In contrast to Mann, who didn't want to "yell and scream," Kirk literally did just that, formulating a flute technique that utilized sounds that better conformed to the masculine-coded expectations of jazz.

I don't mean to suggest that Kirk's playing stems exclusively from a disability or gender/sexuality perspective. His use of unorthodox sounds and extended techniques must also be informed by the performance practices of the jazz avant-garde of the 1960s. "Rip, Rig, and Panic" (1965), for example, features out-of-time opening and closing sections along with multiphonics, flutter tonguing, extreme dissonances, honks, and altissimo-register screams played on the tenor saxophone, as well as breaking glass and a siren that are a reference to the music of Edgard Varèse.[46] We hear similar elements in the free introduction to "Parisian Thoroughfare" (1968), recorded at a session led by Jaki Byard, who was also the pianist in "Rip, Rig, and Panic."[47] Still, examining Kirk's sound through the lens of disability, gender, and sexuality can add nuance to our interpretation of his performances.

Kirk's spoken commentaries in "Volunteered Slavery" and the introduction to "Here Comes the Whistleman" no doubt influenced the way audiences interpreted his music as gendered and sexual. Writing about "Volunteered Slavery," Kruth takes Kirk's comments to women as markers of the music itself, describing Kirk's tenor sax as "ballsy," and the "thrusting, muscular backbeat" as "strong and sexy."[48] Yet, in his flute work we can hear how Kirk performs gender and sexuality through entirely musical means. A particularly good example is Kirk's 1968 Newport Jazz Festival performance of "Three for the Festival," a piece that Kirk returned to continually throughout his career as a showcase for his unparalleled abilities on the flute.[49] Using this tour-de-force to close out his

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[46] Roland Kirk, *Rip, Rig, and Panic*, EmArcy 832 164-2, 1990 [1965], compact disc. For an analysis of "Rip, Rig, and Panic," as well as the piece's connections to Varèse, see Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 121-123.

[47] Jaki Byard, "Parisian Thoroughfare," *The Jaki Byard Experience*, Prestige OJCCD-1913-2 (P-7615), 1998 [1968], compact disc. Another example of Kirk's avant-garde playing, this time on clarinet, is heard in "Salvation and Reminiscing" (1973), which also features the breaking glass sound heard in "Rip, Rig, and Panic." Kirk, *Prepare Thyself*.

[48] Kruth, *Bright Moments*, 263-264.

[49] Kirk, *Volunteered Slavery*.

set, Kirk begins the piece by playing the twelve-bar theme on his three saxophones, though he curiously grunts after each short phrase. When the rhythmic activity of the theme increases in the third chorus, his grunting increases in frequency and intensity as well. Although they might seem extraneous to the music, these grunts are related to the sounds that we hear from Kirk later in the piece. After a quick twelve-bar piano solo by Ron Burton, Kirk continues with a flute improvisation that draws on the various extended techniques he used on the instrument. He begins with short, repetitive phrases after which he takes very loud and deep breaths, making it seem like he's working unusually hard for a solo that has only just begun. He continues in this vein during his second chorus, though now playing longer melodic lines. During the third and fourth choruses, with the rhythm section playing in stop time, Kirk adds humming to his improvised melodies while he continues his heavy breathing. When the rhythm section drops out in the fifth chorus, Kirk continues his solo with key clicks, but keeps up the heavy breathing, now constant though quieter to allow the soft sound of the keys to come through. This is peculiar, since all Kirk needs to do to produce the desired sound is to move his fingers; there's no need for him to even blow through the instrument, and much less to breathe in an exaggerated manner. It sounds as if he's tired, perhaps catching his breath from exerting himself too much—but this is someone who had the stamina to play for hours without taking a breath. Loud bursts of air and even laughter lead into screams from the end of the fifth into the sixth chorus. As Kirk's screaming intensifies, we hear a high-pitched scream lasting two measures (mm. 5-6 of chorus 6, at 1:38), then a lower-pitched moan (m. 7) that turns into Kirk exclaiming what sounds like "Oh, yeah, God!" before continuing with a kind of speaking-while-playing flute style and finishing the solo in the next chorus.

At this point, it becomes apparent that what Kirk has been doing all along is a musical depiction of a sexual act. From the beginning of the piece until the climax of his solo soon after his "Oh, yeah, God!" cry, the musical sounds on the flute, along with the heavy breathing and screaming, are increasingly sexualized. Kirk here seems to be musically acting out his comments from his introduction to "Here Comes the Whistleman," correlating musical intensity and climax with sexual climax. The laughter from the audience during the "Three for the Festival" climax suggests that they appreciate what Kirk has done. Bert Stratton homed in on this aspect of Kirk's performances. In an article from 1970 entitled "Roland Kirk: 'High Energy' Jazz and Sex," he draws attention to what he perceives as a strong sexual energy in Kirk's work, including the album

Volunteered Slavery and the Newport performance of "Three for the Festival."[50] Stratton sees Kirk's music as "the embodiment of his extreme horniness. What else could one expect from a guy who dreams of playing three saxophone shaped instruments all at the same time?" Here, Stratton is partly referring to the phallic imagery of the saxophone, especially the stritch, which is so long that it almost touches Kirk's feet. More significantly, Stratton gives Kirk's sexual commentary on "Volunteered Slavery," as well as the "whole line of obscenities, spoken" and played through his flute in "Three for the Festival," as evidence of his "condition," making it seem as though Kirk's sexuality is a psychological abnormality. In this case, it seems that Stratton is drawing a connection to Kirk's blindness by framing his (performed) sexuality as a disability. For Stratton, the sexual energy in Kirk's music is so palpable that it extends to the listener. Referring to the entire album *Volunteered Slavery*, Stratton challenges the reader to "put on either side of the record, and see how many times you can play through it before you have to switch on Judy Collins to cool yourself down. It's a valid measure of your sexual potency."[51] Although Stratton advocates for Kirk's music, he also paints Kirk as the embodiment of the Buck stereotype by highlighting and sensationalizing his sexuality.

MUSICAL AUTONOMY AND THE ONE-MAN BAND

Finally, I'd like to turn to Kirk's ability to perform as a one-man band, another aspect of his work that demonstrates how the categories of disability and gender can be examined together to provide a fruitful analysis. Although most of Kirk's performances can be considered a one-man band, *Natural Black Inventions: Root Strata* (1971) foregrounds Kirk's skills at playing a multitude of instruments and musical parts simultaneously, including melody, harmony, and rhythmic accompaniment, with minimal involvement from other musicians. On the album cover, we see this message: "YOU MUST READ THE BACK OF THIS ALBUM." In the liner notes, Joel Dorn draws attention to Kirk's performance, emphasizing that while Joe Texidor and Maurice McKinley occasionally play various percussion instruments, "Kirk plays all other instruments simultaneously. Everything that you hear was done live, at one time, in a recording studio. There are no overdubs, no gimmicks, and no electronic effects. Rahsaan is the only musician in the world who is capable of doing this. At times he sounds like a quartet—other times, like a trio—and on other selections in the LP it is hard to define what size group it is because there are so

[50] Stratton, "'High Energy' Jazz and Sex."
[51] Stratton, "'High Energy' Jazz and Sex."

many things happening at once."[52] Even for fans familiar with Kirk's talents, the number and variety of instruments listed on the album is impressive: "Kirk plays tenor sax, stritch, manzello, B Flat & E Flat clarinets, flute, black puzzle flute, black mystery pipes, harmonium, piccolo, bass drum, thundersheet, sock cymbal, bells, music box, palms, tympani, gong and applies the use of bird sounds."[53]

In this display of near-total musical autonomy, Kirk shares a strong kinship with another blind musician, Stevie Wonder. There are interesting parallels between both men, who present themselves as autonomous in similar ways through their music. Will Fulton has shown how, through the use of multitrack recording, Stevie Wonder's albums from the early 1970s showcase Wonder as a "technological one-man band," as he plays all instruments and sings all vocal lines simultaneously, with only the help of his coproducers (and some additional musicians in a few cases) to assist in the creation of the music.[54] Just as Dorn emphasized in the liner notes to *Root Strata* that "with a few exceptions… Kirk is the only musician on this album," the notes to Wonder's *Music of My Mind* are surprisingly similar, stating that the album and all of the sounds heard in it are "virtually the work of one man. All the songs are composed, arranged and performed by Stevie Wonder [excepting a guitar solo and a trombone solo]… on piano, drums, harmonica, organ, clavichord, clavinet, and Arp and Moog Synthesizers. The sounds themselves come from inside his mind. The man is his own instrument. The instrument is an orchestra."[55] As Fulton suggests, the purpose of these statements is to make audiences "revel in Wonder's genius," which is clearly also the goal of the liner notes from *Root Strata*.[56]

Wonder's and Kirk's performances as one-man bands can be interpreted as being rooted in a will to self-determination, or a "quest for personal agency and creative autonomy," as Fulton argues, that can be seen as a "response to the constant 'specter of dependency' that [they] faced as… blind musician[s]."[57] These ideas resonate alongside Kirk's comments on *Soul!* (previously discussed), where he talked about feeling "disrespect[ed]… as a man" by others who denied him his agency and humanity by perceiving him as weak, helpless, and constantly

[52] Joel Dorn, liner notes to *Root Strata*. Dorn does not acknowledge Sonelius Smith, who plays piano on "Day Dream."
[53] Dorn, liner notes to *Root Strata.*
[54] Will Fulton, "Stevie Wonder's Tactile Keyboard Mediation, Black Key Compositional Development, and the Quest for Creative Autonomy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, ed. Blake Howe et al. (Oxford University Press, 2016), 272, 278.
[55] Stevie Wonder, *Music of My Mind* (Tamla T314L).
[56] Fulton, "Wonder's Tactile Keyboard Mediation," 282.
[57] Fulton, "Wonder's Tactile Keyboard Mediation," 281-282.

in need of assistance. In *Root Strata*, Kirk uses his musical skills to push back against people's misconceptions regarding his abilities as a blind man.[58]

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the intersections among gender, sexuality, race, and disability in Kirk's music, arguing that his performances not only served as sites for expressing his identity as a blind Black man, but allowed him to contend with a world that dehumanized him on multiple levels. As we have seen, Kirk's disability and his performances of gender are closely related. He conformed to and subverted dominant stereotypes of Black masculinity and disability as a response to the way he was often perceived by others—as weak and helpless. Kirk not only had to navigate a world that feminizes people with disabilities, but he worked within an art form that has always been dominated by men and has been riddled with toxic masculinity and misogyny, with men often bragging about their sexual conquests and treating women as objects.[59] Many of the music's characteristics that are prized by musicians and listeners are associated with masculinity: improvisations that showcase virtuosity, agility, and speed, even in tunes with slow tempos; improvising through complex chord changes (also called "running the changes," as if the musicians were running a hurdle race); playing loudly; and being able to reach the highest notes possible. Kirk's music conformed to all these expectations, but he further masculinized his performances by performing on multiple instruments simultaneously, circular breathing, and even breaking chairs on stage, presenting an image of strength and stamina. Along with his performance of gender, Kirk also drew attention to his sexuality through spoken comments within his music, as well as in his flute playing. The ways that Kirk performs sexuality are intricately related to his disability and his identity as a Black man, as he pushes back against notions of disabled people as weak and asexual by conforming to dominant stereotypes that see Black men as sexual, virile, strong, and aggressive. These aspects of Kirk's performances led to the perception of his music as gendered and sexual, as demonstrated especially by Stratton's comments regarding Kirk's album

[58] While the album can be considered an affirmation of Kirk's disability and manhood, it is also a musical expression of his racial identity. As he writes in the liner notes, the album presents the "sounds that are part of my life—my black experience." Rahsaan Roland Kirk, liner notes to *Root Strata*.

[59] See, for example, the autobiographies of Miles Davis and Charles Mingus, which often include graphic details regarding their own sex lives as well as those of other musicians. Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe, *Miles: The Autobiography* (Simon & Schuster, 1989). Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog: His World as Composed by Mingus* (Vintage Books, 1991).

Volunteered Slavery. Overall, taking disability, gender, sexuality, and race not as discrete, unrelated social categories, but as significant parts of Kirk's identity that are closely intertwined, helps us better understand this musician and his music.

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