

Body and Soul: An Interview with Andrew Cyrille

Interview conducted by Rob Wallace

Transcribed by Elizabeth Johnstone

Edited by Paul Watkins

RW: Well, without further ado...

Like some of you here, I suspect, the first time I heard Andrew Cyrille was on the groundbreaking Cecil Taylor recording. Did I just say Cecil? See, I'm in Canada now, so my American accent is getting more British.on the Cecil Taylor albums, *Conquistador* and *Unit Structures*. But he has had a long, and continuing, and you will see tonight, still very transformative music career which continues to inspire. Those early Cecil Taylor albums also featured Henry Grimes, who he'll be performing with tonight, and along with Jane Bunnett, the great Canadian saxophonist. And that's at 11:30 tonight, by the way, if you don't know yet.

Professor Cyrille hails from my favourite city on the east coast of the United States: Brooklyn. He attended the Julliard and Hartnett schools of music and worked with an amazing list of people in the jazz and improvised music field, including Mary Lou Williams, Coleman Hawkins, Illinois Jacquet, Kenny Dorham, Freddie Hubbard, Walt Dickerson, Babatunde Olatunji, and, of course, from the mid-sixties to seventies, the important collaboration with Cecil Taylor.

Apropos to this conference, which has been about bodies and improvisation, he's also had a very long collaborative relationship with dancers and choreographers, and maybe we can talk about that in a minute. He is the recipient of numerous grants: Meet the Composer, the Rockefeller Foundation, and an Arts International award to perform with his quintet in Accra, Ghana in West Africa. In 1999, Dr. Cyrille received the Guggenheim Fellowship for composition. So we could go on, but I really feel that especially as drummers we rarely have the spotlight so we need to hear what this man has done. It's really amazing.

So, this year's Guelph Jazz Festival and Colloquium theme, as I mentioned, is "Improvising Bodies," and the framework for this interview, as they have it in the program, is "Body and Soul," which along with being a standard in the jazz canon, of course, is also the metaphorical theme of one of your solo drum pieces from a really great BYG actual record. And the piece is called "From Whence I Came." Since I am also a drummer, I thought I'd open our discussion by asking you... How has playing the instrument, the drum set, such a physical instrument, how has that influenced your own thinking and practice of making music?

AC: Well, that's a heavy question. Rhythm, for the most part, is the foundation of most music, and it begins with a certain kind of motion. Then you have a concept, and then you try to deliver that concept in some sort of a spiritual situation. So learning about the instrument first...you know, and trying to get my technique together...and I still do that...and with all the musicians, persons, that I've worked with, many of them have different concepts. So, one has to understand the concept and be able to solve the problems that the concepts present. And then, of course, as I said before, you try to deliver that in some sort of spiritual way to the listening audience, as well as to the musicians that you're playing with. So for me, it's a continuing way of life. It gives me something to get up to do every day. Now I feel as though being in this business—and I say

quote unquote “business” because sometimes it gets a little strange—but doing what it is that I do gives me a significance for life. It’s almost therapeutic in a lot of ways. Just to be able to play the instrument is a challenge. You know, drummers come from a different department, so to speak, from the other instrumentalists, the people who play horns, and the string players, and the keyboardists, because we use two hands and two feet. I think the only other instrumentalists that does that is an organ player; he uses both feet and fingers to play the instrument. So it’s always a challenge to be able to do one thing with one foot, another thing with another foot, another thing with my right hand, and another thing with my left hand. And if the computer up at the top is working, most of the time it turns out to be okay. You know, it’s a whole kind of existence and just being a musician, number one, is a great way of life; playing with the different people that I’ve played with is another great way of life, something that I appreciate very much; and, of course, the ability to do it. Of course, I thank the creator. But it’s something I don’t take for granted, and I have to work at it. Most people, who do what they do for a living, it’s mental and/or physical activity. So with the drums, and I guess the other instruments also, it’s also physical. I could go into some of the problems that other instrumentalists have....by playing maybe a horn some people get carpal tunnel. Piano players get carpal tunnel. Sometimes people get bursitis, etc. etc. So other than that, it’s something which is done very much for me in my life, and, of course, here I am in Guelph talking to you, being part of this great festival, and that’s another plus for me.

RW: Cecil Taylor has said that when you started playing with him that he encouraged you to think like a dancer. How did you interpret that?

AC: Well, that’s not quite accurate. He didn’t encourage me to think like a dancer. One of the times that we met he asked me “how did I think about playing.” And at that time I was playing for a number of dancers at a school called the June Taylor School of Dance. And if any of you can remember June Taylor was the choreographer for the Jackie Gleason show. So she had a school in Manhattan, at Broadway and 56th St., and there were a lot of young people at the time, and I was one of them, who would be at that school. Now I was at that school, not necessarily as a dancer but as an accompanist. So I used to play for people like Michael Bennett, who did *A Chorus Line*, as some of you might know. Every day—this was even before he did *Chorus Line*; he got the job for the choreography—I would play classes for him. And there was another young man there who was part of *West Side Story*. His name was Jamie Rogers. He was a fantastic dancer. And then there was Claude Thompson, who was another fine dancer. I think he had something to do with *Golden Boy*, in which Sammy Davis starred. And there were a number...Jo Jo Smith was there too...Herman Howell was another dancer...and there were a lot of people who would come to take the classes from these people. Paula Kelly the actress/dancer, she was there. Mercedes Ellington, as a matter of fact, who was Duke Ellington’s granddaughter. She was a dancer. There was Thelma Oliver, who did the movie *The Pawnbroker*. She wasn’t dancing in the movie, but she would come in and she was fantastic. So what I’m saying is that I had the opportunity to play for these people like a piano player would play for a dance class. I would have to invent or create some music that would get them to feel good about what they were doing. I remember Herman Howell saying to me one day, “Okay drummer, make my body move.” [audience laughs] So I had to think of something, some kind of rhythm that would make them want to dance. What would happen is I’d play the exercises—I would figure out rhythms to play for the exercises—and then they would do the choreography, and usually they

would ask me to play something. And I would invent some kind, or create some kind, of rhythm then, in maybe 4/4, 5/4, 7/4. And as long as it felt good to them, they would do a choreography to it. That was how the classes were set up: exercises and then choreography. So getting back to Cecil.... One day when we were together, he said, “Well how do you think of music? How do you think of playing drums?” And then I told him that I think of it through dance because I’d been working with dancers quite a bit. So that’s how that story came about in terms of what I thought about dance and Cecil Taylor. I would have to say this about the dance: the dance was something that really gave me an opportunity to play solos. I’m just talking about a drum solo. I learned how to put, let’s say, a concert together with just the trap set. So I would have all these different rhythms I could come up with as a result of knowing or remembering what I did for dancers. Dance being rhythm, and drums being rhythm, sometimes when I’m playing with another person, another musician, they may remind me of something that I did with the dance, or I could think of something that I did or could do through dancing. Oliver Lake has a piece called “Tap Dancer,” and when I play it—it really features the drums—so when I play the parts that are arranged for me, I think of a tap dancer. So the dance has been very, very important to me. And actually I would like to see more dance and music, live music, done together. I think it’s a great way for both elements of the population that support both music and dance to come together. A lot of times people learn to dance and they’re not that much into dance, or people are into music and they’re not that much into dance. So when they both come together you get a bonus, you get a two-for, you get something for the ear as well as something for the eye. With great dancers, to me, it’s almost like looking at the music physically as they do their choreography. That’s why I love the dance.

RW: Thank you. You mentioned Oliver Lake, and one of your recent projects is this Trio 3 group with Oliver Lake and Reggie Workman. We were talking just briefly before the interview of a recent performance you did in honor of the Mary Lou Williams centennial, with Jerry Allen. And you worked with Mary Lou Williams in the early sixties, is that correct?

AC: Yes, it had been the early sixties because that’s when I was up at Julliard, at that time...the music school.

RW: Maybe you could tell us a little bit about your experience with her, but also how do you think her legacy has changed over the years....because you’ve also been involved in performing her music subsequent to your time directly playing with her, and kind of keeping her music alive in a sense. How do you see her legacy now, in terms of the general public?

AC: That comes about by younger musicians playing the music that she had written. Mary Lou was always—how can I say—a person who was classical, and in that way I mean long-lasting. She started when she was a youngster. You know, they used to call her the piano girl, the little piano girl; she was playing parties, etc., when she was a kid. But then she did a lot of things with Andy Kirk and people of that generation back in the.....she was born 1910...so around 1920...’27....no, she would have been ten years old then. Maybe the late twenties, early thirties, she began playing with those big bands.

When I used to be with her for rehearsal or whatever—this is a long story, a larger story about Mary Lou and her foundation for musicians who were having problems... but anyway, when I would be with her sometimes and she’d sit down at the piano, a lot of the stuff that she

would play for me would be in stride. She'd play stride piano. A lot of that stride piano stuff came from people like Jelly Roll Morton and there was Eubie Blake, etc., and, of course, the guy who wrote the (singing) ba ba do doot da dee. [audience member calls out "Joplin"] Right, Joplin. So she studied a lot of that stuff and she always felt that it was really quite a formidable technique to learn. So she would play stride piano for me. And then she would talk about the swing situation, when she would be doing things with people like Benny Goodman. Then, she got into the bebop era with people like Dizzy Gillespie, and she used to laud Thelonious Monk, and talk about Bud Powell, and she liked people like Earl Garner. She was a very evolutionary person, until it got to the point whereby she did a concert with Cecil Taylor. I introduced both of them to each other in London, and then they formed a relationship, a musical relationship, and they did this concert at Carnegie Hall. I can't remember exactly the name of the recording. Mary Lou Williams, Cecil Taylor. [audience member calls out] Say that again. *Embraced*. That's right. Exactly. See, so she was always somebody who was searching and trying to find new things to play, new concepts, etc. So, insofar as her legacy is concerned...there is one [man]...his name is...the reverend...Peter O'Brien, and he's a Jesuit priest. He and Mary Lou had struck up a relationship some years before she passed away, and eventually what happened was Peter became the trustee of her foundation. As a result, he has a lot of her music, so he also would like for her music to be heard by more people, people of the younger generation today, and, of course, some of us who knew Mary Lou's music and would like to hear more of it. There's a lot of things that she wrote that perhaps have never been heard. And I'm saying a few things that might be a little off the mark, but I played with Jerry Allen not long ago at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and it was again—it was this year, for the centennial—for Mary Lou Williams. What we played there was the mass that Mary Lou wrote, before she died, for the Catholic Church. There was a choir of young people who sang. There was Carmon Lundy, who sang solo. There was the bass player...I can't remember his name right now. Jerry Allen and myself did the music of Mary Lou Williams for their presentation. And it was great.

So finally.....Kenny Davis, that's the bass player's name. So finally, I got an offer to do a week at this club in New York called Bird Land. And Trio 3, with Jerry Allen, had been there....I think this was our third year...so since this was the centennial of Mary Lou Williams I thought it would be a good idea to have Trio 3 plus Jerry Allen playing the music of Mary Lou Williams. So Father O'Brien, who had a number of compositions by Mary Lou, which either had never been heard or had been played some time in the past, gave them to us and we played them at the club. Now, in addition to that, there will be a recording coming out of those compositions on Intakt Records—it's a Swiss label—some time next year. We had a great time learning her music and playing it. So, in that regard, her legacy lives on because the music is going to be presented again. And the word "classical," to me, means long-lasting, and that's what she has presented and given to us. And I hope as many people as possible have the opportunity to hear the music.

RW: Well, that sense of "long-lasting" and classicality, as you described it, reminds me that I wanted to ask you about your own philosophy of teaching...because so much of the way that this music is translated to subsequent generations is through personal, oral instruction with masters such as yourself. So, do you have any sort of philosophy of teaching that you apply to your students in translating this knowledge?

AC: Well, number one, I'm not interested in clones. Most of the students that I have, whether they're private or in my classes at The New School, I would like for each of them to be able to find their own residences within, and be able to grow from within so that they can have something to say with their own philosophies. So even though I may give them material, the material is given to them so that they can perhaps train their minds to be able to think. And to me that's what an education is about. It's about the ability to think, and in a lot of ways to problem solve. So when I talk to them and I give them information, the information is given so that they can take it, absorb it, find some things in it for themselves and expand that in terms of what it is they would like to say. And, for the most part, that is what jazz, quote unquote, has been about since the time I was introduced to it. I remember being with drummers, like Max Roach and Philly Joe Jones, and the great Roy Haynes, and so many, and they would always say to me: you have to find your voice; you have to find something to say; you shouldn't be somebody who copies somebody else; you should be able to play something that represents you, something that you have to say. And of course, with it, that's a heavy order, so to speak. You know, you go out and you find your own philosophy, find what it is that you have to say with the music. So this is what I try to transfer to my students. I try to relay that to them. I remember one night being with Max Roach, and he had played at some club called *Smalls* up in Harlem. He had a great band with him that night. And he played, boy he played some drums. So after it was over I felt like I was washed. What can I play? So I went to Max, I said, "Look, Max..." I said, "Wow man, you played everything. Is there anything left?" He said, "No"... [laughing from the audience] BUT...he says, "No, I didn't play everything." He says, "There is other stuff that's out there that you have to find." So that's something that I absorbed and I think about to this day. So in a sense what I'm saying is that I also try to relay that to my students, to my classes.

RW: Wonderful. I think we have time maybe for one or two audience questions. If anyone would like to ask Professor Cyrille a question, please.....

AC: I know, see, people are always thinking. We all think all the time. We never stop. So I guess it's difficult sometimes....

Audience Member: I was asking one of the earlier panelists about what questions remain to be addressed—perhaps at next year's conference—[particularly about] the social impact of jazz. Is that something that you teach? Do you teach the social and political effects of jazz?

AC: Well, no. I don't necessarily get into politics so much, and social situations. There are many people who do that. There are classes for that. There is so much literature about the music. So if somebody really wants to find out about the history, it's not that I don't know anything about it or that I can't address, perhaps, some questions, but I don't do that in my classes. I tell people to go and get certain books that you can read and you can find out the history of this music. Sometimes I say, if you really want to know sometimes the history of a culture... Of course, today we have a lot of recordings and there's, of course, written music from Europe, and then, of course, there is the traditional music, word-of-mouth so to speak that's handed down in the cultures of African, India....and I'm quite sure Asia, like China, Japan...so I don't know if that stuff is really written in any sort of calligraphy as far as music is concerned. You know, you can almost visualize the history of a nation, country, a civilization, by the music

that's played. You think about the music, of course you think about jazz and the kind of stuff that they were playing back in the times of Jimmy Lunsford and Chick Webb and the people that used to go to the Savoy Ballroom to dance to the music. So that's a social situation that happened because of what was going on in society at that particular time. You don't see too many big bands going around now because of the expense. You have a few. But at one time there were a lot of big bands that played in venues in their localities simply because they were stationary. After World War II there was a problem, or during World War II there was a problem with transportation, etc., so the groups got smaller. So those are social situations that one could refer to. And you can go into it, into detail to find out why certain things were done, why they play certain kinds of musics in places like Cuba, and Haiti, and Jamaica, etc., because of the acculturation, so to speak, of the two cultures, the European and the African. See, there are things you can get into which really let you know what was going on with the people. At this time I don't have a class in that kind of teaching, teaching that kind of philosophy. It's usually about music.

RW: Okay, yes, Joe, one more question.

Audience member: You say...that your teaching mostly involves helping that student find their own voice as a musician...

AC: Right.

Audience member: [Continues] Can I assume that students that come to you have reached a certain proficiency on an instrument, that they've kind of got a language down and you help them find *them*? And if not, how do you help someone whose working on the basics do that in such a way that still allows them to be them?

AC: Well, the basics would simply be technique: how do you hold sticks, how do you get rolls, how do you play the rudiments, how do you get your independent coordination, as I was talking about before, two feet, two hands. So, yes, that's a way of pointing people in a certain direction. At this time, though, at The New School—and I teach at The New School University in New York—most of the students that come there, a lot of these men and women are practically professional, and they come there with a great deal of technique. So, as far as drums are concerned, most of them can play. They can play the material that's given to them. Now, of course, their not shaped and certain things are suggested, and so far as what they do, how they do it, how they can help each other, etc., how they could, should, listen to each other to make the music even better... I take beginners and I take people who are professionals who would like to get a broader concept of perhaps what they could do on their instrument. I talk to them about what they think, and how they think about certain things. I listen to them. I make comments about what I hear, and usually they appreciate it.

RW: Oh, we really appreciate you being here! I'm sorry we have to cut off. Thank you so much. And I'd also like to acknowledge another great gentleman who is here—Jesse Stewart—because I forgot to mention him. And Mark Zurawinski, he's here.

Anyways, 11:30 tonight, the great Andrew Cyrille, along with the great Henry Grimes, and the great Jane Bunnett. This is going to be a concert not to miss. Please come out. And thank you once again, sir. It's been a pleasure talking to you.