

**PANEL: Cecil, Ornette, Sun Ra, William Parker: Negotiating Tradition and Innovation**

**Chaired by Liz Groeneveld (School of English and Theatre Studies, University of Guelph)**

**Panelists:**

**Alan Stanbridge**

***Bio***

**Dr. Alan Stanbridge** is an Assistant Professor in Visual and Performing Arts and Arts Management at the University of Toronto, cross-appointed in Music and Museum Studies. In 2005, Stanbridge was a recipient of the University of Toronto at Scarborough Faculty Teaching Award for his outstanding contribution to the teaching of undergraduates. Drawing on a diverse range of musical examples from the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century to the present day, Stanbridge's interdisciplinary research focuses on the manner in which a variety of discourses have served to shape contemporary understandings of musical meaning and cultural value. His research project is supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). Stanbridge has published articles on popular music, jazz history, cultural theory, and cultural policy, and he is a member of the Editorial Boards of the *International Journal of Cultural Policy* and the *Jazz Research Journal*, a member of the Advisory Board of *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation*, and a contributor to the *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World*. In a previous life, Stanbridge pursued a 15-year career in professional arts management and music promotion in Britain, during which time he held the post of Director of the Glasgow International Jazz Festival, and occupied senior management positions with several arts centres and music organizations, including Midlands Arts Centre, the Almeida Theatre, and Jazz Services. Throughout his career, Stanbridge has been responsible for the programming and co-ordination of a diverse range of arts and music events, and he has promoted concerts and specially commissioned projects featuring Ray Charles, Cab Calloway, Stan Getz, Lee Konitz, Gerry Mulligan, Astor Piazzolla, Willem Breuker, the Brotherhood of Breath, John Stevens, Fred Frith, John Zorn, Tim Berne, Philip Glass, and John Cage, among many others.

***Abstract***

“Old and New Dreams: Tradition and Hybridity in Contemporary Music”

In a recent interview in the *Globe and Mail*, prior to his first concert performance in Toronto in over 20 years, the pianist Cecil Taylor cited Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, Mary Lou Williams, Thelonious Monk, Horace Silver, and Dizzy Gillespie as among his most important influences. When asked whether he was “really just a traditionalist at heart,” Taylor responded by quoting Somerset Maugham,

suggesting that “tradition can be either a prison or a guide” (Considine, 2007). Interestingly, however, Taylor misquotes Maugham slightly, introducing a degree of ambivalence into Maugham’s otherwise optimistic epigraph: “Tradition is a guide and not a jailer.”

Given the often hostile reception that Taylor’s ideas have received at the hands of jazz traditionalists – “total self-indulgent bullshit” was Branford Marsalis’s considered opinion in Ken Burns’s PBS *Jazz* series (quoted in Stanbridge, 2004) – the ambivalence is perhaps unsurprising. But Taylor’s faith in tradition – “I’m always one who’ll genuflect to those great men and women” (Considine, 2007) – coupled with his still uncompromising artistic practice, represents a clear statement of the manner in which many of the most challenging jazz artists have sought to balance issues of tradition and innovation: issues that the philosophical tenets of modernism had tended to suggest were mutually exclusive.

Although Taylor’s current performance practice has little of the relentless intensity so familiar from his concerts of two or three decades ago, the advancing years have done little to compromise Taylor’s aesthetic approach. Indeed, Taylor’s links to the jazz tradition – a consistent trope in his own discourse over the years, if one viewed with considerable scepticism by his detractors – are now clearer than ever, suggesting a fertile and productive relationship with the past that denies the stereotypical discourses of either an adamantly vanguardist modernism or an ironically depthless postmodernism. Moreover, Taylor’s artistic practice remains a profoundly hybrid one, drawing inspiration not only from the jazz tradition but also from contemporary classical and world music, dance and literature.

The qualities inherent in Taylor’s music are shared by many of the most interesting examples of contemporary music today, serving to confirm Somersert Maugham’s positive reading of the role of tradition. But much of this music fits somewhat uncomfortably under the restrictive rubric of ‘jazz,’ emphasizing the increasingly problematic nature of genre classification, and highlighting the aesthetic narrowness of the traditionalist gatekeepers of the jazz canon. To offer a typical example: John Hollenbeck’s highly innovative approach to the jazz big band – which, alongside more ‘traditional’ big band scoring, incorporates electronic effects, minimalist techniques, Theo Bleckmann’s vocalizing, and settings of the poetry of William Blake and Wallace Stevens – is readily dismissed as “pretentious” by *Jazz Times* (Shanley, 2007: 71).

In this paper, denying such easy criticisms, I examine the eclectically hybrid nature of much contemporary music, and its dynamic relationship with tradition. Focusing on the creative balance between tradition and innovation, I consider the recent output of several key record labels, including ECM, Winter & Winter, and Tzadik. In the latter part of the paper, I explore the remarkable resurgence

of the accordion in contemporary music, drawing on the work of Gianni Coscia, Jean-Louis Matinier, Stian Carstensen, and Guy Klucevsek, among others.

## **Jason Robinson**

### ***Bio***

**Dr. Jason Robinson** is a Southern California-based saxophonist and scholar. He teaches in Music at the University of California, San Diego and in African American Studies at the University of California, Irvine. His research focuses on improvised music, Jamaican popular music, and music of the African diaspora. He enjoys an active performance and recording career, collaborating often with leading figures in creative music.

### ***Abstract***

“Space, Race, and Transcending Place: Sun Ra, Afro-futurism, and Black Nationalism”

In a revealing scene in the 1972 film *Space is the Place*, iconoclastic pianist Sun Ra questions a group of African American teenagers about race and strategies of racial empowerment. The scene takes place at a teenage hangout in Oakland, where black teenagers are playing pool, singing together, and socializing, and where, suddenly, they realize that a pair of shiny platform shoes is emanating other-worldly (synthesizer generated) sounds. Without warning, Sun Ra appears, teleported into his magic shoes from a distant place. Ra’s discussion with his young, somewhat skeptical, audience reveals a unique understanding of black identity, its relationship to (outer)space, and its representation in sound. This poignant scene brings together ideas about race and empowering strategies that use space – outerspace *and* (re)imaginings of social space – as a new mode of black nationalism that transcends prevailing ideas about the connection between racial identity, place, and music.

Framed as an aberrant member of the 1960s avant-garde, Sun Ra is frequently marginalized in jazz discourse. Recent scholarship, most notably John Szwed’s landmark biography of Ra called *Space is the Place*, challenges these historical orthodoxies by illustrating, among other things, Ra’s development as a jazz pianist and his challenging of racial boundaries in music technology and electronic music. While Ra’s early career embodies the development of a late 1940s jazz pianist, his work became decidedly more experimental in the mid 1950s. Changing his name from Herman “Sonny” Blount to Sun Ra, a reference to the Egyptian sun god, founding his commune-like group the Solar Arkestra, and the group’s 1961 move to New York, illustrate a trajectory that speaks to several parallel debates. Ra’s music transformed throughout the 1960s, transcending expectations about post-bop jazz practice by including nonconventional instruments (including homemade instruments) and multimedia elements (costumes, dance, and lighting), promoting themes of

space travel and afro-futurism, and incorporating electronics and sounds traditionally associated with science fiction movies and new trends in electronic music.

This paper uses two historical bookends as its focus: Sun Ra's 1961 recording *The Futuristic Sounds* of Sun Ra (and his concomitant move to New York) and Sun Ra's 1972 movie *Space is the Place*, filmed in Oakland while Ra undertook a teaching residency at UC Berkeley. I argue that Ra's musical and social philosophy presented a new kind of philosophy related to emergent forms of black nationalism, yet significantly different than the social and aesthetic strategies evidenced in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. This important distinction helps to explain the (outer)space trope in Ra's musical philosophy, a phenomenon best described as afro-futurism. I draw upon ideas from the emerging discourse of afro-futurism, showing that Ra's performance practices and elaborate mythological ideas confront assumptions about black identity, experimentalism, and access to new technologies.

## **Peter Williams**

### ***Bio***

**Pete Williams** is a PhD student in American Studies at the University of Kansas. His work explores improvisation in music, identity, literature, the classroom, and everyday life, and has examined Ornette Coleman, Langston Hughes, Miles Davis, and conceptions of "jazz democracy." He is also an electric and upright bassist who has performed in the U.S. Southeast and Northeast in a variety of musical settings.

### ***Abstract***

"Sound Has No Parents': Ornette Coleman's Harmolodic Democracy"

In 1997, Jacques Derrida interviewed Ornette Coleman about improvisation, composition, and language. After the interview, Derrida joined Coleman on stage and read a short piece he had written while Coleman improvised. Two recent essays – by David Wills and Sara Ramshaw – examine this unusual meeting through the framework of Derrida's concepts of "the event" (in Wills' case) and "the law" (in Ramshaw's case) and, based on that framework, judge the performance to be largely a failure. My essay will focus on Coleman's contributions to the meeting and will take a harmolodic view of the performance and of the preceding interview, examining Coleman's critical notions of democracy in music and in everyday life, as well how Coleman's performance of a multiplicity of identities contributes to his complication of and resistance to dominant modes of blackness, masculinity, and democratic freedom. Through this view, the performance and interview with Derrida may be seen not so much as a failure but as an opening to possibilities.

To this end, the essay will perform close readings of Coleman's words

about music, holding them up alongside his musical production itself as an object of study. Looking at Coleman's words and music together can blur the categorical boundaries that have been constructed between interpretation, musical performance, and theory.

Given Stuart Hall's conception of culture as a site of struggle, this paper further envisions improvisation as a key player in that battlefield. Ornette Coleman's music and his conception of harmolodics – both improvised – reorganize the relationship among the three cultural elements identified by Ajay Heble and Daniel Fischlin – “knowing,” “community,” and “instruments” – even as his improvisations in these areas also constitute a performance. In the same way, following Judith Butler's notion of performative gender, Coleman's unique performance of black masculinity speaks to the limitations of the dominant culture's depictions of African Americans and of reductive codes of black masculinity.

Coleman's resistance to and complication of almost every category of identity one tries to put him in – African American, heterosexual, male, jazz musician – point to his status as what Antonio Gramsci called an “organic intellectual,” one that arises out of the dominated class in its struggle for hegemony and can “bring into being new modes of thought.” Coleman constantly struggles against the limiting, defining, and even oppressive categories the dominant culture forces onto cultural production by continually asserting music's basic freedom. As he said in an April 2007 interview, “Sound has no parents, so you don't have to worry about being spanked.” Ornette Coleman's ideas and his music, the totality of his cultural production, deserve attention as “new modes of thought.”

Despite Coleman's recent Grammy and Pulitzer awards (or perhaps because of them), harmolodics remains both critical of the dominant culture and productive of new modes of improvisation and community, projecting its hopeful vision of democracy into the future, even as it improvises its resistance in the present.

## **Michael Morse**

### ***Bio***

Massachusetts-born bassist, composer, arranger, and teacher Michael Morse studied with Gary Peacock, Warren Grim and Rudolf Watzel. Among the jazz greats with whom he has performed and recorded are Brian Barley, Bob Mover, Lee Konitz, Roswell Rudd, Charles Ellison, Claude Ranger, Jane Fair, Terry King, Steve Hall, Kirk MacDonald, Pat LaBarbera, Maury Kaye, Phil Nimmons, Bob Fenton, Linton Garner, Glen Hall, Sadik Hakim, Nelson Symonds, Norman Marshall Villeneuve, Michael Occhipinti, Ted Quinlan, Roy Patterson, Billy Robinson, Karl Berger, Peter Leitch, David Mott, Jessica Williams, and Tim Brady. Experienced in virtually every form of North American music, he has performed with Lightnin' Hopkins, Haitian master drummer Georges

Rodrigues, the Eddie Toussaint Dance Company, Diane Tell, Big Sugar, and the Prague Chamber Orchestra.

Michael Morse is the leader of the Dignity of Labour Ensemble, and is presently active as a performer with the Avataar Collective, the PoetiKs, Satanist Daycare, and Weapons of Mass Neutrality. Michael participated as a bassist in two recent CDs with close friend and collaborator Glen Hall: Trio Muo's Angles, with master percussionist and composer Joe Sorbara; and Strophe, with brilliant string players Kye Marshall and Rebecca Van Der Post. Michael's compositions are played by many groups. For example, "Ecstatic Regret" was recently recorded by a group led by guitarist Steven Cole.

Michael is an avid participant in Toronto's creative improvisation scene. He has played with many of its leading lights, including (in no order whatsoever) Christine Duncan, Joe Sorbara, John Kameel Farah, Kyle Brenders, Michael Snow, Colin Fisher, Ronda Rindone, Lina Alemanno, Jean Martin, Felicity Williams, Michael Parsons, Jim Bailey, Ravi Naimpally, Dave Clark, Victor Bateman, Jason Hammer, Myk Freedman, Michael Herring, Rakesh Tewari, Paul Newman, John Wilson, Michelangelo Iaffaldano, Brodie West, Melissa Stylianou, Sundar Viswanathan, Geordie Haley, Nick Fraser, Ken Aldcroft, Tomas Krakowiak, Kye Marshall, Evan Shaw, Glen Hall, Tania Gill, Michael Keith, Nick Storrington, Nicole Rampersaud, Jesse Stewart, Don Scott, Brandon Valdivia, Rob Piilonen, Scott Thomson, Kai Koschmider, Gordon Allen, Jake Oelrichs, Rebecca Van der Post, Parmela Attariwala, David Story, Matt Brubeck, Rob Clutton, Dave Chokroun, and Alex Porter. Other groups and musicians Michael has played with during his years in Toronto include a cooperative trio (featuring Jay Alter and the late, sadly missed Bob George), Andy Wernick, Laurie Corrigan, Bill Westcott, EarCam, Bill King, Rita DiGhent, Tony Quarrington, the International Drone Bandits, John Brown Trio with Brenda Scott, Sonora, Steve Cole, and one or two whose names he can't recall (or never knew in the first place). Michael completed both a Master's and a PhD at York University. His dissertation, *Rhythm, Musical Time and Society -- Prolegomena to a Sociology of Music*, will be published by White Cliffs Media. New books on musical rhetoric and syncopation are in progress.

### **Abstract**

"Jazz and the Rise of the Uniculture"

Students of jazz and contemporary improvised musics continue to consider the multiplicity of relations between these practices and others (that may or not may not be) like them. Whether or not the bass playing of Flea and William Parker belong under a common rubric called 21st century bass playing is as debatable as whether Parker's music has any reasonable generic connections to the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

However we choose to answer such questions – and a variety of answers are

not only possible but certainly necessary – it is undeniable that maestro Parker (and his listeners) live in a world not merely contingent to Flea's but directly affected by it. In other words, however disparate the experiences of its various component subcultures, all belong to (and are defined by inevitable participation in) a larger socio-economic framework.

The present paper argues that this framework, society, has become increasingly indistinguishable from a kind of unified popular culture, in which the experiential and generic distinctions of hitherto extant subcultures weaken and move even farther to the margins. In the uniculture, the identity of artistic subcultures, however powerfully delineated, approaches non-existence through functional irrelevance. At the same time, musically germane technological developments offer grounds for eventual hope (and even present-day realities) of musically defined culture.