

Book Review

Fred Ho Plays Malcolm X: A Review of *Wicked Theory, Naked Practice: A Fred Ho Reader*

Diane C. Fujino, Editor
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When Malcolm X—or El Hajj Malik El Shabazz (1925-1965)—was assassinated in Harlem, New York, on February 21, 1965, the African-American orator and public intellectual left behind a legacy of a life cut short. There was his *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, as-told-to Alex Haley (1965); various speeches transcribed and circulated by New York socialists whose preferred Marxist was Leon Trotsky (1879-1940); the recordings of radio and television interviews; print news stories and film documentaries; and the letters sent from Africa to his wife, Betty Shabazz (1936-1997), and supporters.

But if Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) was the *de facto* liberator of African Americans from socio-political peonage, it was Malcolm X who freed their consciousness, who, in fact, changed their mass identity from the defcaf Negro to the black-and-proud Afro-American. Indeed, Malcolm X's transformational legacy to his audiences was, arguably, the *necessity* for political analysis: to free one's self or peoples from the shackles of imperialism, colonialism, and racism, one must analyze one's objective situation, name it for what it is, and then take rigorous action to correct the matter—"by any means necessary."

No wonder, then, that trumpeter Miles Davis (1926-1991) titles the last track of his transformational, jazz-fusion-avant-garde LP *On the Corner* (1972), "Mr. Freedom X." The piece salutes Malcolm X's cultural influence, which reached from fashion to hairstyles to—yes—jazz.

No wonder, then, too, that the privileged son of an Ivy League university professor, Fred Wei-han Houn, born into the Chinese-American bourgeoisie, upon reading, as a teen in the late 1960s, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, found himself changed. In *Wicked Theory, Naked Practice: A Fred Ho Reader*, edited by Diane C. Fujino, the radical jazz musician, composer, scholar, and activist credits "Malcolm X's life and ideas" for awakening his "political consciousness [to the reality] that I/we are victims of a system of white supremacy and racism" (44). Indeed, Houn later Sino-Anglicized his surname to Ho to accent his ethnic identity.

Echoing his first political hero's autobiography, Ho recalls his escape from the process of "Americanization"—or "whitification" (42), his journey from "banana" ("yellow"—Chinese—"on the outside," but "white"—culturally European—"on the inside" [42]) to "yellow revolutionary nationalist" in the 1970s [47], to "Marxism" and "socialism" (44-45). Note: This professional baritone saxophonist locates his primal *ars poetica* in a political manifesto.

Throughout his *Reader* that assembles 23 articles and interviews (some appearing for the first time) and is split into four sections ("The [Political] Movement and the Self"; "Music, Aesthetics, and Cultural Production"; "Asian Pacific American Cultural Theory and Criticism"; and "Wicked Theory, Naked Practice" [pieces on Americanized Maoism and radical Matriarchy]), Ho unites, unstintingly, lived experience, artistic expression, scholarly research, and "revolutionary" passion and praxis. Part-Malcolm X and part-*Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (1972), the *Reader* prods the reader to discard feel-good multiculturalism for "revolutionary internationalism" (54); calls on artists to "resist being commodified and commercialized by the mainstream" (82) and to follow Ho's example of being "a self-producing artist," using "guerilla cultural production and distribution approaches" (55); opposes Eurocentric and conservative approaches to jazz that now see "For the first time in the music's history, twenty-something musicians . . . stuck playing a style that predates their birth" (60); chronicles and elaborates Asian/Pacific American music and jazz (and literary) styles and tendencies; and demands, ultimately, the birth of "a matriarchal socialist society" (376).

The *Reader* is ambitious in its scope, and is comprehensive—to the point of unnecessary repetition—of Ho's political beliefs. Though prompted by Ho's diagnosis and treatment for what could be terminal cancer, the 428-page,

academic-press-issued tome omits Ho's birth date as well as a bibliography of his writings and a discography of his recordings. These absences are bizarre, inexplicable, and unforgivable.

But there is much to savour in this book—as there is to hear in Ho's music (which *must* be more important than his politics, though his scholarship is absolutely consequential). One observes in this volume a constant harmony between political analysis and musical innovation.

Thus, after being radicalized by African-American history and cultural struggle, Ho learned to distrust *poseurs*—“nationalists who mouthed Yellow/Black/Brown pride and/or anti-white diatribes but took paychecks from white institutions” (47). Simultaneously, Ho took up the music of “little-known composer Cal Massey [1927-1972] . . . (as performed by Archie Shepp)” (47), especially “extended suites such as The Black Liberation Movement Suite (which he wrote for fundraising concerts for the Black Panther Party) . . .” (47).

Liking Massey's “thematically epic historical scope, [Frantz] Fanonic titles (e.g., ‘The Damned Don't Cry’), soulful melodies, complex and rich harmonies, Afrocentric rhythms . . .” (47), Ho was moved to compose and perform jazz as “the music of liberation and revolution (connected to the ‘jazz tradition,’ simultaneously swinging and radical)” (47), opposing what he considers the “mainstream, pro-Yankee integrationist/imperialist political position regarding ‘jazz’ as America's ‘classical music’ . . .” (127), a stance he connects to jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis (1961-).

It is perhaps for this reason, then, that in Ho's homage to 1960s Black Power radicals, *All Power to the People! The Black Panther Suite* (1998), the work's opening, Tommy-gun drumming echoes Ho's description of Massey's partisan work: “one could hear the Black Panthers marching inside the music itself” (47). (I also hear in Ho's stunningly percussive and concussive suite a ‘shout out’ to Davis's *On the Corner* and to the pioneering rap-plus-drum recordings of The Last Poets, but I gotta admit I'm no musicologist . . .)

Ho's other major musical influences are African-American saxophonists John Coltrane (1926-1967) and Archie Shepp (1937-). Showcasing rebel innovation, these geniuses animate Ho's quest for an aesthetic that reflects his reading of jazz as articulated in his essential article, “What makes ‘Jazz’ the Revolutionary Music of the Twentieth Century, and Will It Be Revolutionary for the Twenty-first Century?” (1995). For Ho, jazz is “*both* folk/popular music and an art/classical music,” which, resisting “calcification and ossification . . . has never looked back to the past as ‘classical’ music has . . . Rather, ‘jazz’ has been about the present . . . and the future . . . Its entire history has been the freeing of time, pitch, and harmony from fixed, regulated, predictable standards” (95). Ho locates the radical potential of jazz in “the drum kit,” which allows one person to replicate “The multiple, layered rhythms of both West African and New Orleans drum ensembles”; in the piano, played as part of “the ‘rhythm section’”; in the “string bass . . . played primarily pizzicato, or plucked, supplying rhythm, keeping time, and providing a harmonic foundation”; and the clarinet-displacing saxophone, now “the ‘voice’ of the ‘jazz band’” (95-96). Elsewhere, Ho argues that the political revolution will be “Improvised and composed, both” (83), but these practices are also integral to jazz, which reflects both “African-based kinetics” and “the tension and beauty of being both on the front and back edge of the beat” (99).

This understanding of jazz theory, plus his own radical politics, have inspired Ho to compose such works as 1985's anti-sexist *Bound Feet* (demonstrating an “embryonic integration of Eastern non-tempered and Western tempered instruments” [53]); his first opera, 1989's *A Chinaman's Chance*; a second opera, 1999's *Warrior Sisters: The New Adventures of African and Asian Womyn Warriors* (“politically matriarchal socialist, musically new Afro Asian, and theatrically an action-adventure epic” [59]); and another 1999 opera, *Night Vision: A New Third to First World Vampyre Opera*, which features “a two-thousand-year-old female vampire pop superstar singer . . .” (59). Clearly, in deploying such forms, Ho means to combine the folk-base of both African-American blues (the basis of all African-American music) *and* traditional Chinese opera, which doubled as a form of popular music for immigrant Chinese-North American cultures.

By fronting the Afro Asian Music Ensemble, producing original and important scholarship on Asian-Pacific-American music and jazz *and* Asian-American literature and “Black Studies,” Ho has been a trailblazing figure in several arenas (or on several ‘fronts’) for the last 30 years. Moreover, as a principled activist in anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist groups and causes, Ho has been precisely the kind of disciple that Malcolm X envisioned. Significantly, his interest in “collective decision-making and shared economic risk venture” (61), in venturing—successfully—to earn money for his art outside the standard, commercial venues and record-distribution systems, sets a terrific example for any artist who is patient, persistent, and principled enough to try an independent, “underground” course.

Early on in the *Reader*, Ho recognizes that “The challenge to unite my career and revolutionary cultural work requires the same skills and qualities needed to build revolutionary organization: commitment, clarity, creativity, and competence” (55). These principles also descend to *us* from the practices of Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), Mao Zedong (1893-1976)—as guerilla Peoples Liberation Army leader, and Sieh King King (an early twentieth-century Chinese feminist organizer in San Francisco).

If Ho should leave this world—*our* struggles—too soon, far too prematurely, he leaves us, nevertheless—like Malcolm X before him—a great legacy, both in music and in political analysis. His life and his *Reader* remind us that all good art is Agitprop, declaring, “Up against the wall, motherfucker! *The People*—Womyn—shall rule!”