“The Fools Don’t Think I Play Jazz”: Cecil Taylor Meets Mary Lou Williams

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“I Imagine it,” the pianist and composer Mary Lou Williams exclaimed in April 1977. “A swinging pianist with an avant-garde!” Williams (1910–81), a prominent figure in jazz since the 1930s, was eagerly anticipating an upcoming Carnegie Hall recital in which she planned to perform with her friend and fellow keyboard player Cecil Taylor (1929–2018). Planned for several months, the widely publicized concert, which was recorded and later released commercially as an album titled *Embraced* (1978), featured the unlikely pairing of two jazz performers a generation apart who moved in very different artistic circles. She nonetheless had high hopes for the event, which she had financed herself with the intention of inviting Taylor, a pillar of the postwar so-called “free jazz” movement. “Cecil is honest and sincere,” she said, telling the press that their rehearsals had gone very well, with

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the younger musician effectively complementing one of her gospel-flavored compositions and Williams reciprocating with equal enthusiasm. "When he started his avant-garde things, I was on him," she said. "Everything he did, I answered."4

The event did not go as planned. According to the New York Times critic John S. Wilson, "the two pianists spent the evening separated by the length of two pianos and by totally different musical concepts."5 The recording confirms that, by and large, Williams played her own swing-based tonal compositions, often infused with related African American idioms such as spirituals, gospel, blues, and boogie-woogie, while Taylor simultaneously played non-metered rubato textures and figuration, deploying modal and post-tonal clusters rather than triadic, functional tonal harmony. "At times, they seemed like performers on two different planets," wrote Hollie I. West in the Washington Post.6 The majority of critics, ever since, have regarded the performance as "disastrous," a view privately shared by Williams herself, who not long afterward wrote to Taylor, "Being angry you created monotony, corruption, and noise. Please forgive me for saying so. Why destroy your great talent clowning, etc.?"7 She lost over $5,000 on the recital.8

Although a few who witnessed the concert or heard the released album remained open minded or at least noncommittal, most dismissed it as "a noble experiment that failed"—an "ill advised" "misfire" that degenerated into a "farce"—and several criticized Taylor for "exhibitionist pounding," accusing him of "playing his own show" without due deference to Williams.9 Nevertheless, the Carnegie Hall recital should

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4 Wilson, "Tradition and Innovation," 77.
6 West, "Jazz Duo," B1.
8 "Mary Lou Williams Concert: Gross Receipts and Expenses," Mary Lou Williams Collection (hereafter MLWC), Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University, Newark, NJ, Series 6, Box 9, Folder 4. Adjusted for inflation, $5,000 in 1977 is equivalent to more than $20,000 in 2018 (see https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm).
not be dismissed as only an ill-fated debacle. It serves as a salutary reminder that jazz’s improvisational aesthetics do not inevitably yield the idealized democratic collaboration or egalitarian sociability that many of the music’s proponents and advocates have claimed. And it offers a striking illustration of how conflicts between dissimilar performance strategies can reveal a great deal about players’ thought processes and beliefs. In addition to manifesting the distinct musical idiolects of two African American pianists of decidedly different temperaments and aesthetic sensibilities, the concert also, in its way, engaged longstanding debates over jazz’s history and identity; Brent Hayes Edwards has recently called the performance “historiographic.” Its musical incongruities reflected Taylor’s and Williams’s contrasting definitions of the idiom and divergent views of its chronological evolution. The pianists’ strained musical interplay contravened any notions of jazz as a unified genre with a unilinear historical trajectory. In particular, it encapsulated


the inherent ambivalence toward the past often exhibited by the jazz avant-garde, a movement that has tended to reject or abandon central aspects of the musical tradition it nonetheless often embraces, even if only as an ideological foil. Moreover, the event’s palpable tensions signified, in microcosm, the sort of “representation ‘contest’” that, Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., notes, “challenges [any] notion of a static sense of racial authenticity within African American communities.” It is no exaggeration to say that the creative contretemps that unfolded between these two major artists on that lone occasion some four decades ago was deeply rooted in their differing opinions about what it meant to be a jazz musician—and indeed to be a black American. For all these reasons this notorious concert merits another hearing, with an ear not only to its musical details but also to the performers’ own impressions of the event itself along with their well-documented perspectives on jazz as an African American art form. On that day, much more than music was at stake.

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Williams came of age after World War I, as jazz first became widely popular—she met Jelly Roll Morton in New York in the early 1920s. During the 1930s she was the pianist, composer, and arranger for Andy Kirk’s Twelve Clouds of Joy, one of the swing era’s leading big bands. After a short stint in 1942 as an arranger for the Duke Ellington Orchestra, she pursued an independent career as both a keyboard virtuoso and

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one of jazz’s most ambitious and original composers; in 1946, excerpts from her orchestral *Zodiac Suite* were performed at a Carnegie Hall concert organized by the impresario Norman Granz.18 (Some three decades later Granz issued, on his Pablo record label, Williams and Taylor’s recital.) Throughout her life Williams remained highly receptive to new musical trends and she was always committed to tradition-rooted innovation in her own work. “If we are to make progress in modern music, or, if you prefer jazz,” she wrote in a 1947 article, “we must be willing and able to open our minds to new ideas and developments.”19 When these words appeared in print her Harlem apartment had become a frequent gathering place for young musicians, among them bebop players such as Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell, and Thelonious Monk.20 As the decades passed her historical consciousness deepened. Several months after her 1977 concert with Taylor she began an appointment teaching jazz history at Duke University, and in her final years she featured a variety of black musical idioms in her performances, sometimes programming them in chronological sequence.21

Still, when it came to the postwar jazz avant-garde, of which Taylor was a seminal exponent, Williams felt some ambivalence. A genuine admirer of certain experimentally inclined musicians of the 1960s, such as John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy, she even occasionally dabbled in relatively dissonant, free improvisation herself.22 Her earliest recorded rendition of her original composition “A Fungus A Mungus,” from the early 1960s, begins with an ascending eleven-note rubato phrase containing nine different pitch classes; a transcription, in example 1, shows that its first eight notes are paired in perfect fourths: F–B♭, B–E, C♯–F♯, D♭–G♯. She next plunges into rapidly intensifying swaths of dense, unmeasured, dissonant sound.23 Even so, Williams was frequently an outspoken

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21 See, for example, the medley including spirituals, blues, swing, and boogie-woogie on Mary Lou Williams, *Solo Recital: Montreux Jazz Festival 1978*, compact disc, Pablo 2308–218, rec. 16 July 1978. See also Torff, “Mary Lou Williams,” 178–79.
22 Handy, “Conversation with… Mary Lou Williams,” 201; and Torff, “Mary Lou Williams,” 194.
23 Mary Lou Williams, “A Fungus A Mungus,” *Black Christ of the Andes*, compact disc, Smithsonian Folkways 40816, rec. 1962–63; Mary Lou Williams, “A Fungus A Mungus,” *The
critic of most post-1950s jazz trends, perceiving the avant-garde as “cold.”

“After bop they began going to school,” she said not long after her recital with the conservatory-trained Taylor. “This destroyed that healthy feeling in jazz.”

Although Williams used the word “jazz” only reluctantly, considering it “corny” and “derogatory,” she had a clear conception of the music, which she regarded as “healing to the soul.” Her implicit definition of jazz appeared to focus more on the idiom’s formal attributes than on its social context as an African American-originated cultural expression. “You know what jazz is?,” she asked in 1981, shortly before her death. “It’s music that’s played and notes that are not on your instrument.” Jazz, she added, “was created by the blacks, but that means nothing . . . God do[es]

[example 1. Transcription of Mary Lou Williams, “A Fungus A Mungus” (0:00)]


25 Ibid., 70.


not create anything for one race of people to play." Williams also had a clearly articulated sense of the idiom's chronological development, most vividly conveyed by a widely reproduced line drawing, sketched according to her directions in 1977 by the illustrator David Stone Martin, which depicts jazz's evolution in the form of a tree. The tree’s trunk, adorned at its edges with the recurring word “blues,” displays the terms “spirituals,” “ragtime,” “K.C. [Kansas City] swing,” and “bop,” extending upward toward branches festooned with leaves that each bear a musician’s name. On one side of the tree several bare, dead branches are labeled “commercial rock,” “black magic,” “avant-garde,” “cults,” and “exercises-classical books.” Asked about this negative symbolism, Williams asserted, “Those things have almost destroyed jazz. . . . Something should have grown out of the bebop era, but it didn’t.” In her view, the history of jazz had unfolded as an evolutionary stylistic succession, but with bebop it had reached an impasse that no subsequent musical trend had satisfactorily breached. More recent African American and popular idioms seemed to her flawed and unworthy of the label “jazz.” Williams took an especially dim view of rock music: “When rock came through it covered the entire world. . . . It was really an evil that that type of music would spread all over the world. . . . It was really pitiful and has left the jazz musician—the creative artist—in a very pitiful state. We don’t have any young kids two or three years old that’s creating anything. When they’re born, at that age, they hear all this terrible music on records and things, and it destroys his natural talent.”

The prospect of performing with Taylor clearly presented, from her perspective, a considerable musical challenge fraught with no little historiographic significance. How would she go about collaborating with a musician who she believed was “not playing jazz”?

Taylor, renowned since the 1950s as one of postwar African American music’s most radical innovators, also felt ambivalent about the word “jazz,” finding it “inappropriate” and “inadequate.” Still, he never doubted that

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30 Smith, Interview with Mary Lou Williams.
31 Lyons, “Mary Lou Williams,” 70.
his own music was squarely “in the tradition” of the idiom itself.34 But his conception of the idiom was very different from Williams’s. “Jazz would naturally have to be an expression of the American Negro, his feelings, within the tradition of his folk songs, the church, those swinging bands,” he told journalist Joe Goldberg in the early 1960s. “And, of course, it naturally reflects the social and economic and educational attitudes of the players. And that’s why the fools don’t think I play jazz.”35 Jazz, for Taylor, was a music defined first and foremost by its African American cultural context. While he always named canonical jazz pianists and composers such as Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell, and Horace Silver as his greatest influences and inspirations, his notion of jazz, in terms of its stylistic features, was broad enough to encompass popular postwar musics such as that of James Brown, more typically regarded as a funk or soul musician.36 In marked contrast to Williams, who voiced misgivings about calling jazz “Afro-American music” because she felt the idiom had “nothing to do with African music,” Taylor regarded jazz as synonymous with African American music in all its variety—a view that, while far from universal, is shared by a number of other musicians and critics.37 “What I try to say on my piano,” he once told a French journalist, “is the black experience in musical terms.”38

The pianists’ differing conceptions of jazz roughly align with two influential schools of thought. Williams’s beliefs are comparable to those of culturally conservative writers such as Ralph Ellison and Stanley Crouch, along with musicians such as Wynton Marsalis (b. 1961), who have treated the music as an art form that transcends the racial subjugation of its black American originators through a disciplined mastery of certain formal practices, chief among them swing and the blues.  

Taylor’s perspective was akin to the more radical, black nationalist aesthetics of Amiri Baraka, for whom jazz, like all other African American musics, is a manifestation of black Americans’ collective cultural identity, functioning as a means of resistance against their social oppression—although Taylor tended to be less outspoken than Baraka about the music’s politically activist dimension. The pianists’ differing ideological orientations were clearly signaled by their attitudes toward white jazz players. Williams, conceiving of jazz primarily in terms of formal musical principles, became disheartened toward the end of her career at what seemed to her a deficit of musical expertise among younger African Americans, to the point that she even lamented, “The whites are playing it with the feeling.”

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blacks under 40 years old cannot play it at all.” By contrast, Taylor, perceiving jazz’s African American social milieu as its essential characteristic, thought whites could never do more than “imitate [the] feeling” that black Americans were able to express through music. (Similarly, Baraka contended, “white blues and jazz . . . is distinguishable in general because it is based on an appreciation or adaptation of the jazz aesthetic.”) 

Furthermore, Taylor viewed his own relationship to jazz, as an historical phenomenon, quite differently from Williams. For her, jazz was a music that had evolved more or less in tandem with her own artistic development; when she deployed older styles she was invoking her personal past as well as broader historical currents, and in mentoring younger players she positioned herself as a wellspring or catalyst of emerging trends. In 1974 John S. Wilson wrote of Williams, “She acknowledges her past by incorporating it in the present. The rolling blues, breaks, and boogie-woogie figures that she was playing in Kansas City 45 years ago with Andy Kirk’s band are an essential part of the fabric of one of her most recent compositions, ‘Play It, Momma.’” “I’m the only living musician that has played all the eras,” she told her friend and fellow pianist Marian McPartland (1918–2013) in 1978. “Other musicians lived through the eras and they never changed their style.” It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that, in her eyes, whatever she played was jazz, and what she did not play was not jazz; late in life she even went so far as to declare, with uncharacteristic immodesty: “I’m known as the only true artist that played jazz.”

Taylor, two decades younger and well versed in Western classical music, thought of himself as an inheritor rather than a progenitor of a tradition whose scope, in his opinion, greatly exceeded the individual

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41 Williams, Interview with Martha Oneppo, 12.
42 “Cecil Taylor Panel Discussion.” Throughout his career, however, Taylor has often played alongside white musicians with enthusiasm; for more on his views of white jazz musicians, see Robert Levin, “Cecil Taylor: This Music Is the Face of a Drum,” All About Jazz, 8 August 2010 (https://www.allaboutjazz.com/cecil-taylor-this-music-is-the-face-of-a-drum-cecil-taylor-by-robert-levin.php; accessed 18 July 2017); originally published in Jazz and Pop 10, no. 5 (April 1971): 10.
45 Marian McPartland, Interview with Mary Lou Williams, Piano Jazz, NPR Radio Broadcast, 8 October 1978 (http://www.npr.org/2010/05/06/126537497/mary-lou-williams-on-piano-jazz, accessed 13 June 2017). See also Dizzy Gillespie with Al Fraser, To Be, or Not . . . to Bop: Memoirs (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 150.
46 Williams, Interview with Martha Oneppo, 72.
stylistic range of either Williams or himself. He regarded the music of his self-claimed artistic forerunners as culturally linked to his own, whether or not it had any audible resemblance (“that’s where I came from. I don’t do it that way, but it’s a part of me”).47 Jazz’s past was something he perceived with a degree of detachment. His perspective on the idiom is, in this respect, comparable to the Enlightenment-period humanist view of history as, in Carl Dahlhaus’s words, “a passage leading back to the Self—a ‘Self,’ however, which had been made aware of its own particularity through its encounter with history.” 48 Moreover, unlike Williams, he viewed his own musical idiolect as fairly static, remarking in 1983 that “I don’t think my music will change. The only thing changing is my personality.”49 All in all, Williams saw herself as playing a broad, adaptable role within a delimited, although certainly variegated, jazz tradition, whereas Taylor thought of himself as having a stylistically narrower role within a substantially larger tradition.

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Two decades before their Carnegie Hall recital the two pianists had appeared on the same bill at the 1957 Newport Jazz Festival, but they did not meet until 1969, when Williams, in London to give a concert, heard Taylor at Ronnie Scott’s jazz club.50 Their friendship blossomed during the mid-1970s, while Williams was in residence at New York’s Cookery restaurant; Taylor came to see her play several times. According to Williams’s manager, Peter O’Brien, “every night at the Cookery, [Taylor] comes in, sits down and stares at her…. He just loved it!”51

eventually proposed that they play a recital together.\textsuperscript{52} When he agreed, she spent more than $16,000 (the equivalent of more than $66,000 in 2018 dollars)—“almost all [her] savings”—on the venue rental charge and concert publicity, as well as a $1,000 performance fee for Taylor.\textsuperscript{53} (McPartland recalled that “Mary Lou ha[d] little business ability and scant knowledge of how to correlate, to direct, her ideas and plans.”)\textsuperscript{54} Williams’s ambitions were bold. In her concert program notes she wrote portentously, “A new era emerging from the history of jazz is twenty years past due,” and declared that, by staging the event, she intended “that a new and exciting era in \textit{Jazz} come about through a return to its history so that something musically unexpected might again come out of the Modern Era.”\textsuperscript{55} By performing alongside a pianist with whom she felt little aesthetic affinity she hoped to create something new out of something old—to revitalize the jazz tradition by reaffirming its roots. Advocating historically grounded progressive change, she basically affirmed the organicist, evolutionary notion of jazz’s stylistic development that, Scott DeVeaux has observed, was widely shared by postwar jazz critics and historians.\textsuperscript{56}

The pianists started rehearsing about ten days before the 17 April concert, devoting most of their attention to a set of pieces by Williams that illustrated jazz’s stylistic evolution from spirituals through ragtime, blues, swing, boogie, and bop.\textsuperscript{57} She wrote by hand several pages of music, in some instances, such as the gospel-oriented “The Lord is Heavy,” notating her own parts, fully harmonized on a grand staff (fig. 1). For Taylor she mainly indicated skeletal bass lines, although in several cases she apparently provided him with complete grand-staff keyboard notation as well. Figure 2 shows the opening measures, in Williams’s handwriting, of

\textsuperscript{53} Hazziezah [sic], “Two Great Musical Giants to Entertain at Carnegie Hall,” D9; “Mary Lou Williams Concert: Gross Receipts and Expenses”; and “Memorandum of Agreement,” MLWC, Series 6, Box 9, Folder 4; and letter from Gilda Barlas Weissberger (on behalf of the Carnegie Hall Corporation) to Mary Lou Williams, 28 October 1976, MLWC, Series 6, Box 9, Folder 3.
\textsuperscript{54} Marian McPartland, “Into the Sun: An Affectionate Sketch of Mary Lou Williams,” in \textit{All in Good Time} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 69–80, at 73.
\textsuperscript{55} Williams, “Program Notes,” 10. In a revised version of the program notes that accompanied the commercially released concert recording, Williams omitted the reference to instigating “a new and exciting era in jazz,” and instead stated only that “my effort on this concert was to show the full seep and history of this music called Jazz together with some of the struggles it has been up against in the last twenty years.” Liner notes to \textit{Embraced}.
\textsuperscript{57} Wilson, “Tradition and Innovation in Jazz Meet at the Williams–Taylor Concert,” 77; and West, “Jazz Duo,” B12. See also Wilmer, “Nobody’s Playing Anything But You.”
FIGURE 1. Mary Lou Williams’s manuscript “Gospel: Mary” [“The Lord is Heavy”]

Mary Lou Williams Collection (MC 060), Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University Libraries, Series 1A, Box 4, Folder 10. Used by permission of the Mary Lou Williams Foundation and the Institute of Jazz Studies.
FIGURE 2. Mary Lou Williams’s manuscript “Cecil Taylor—slow blues”
[“The Blues Never Left Me”]

Mary Lou Williams Collection (MC 060), Institute of Jazz Studies,
Rutgers University Libraries, Series 1A, Box 4, Folder 10. Used by
permission of the Mary Lou Williams Foundation and the Institute of
Jazz Studies.
a composition in G major that is clearly the basis for the piece from the Carnegie Hall recital titled “The Blues Never Left Me” (Williams plays a modified rendition of these measures starting at 0:56 on the released album track). Her manuscript is labeled “Cecil Taylor—slow blues.”\textsuperscript{58} Williams probably had memorized her own composition and therefore did not need the notated part. It is doubtful that she expected Taylor to play her staff notation exactly as written, but she may have hoped he would use it as an aide-mémoire or general source of reference. Most of Williams’s surviving handwritten notation for the event is more fragmentary—several pages intended for Taylor consist only of unadorned bass lines or block chords. The older pianist also wrote out some “licks” expressly for her collaborator; figure 3 reproduces staff paper, marked “Cecil,” on which she sketched a few short motives, supplemented in two places by lead-sheet chord symbols.\textsuperscript{59}

The rehearsals did not, in truth, unfold as auspiciously as Williams implied in her pre-concert press interviews. Taylor was stricken by the flu a week before the concert; during their meetings she found him “nervous and tense.”\textsuperscript{60} Her handwritten notation was not greeted in the spirit in which it was intended. Even though Taylor, in his own compositions, had often used a combination of Western staff lines, alphabetic pitch names, and self-invented graphic symbols, as a performer he had always had reservations about musical notation.\textsuperscript{61} “The problem with written music is that it divides the energies of creativity,” he asserted some years before the concert. “While my mind may be divided looking at a note, my mind is instead involved with hearing that note, playing that note, combining the action—making one thing of action. Hearing is playing; music does not exist on paper.”\textsuperscript{62} Taylor conveyed a sense of how he dealt with Williams’s notated compositions in an allusive lyric prose poem titled “Langage” that he wrote for publication in the issued recording’s liner notes.\textsuperscript{63} “Preparation for Embrace was about the intake of forms generations old their secret dynamism, scattered deposits transposed heritage,”

\textsuperscript{58} MLWC, Series 1A, Box 4, Folder 10.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} West, “Jazz Duo,” B12.
\textsuperscript{61} See, for instance, the handwritten manuscripts reproduced in close-up, and pictured on Taylor’s piano, at 21:00 in the documentary film Cecil Taylor: All the Notes, directed by Christopher Felver (Sausalito, CA: EMotion Studios, 2004).
\textsuperscript{62} Cecil Taylor à Paris: Les Grandes Répétitions, directed by Gérard Patris, ORTF Televison Broadcast, 28 July 1968. See also Taylor’s similar comments in Felver, Cecil Taylor: All the Notes.
\textsuperscript{63} The liner notes also contain a second text by Taylor, a surrealist poem titled “Choir”; a revision of Williams’s program notes was also included. Williams and Taylor, liner notes to Embraced. Taylor said that “the liner notes to the album … was my answer” to the concert’s critics. Len Lyons, “Cecil Taylor,” in The Great Jazz Pianists: Speaking of Their Lives and Music (New York: Da Capo, 1983), 301–11, at 308.
Figure 3. Mary Lou Williams’s manuscript “Cecil: Licks”

Mary Lou Williams Collection (MC 060), Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University Libraries, Series 1A, Box 4, Folder 10. Used by permission of the Mary Lou Williams Foundation and the Institute of Jazz Studies.
he explained in a brief peroration subtitled “Growth as inherent right,” thereby affirming that he was principally concerned with the compositions’ underlying historically derived sociocultural content and meaning (“transposed heritage”), as opposed to their directly audible musical attributes. “One perused the specific chart in search of germinating core,” Taylor continued. “The light provided gave the key to past differentials, allowing the fire as ‘now’ horizontal vertical compression roots necessarily in echo achieve continuum thru burning cycles born again.” Evidently, to his way of thinking, Williams’s musical notation functioned more as a general source of creative inspiration than even an approximately specific performance directive. Her handwritten indications became historically charged catalysts for his own imaginative impulses.

Edwards infers from “Langage” that Taylor’s “goal in plumbing historical styles is not to reveal some transhistorical essence or foundation, but instead to restage the stylistic heterogeneity of any particular past moment.” The duo performance’s unabashedly heterogeneous, or at least binary, aesthetic orientation certainly corroborates this reading. Yet in invoking the musical past, the younger pianist’s words repeatedly feature organic and phylogenetic metaphors—“germination” yielding “roots” through “growth,” all recurring over “generations”—that suggest he still conceived of jazz’s history as involving an enduring foundational “continuum” progressively evolving over time, in this respect not unlike his elder’s own arboreal conception of the idiom’s chronology. Taylor’s invocations of continuity and rebirth likewise echoed Williams’s professed desire that “a new and exciting era” in jazz be induced through “a return to its history.” But his fundamentally sociological rather than stylistic conception of the music led him to claim an “inherent right” to flout either widespread idiomatic norms or the detailed directions of the older pianist’s scores. Musical style, in the sense of a communally established set of genre conventions, was in Taylor’s view antithetical to the personal creativity he valued because it involved individuals conforming to orthodoxies associated with a particular historical era. “Style in its self ringeth a most narrow paradigm genuflecting to the cultural mores of a given time,” he wrote.

But intransigence was felt on both sides. Taylor himself became frustrated at Williams’s disinclination to play his pieces in the way he desired. Their discussions grew heated. According
to reporter Hollie I. West, who interviewed both pianists separately not long before the concert, “they fought like cats and dogs.”69 With a few days to go, Williams, against Taylor’s wishes, arranged for the performance to be recorded for future release (a $4,000 advance on royalties, split between the two artists, helped recoup some of her financial outlay).70 She also, without forewarning, decided to hire a bassist and drummer, Bob Cranshaw (1932–2016) and Mickey Roker (1932–2017), two well-known straight-ahead post-bop players with whom she had played previously and who rehearsed with Taylor only at 6:00 p.m. on the night of the performance.71 Cranshaw surmised that because “Cecil was out... she called me and Mickey to help her... She thought that we would be able to control it.”72 He was prepared for the performance “to be a lot looser than what we would ordinarily do with Mary Lou because Cecil plays a lot different and I like a structure.”73 Roker, the drummer, admitted that “Cecil Taylor, I just don’t understand. And understanding is greater than love—if you don’t understand, it’s hard for you to deal... But being a professional, it’s not always your cup of tea; you’ve got to learn how to deal with a situation that’s not comfortable, that broadens your scope a little more.”74 Taylor, meanwhile, was well aware that “there was going to be a problem for them.” By curtain time, he later said, “I knew what I was going to do.”75

Most, though not quite all, of what took place that evening is documented on the released double album; once the pianists had resolved their differing preferences about the audio mix, the tracks were issued with almost complete left-right stereo separation between the two keyboards.76 The concert’s opening medley of Williams’s historically oriented compositions features the two of them without rhythm section accompaniment. Williams seems to perform each piece in her own way

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69 Hollie I. West, telephone conversation with the author, 15 June 2015.
70 Pablo Records, telegram to Father Peter O’Brien, S.J., 13 April 1977, MLWC, Series 6, Box 9, Folder 10; Father Peter O’Brien, S.J., telegram to Pablo Records, 14 April 1977, MLWC, Series 6, Box 9, Folder 10; Norman Granz, letter to Mary Lou Williams, 27 April 1977, MLWC, Series 6, Box 9, Folder 4; and Rusch, “Cecil Taylor,” 54.
71 Rusch, “Cecil Taylor,” 54. Williams can be heard with Cranshaw and Roker on her studio album Zoning (Mary Records M-103).
73 “Mary Lou Williams: Perpetually Contemporary.”
75 Rusch, “Cecil Taylor,” 54, 52.
76 According to Gary Giddins, Williams played at least two additional encores without Taylor, a blues and Dizzy Gillespie’s “A Night in Tunisia.” They were not included on the issued album. “The Avant-Gardist Who Came in from the Cold,” 287; and Rusch, “Cecil Taylor,” 54.
without giving much indication that she is even aware of Taylor’s presence. Taylor plays throughout, mainly employing his habitual non-triadic harmonies and ametrical rhythms, and never adopting Williams’s melodic vocabulary, tonal harmonic progressions, or two-handed stratified textures (she mostly states monophonic or homophonic melodies or riffs over stride [“oom-pah”] or boogie-woogie ostinatos). Yet he often clearly engages with the music she plays at any given time. Sometimes he selects pitch combinations that match her compositions’ tonality: as Williams begins the concert with “The Lord is Heavy,” in A-flat major (0:30–1:00), Taylor concurrently makes use of notes belonging to the A-flat major scale, supplemented with that scale’s “blue notes” C and G (scale-degrees 3 and 7). In the excerpt transcribed in example 2, the younger pianist plays sweeping ascending arpeggiations of pitches that, although disregarding Williams’s ongoing plagal oscillation between tonic and subdominant harmonies, nevertheless affirm her composition’s underlying key in that they without exception articulate the tonic scale plus its lowered seventh degree. (In exx. 2, 3, and 4, Taylor’s pitches are transcribed without bar lines because, independently considered, his playing is unmetered; temporally, his improvisation is notated in vertical alignment with coinciding notes played by Williams.) On the uptempo ragtime tune “Fandangle” (a piece she had learned in childhood from her mother), he echoes some of her linear bass progressions (0:20, 1:12). Example 3 finds Taylor initially playing ametrical dual iterations of Williams’s low-register left-hand chromatic ascent, G–G–A (scale-degrees 4–4–5), before outlining a cadential resolution to D at the end of the phrase, interpolating an implicit tritone substitution (the pitches A and D) for the dominant before arriving at the tonic slightly after the older pianist. In this instance Taylor clearly adopts his characteristic unmetered mode of rhythmic organization, remaining temporally detached from Williams’s coexisting steady duple meter. But his pitch selections track Williams’s composition very closely.

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77 As a point of comparison, Williams’s solo renditions of pieces from the Carnegie Hall concert’s opening medley can be heard on the albums Solo Recital: Montreux Jazz Festival 1978; and At Rick’s Café American, compact disc, Storyville 1038420, rec. 14 November 1979. See also Mary Lou Williams, Carnegie Hall, 28 June 1978 (https://www.wolfgangs.com/mary-lou-williams/music/audio/20020099-50726.html?tid=484/5834; accessed 31 July 2017). Another chronologically sequenced series of performances designed to exemplify various historical styles can be heard on her studio album A Keyboard History, LP, Jazztone J1206, rec. 8 and 10 March 1955; discussed in Edwards, “Zoning Mary Lou Williams Zoning.”

78 Mary Lou Williams, interviewed by John S. Wilson on 26 June 1973, for the Jazz Oral History Project, Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University, Newark, NJ. See also Kernodle, Soul on Soul, 176.

79 Asked by a student “where the pulse is in [his] music,” Taylor responded by noting “how many different rates of breathing there are.” Whitney Balliett, “Cecil,” in
Elsewhere the correspondences between the two pianists are limited mainly to their playing at comparable levels of intensity. At times their musical relationship is far from self-evident, such as when, during Williams’s slow, introspective, G-major stride blues, “The Blues Never Left Me,” Taylor plays blistering cascades of hyper-intense, shimmering tone clusters (2:38). Journalist Philip Clark writes that, at this point, Taylor “lets rip with a tirade of lava-hot clusters that tumble around Williams like rock plummeting down a mountainside.” Critic John Litweiler’s remarks on the concert aptly capture the effect of the passage transcribed in example 2.

Example 2. Transcription of Mary Lou Williams and Cecil Taylor, “The Lord is Heavy” (0:30)


which uses approximate graphic notation to represent the younger pianist’s contributions: “Taylor seizes on phrases [Williams] plays to mount a grand fantasia in extremely long, complex lines, as turbulent as ever and at his fastest speed; the two improvise in their separate worlds
EXAMPLE 4. Transcription of Mary Lou Williams and Cecil Taylor, “The Blues Never Left Me” (2:34)
without remotely approaching communication.”\(^8^1\) If in this instance Williams appears serenely imperturbable, Taylor is boisterously adversarial and, arguably, willfully inconsiderate.

Cranshaw and Roker join the pianists on three other Williams compositions (“Good Ole Boogie,” “Basic Chords,” and “Back to the Blues”), almost exclusively playing a typical postwar duple-meter swing groove. At one point on “Good Ole Boogie,” a medium-uptempo F-major blues, Taylor plays a swing-influenced steady groove for the only time during the entire concert—he fleetingly mirrors Williams’s bass line patterns (1:43), incorporates pulsating blues-based harmonies (the \(5b\) blue note from 1:47 to 1:57), and sustains a driving riff for an entire twelve-bar chorus, clearly tracking the underlying chordal framework (2:14–2:27). Example 5 transcribes the first few measures of this riff chorus: Taylor starts by playing a stream of eighth-note harmonic clusters comprising the tonic note, F\(^4\), in three octaves along with both its diatonic and flattened seventh scale degrees (E\(^4\) and E\(^b\)). Two measures later he eliminates the dissonant semitones by jettisoning the E\(^4\) as he syncopates the riff across both the downbeat and midpoint of each measure. Then, as the harmony shifts to the subdominant in measure 5, Taylor resolves the lowered seventh scale degree (E\(^b\)) downward by step to D\(^b\), the third of the underlying B-flat-major harmony. This rare moment of rhythmic and harmonic concordance by Taylor did not pass unnoticed—Williams can be heard laughing appreciatively in response (2:20).

Near the beginning of “Basic Chords,” Williams plays a brief series of dissonant pitch clusters (0:38), unambiguously imitating Taylor, before cuing the rhythm section for another swinging blues composition. Midway through, Williams, Cranshaw, and Roker gradually yield to Taylor (2:30), playing sparse, irregular accents and interjections behind him for more than ninety seconds—this may be one of the moments that, according to critic Ron Welburn, “seemed to be breakdowns” in which “the look on Williams’ face . . . suggested that preset signals and schematae had gone awry.”\(^8^2\) “Boy, was she mad at us!,” Cranshaw recalled. “She asked why we followed [Taylor], and Mickey said, ‘Shit, the only way to stop him [was] if both of us carried him off the bandstand!’”\(^8^3\) During the final few minutes of the piece, Williams and the rhythm section resume a twelve-bar chorus in duple meter, which Taylor complements with pitch clusters that glancingly refer to their blues chord changes.


\(^8^3\) Quoted in Anthony Joseph Lannen, “Bob Cranshaw” (M.A. Thesis, Rutgers University, 2016), 60.
Two of Taylor’s pieces were on the concert program: “Ayizan” and “Chorus Sud.” Their composer is the commanding presence on each, with Williams, in a supporting role, somewhat adapting to his unmetered,
non-triadic idiom. At various times, however, she uses harmonies and figuration more characteristic of her habitual style: on “Ayizan” she plays pentatonic blues patterns in regular meter (4:20) and also improvises in an E-flat Dorian mode for around two minutes (6:30). “Ayizan” may well be the piece to which Williams referred when, several days before the performance, she told journalist Peter Keepnews, “Cecil’s written a beautiful thing for the concert, where he plays free and I play on top of that with a blues feeling.” At these moments Taylor appears to yield to her slightly, or at least to complement her textures and harmonic palette. “Chorus Sud” again finds her frequently gravitating toward tonal or modal, metered playing (1:00, 1:49, 4:50). Eventually she decisively establishes a C-minor tonality (7:00) in duple meter, introduces a swinging vamp, and cues the rhythm section (8:30). Taylor improvises all the while, but little of what Williams plays appears to be substantively informed by what her partner is doing. She ignores him.

All things considered, Williams and Taylor both compromised little when playing their own compositions in the duo format, but attempted, each in their own way, to collaborate constructively and to adapt when playing the numbers they had not written—even if not nearly enough to produce stylistically unified performances. Yet they could not have viewed the concert more differently. Some months later, probably after he had received Williams’s distressed letter, Taylor told journalist Robert D. Rusch, “To put it modestly, I think she was outraged by it.” He was not wrong. In public Williams diplomatically refrained from acknowledging the artistic and interpersonal strains surrounding the recital—a few weeks after the event she claimed in a radio interview that her interactions with Taylor had been “just fine,” and when queried about how the two pianists selected repertoire she replied, “We didn’t. A guy like him, you have to play with him and play as he plays—and God gifted me with some ears.” The truth was of course rather different. Two weeks later she wrote to Hollie I. West, “Cecil, all of a sudden, went berserk... the only thing we really rehearsed was the history” (i.e., the opening sequence of her historically oriented compositions). She also expressed regret that Taylor

85 Rusch, “Cecil Taylor,” 52.
86 Smith, Interview with Mary Lou Williams. Although I have not been able to determine the exact date of this interview it must have been recorded around the second week of May 1977 because it was taped in Vancouver, where Williams played from 11 through 14 May that year. MLWC, Performance and Personal Appearance Files, 1936–1981: Finding Aid (https://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/jazz/MLW_PDFs/performance%2520list.pdf; accessed 10 June 2017).
87 Mary Lou Williams, letter to Hollie I. West, 26 May 1977, MLWC, Series 5, Box 4, Folder 3; partially quoted in Edwards, “Zoning Mary Lou Williams Zoning,” 169. The letter, which begins “Dear Hollie,” may not have been mailed; West has no recollection of
“was upset about an article I’m to blame for”—perhaps referring to a newspaper report, published in the New York Times two days ahead of the performance, that quoted her saying that in the jazz avant-garde she heard “hate, bitterness, hysteria, black magic, confusion, discontent, empty studies, musical exercises by various European composers, sounds of the earth, no ears, not even relative pitch, and Afro galore.”

When the concert recording was issued a year later Williams still cast it in a favorable light when speaking on the record, telling writer Val Wilmer, “I kept listening to it and it keeps adding and flowing together. When there’s an opening, I go along with him and start swinging like Fats [Waller] and it’s a contrast to what he’s doing.” But she maintained elsewhere that she had been “completely shocked that night,” protesting that not only had Taylor failed to play her pieces in the way she had expected, but he also had impeded her own role, making her feel as though “there were times when it appeared he wasn’t going to let me in.”

Her collaborator nonetheless said he had done “exactly what [he] wanted to do” and assessed the Carnegie Hall performance in terms ranging from “all right” to “completely successful.” In his conversation with Rusch, Taylor reflected on the concert at some length, claiming that Williams had been dissatisfied because she “had a particular idea in mind what she wanted to do and it seemed to me that... it was never really understood on her part how I viewed... music.” He continued:

It’s very simple, most of the people thought, most of the critics thought that... there would be an attempt to reduplicate styles of eras gone past. I consider that possibly one way to do things. The other thing that came to me to feel about it was that the legacy of those preceding generations still lives, not only in the musical present of those people who are still alive from those generations, but the major principles of musical

receiving it, but recalls being in close contact with Williams at the time of the Carnegie Hall concert, spending an entire day at her home in New York. He doubts that any other individual named Hollie could have been its intended recipient (telephone conversation, 15 June 2015). See also Stan Britt, “The First Lady of Jazz: Mary Lou Williams,” Jazz Journal International, September 1981, 10–12, at 12.


organizations [sic] that those people have given us are the property of all succeeding musical generations. 92

Taylor’s assessment was fair. The two musicians’ markedly different perspectives on the event were not merely a matter of taxing rehearsals, petty disagreements, and logistical complexities. Their conceptions of jazz as a musical and a social phenomenon, and of their own individual relationships to the idiom and its past, were fundamentally irreconcilable. Commenting further on the concert, Taylor explained, “the really poetic essence of [the] music” resided in “the spirit that informs [jazz musicians] as to what the music should be made of. It wasn’t about imitating the notes . . . it was understanding the passion that informs. It’s about the culture.” 93

And if the two pianists conceived of jazz dissimilarly—Williams regarding it as stylistically evolving while maintaining fundamental principles of swing, regular meter, tonality, and so forth; Taylor viewing it primarily in cultural terms, encompassing a wider, perhaps limitless, range of aesthetic practices—they also engaged with the idiom’s communal conventions in very different ways. 94 Williams was more of a classicist, respecting “tradition and organization” and reluctant to stray from a well-defined and circumscribed array of musical orthodoxies. 95 Taylor was a romantic, committed above all to spontaneous self-expression and willing to flout idiomatic norms without hesitation. 96 “One has to be very careful about making the separation between style . . . and . . . musical creativity,” he cautioned, when asked about the Carnegie Hall performance. “It seemed to me that my responsibility was in any context to create music that I thought was valid, exists today paying homage to the preceding eras—but on my

92 Rusch, “Cecil Taylor,” 53 (ellipses in the original).
93 Ibid., 57. Taylor’s stance is notably distinct from that of those commentators who have sought to relate the pianist’s music to the received jazz tradition by identifying audible stylistic features that it shares with jazz, or with African American musical traditions more generally. Baraka, for one, calls attention in this regard to one of Taylor’s most conservative performances—a 1960 triple-meter piano trio improvisation on the popular song “This Nearly Was Mine.” See Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones], “Cecil Taylor,” in Black Music (New York: William Morrow, 1968), 110–12, at 110–11; discussed in Phillip Brian Harper, Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 97–112.
94 According to A. B. Spellman, Taylor “views . . . tonality or the lack of it as quite beside the point of his music.” Four Lives in the Bebop Business, 29–30.
own terms.” His individual creativity, in other words, overrode stylistic conventions established by other players or associated with other eras.

The pianists’ differing artistic outlooks were compounded by more mundane, practical asymmetries: they had entirely different responsibilities and financial interests in the performance. As the event’s organizer, Williams expended considerable administrative labor and bore the economic risk. Since the concert failed to break even, she in effect paid Taylor’s fee out of her own pocket. She consequently felt entitled to more deference from him than he was able or willing to grant her. And she felt it was her prerogative to set the terms of the event, including making last-minute changes—the addition of a rhythm section—that exacerbated the simmering artistic tensions. Although neither Williams nor the concert’s reviewers went so far as to expressly invoke matters of social etiquette, the appearance of a younger, male musician performing in a way that discomfited an older, female artist could also seem indecorous. Yet at the same time, Taylor had been placed in the awkward position of being contractually bound to participate in a concert whose parameters had unexpectedly changed at the last minute in ways that undercut his musical goals.

But given his full awareness of the enormous musical chasm separating its protagonists, in what sense did Taylor claim the Carnegie Hall concert to have been successful? Certainly, by pursuing their own individual creative impulses, both he and Williams had fulfilled his—but not her—principal artistic desideratum. Yet in and of itself this would not warrant his characterizing the event as “a success”—as a collective endeavor, that is, rather than as simply two coinciding parallel performances. From an external observer’s vantage point the duo performance in its totality could plausibly be defended as an experimentalist project (critic Kevin Whitehead has compared it to Conlon Nancarrow’s player piano studies), or as a postmodern juxtaposition of contrasting, independently coherent styles—an aesthetic of fragmentation, discontinuity, and multiplicity that is especially conducive to strategies of implicit critique whereby one or more idiomatic systems comments on or transforms others. The latter interpretation would necessarily take for granted that, in terms of their

98 Ibid., 54.
formal attributes, the two pianists’ individual styles were highly dissimilar, such that Taylor could interact musically with Williams from an external aesthetic perspective—as a disinterested commentator rather than a coequal collaborator.

Yet when asked Taylor habitually objected to his music being associated with experimentalism or postmodernism. In his mind these artistic movements remained inextricably embedded in the Euro-American art world in which they were originally identified and named—a world that he described as “closed” to African American musicians due to racial discrimination. Even though he admired, albeit with reservations, the work of the emblematic white experimentalist composer, John Cage, his immediate response when invited to give his opinion of Cage was simply, “He doesn’t come from my community.” And tellingly Taylor was chagrined when, in 1973, the Guggenheim Foundation approved his application for a fellowship to “define the Black methodological system of composing and writing” but in doing so announced that the award was bestowed for “experimental music.” These convictions placed him at odds with those proponents of postwar African American musical avant-gardism who advocated a “nonracialized account of experimental music.” Taylor inclined more toward the black nationalism of the Black Arts movement, although his attitudes were less zealously separatist than those of Black Arts adherents such as Baraka. For as Benjamin Piekut writes, “Baraka and his associates constructed black nationalism on a foundation of cultural purity; any association with or involvement in what was thought to be ‘European,’ ‘Western,’ or white was condemned.” By contrast, Taylor


insisted he was “not afraid of European influences. The point is to use them—as Ellington did—as part of my life as an American Negro.” 105 Furthermore, even within the realm of African American music writ large—which he considered “jazz” by another name—Taylor tended to rhetorically embrace neither the overt eclecticism nor the genre-destabilizing aesthetics advanced by certain influential black avant-garde musicians under imprimaturs such as “great black music.” 106 Rather, he consistently emphasized his ties to the narrower, core jazz canon, even going so far as to fault certain high-profile players, among them Ornette Coleman, Sonny Rollins, and Miles Davis, for gravitating toward postwar popular styles that used electric instruments. 107 Ultimately, then, if the 1977 concert is to be understood with due consideration for the perspectives of its participants, it must be apprehended not through a lens of musical experimentalism or polystylism, but in terms particular to the genre of jazz.

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Mary Lou Williams and Cecil Taylor’s Carnegie Hall performance left a lasting imprint. The participants’ public and private testimonies, critics’ published commentaries, archival evidence, and audio documentation all indicate that, at every moment on stage, the pianists’ musical strategies of antagonism and conflict, as well as of empathy and compromise, engaged perennial historical and stylistic questions about jazz that were inseparable from broader issues of black American identity. Williams was by disposition a communitarian. Respectful of tradition, dedicated to mentoring younger musicians, and committed to charity work for the disadvantaged, she saw African Americans’ collective identity as not purely a consequence of oppressive conditions originating externally but also

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107 Taylor was “not happy with” Coleman’s first album featuring electric instruments, Dancing In Your Head, and was similarly unenthused by tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins’s fusion-influenced LP Easy Living, declaring, “Those chumps he’s playing with ain’t playing anything. He’s one of the cats I learned a lot from so it hurts me when I, you know, hear him playing this simple shit.” Johnson, “Cecil Taylor: An Interview with a Jazz Legend,” A13, C10. Taylor also “lost interest in [Miles] Davis after Bitches Brew,” the trumpeter’s most famous recording with electric instruments. Stanley, “Jazz Pianist Cecil Taylor,” 9. The notion of a “core” jazz tradition is discussed in Scott DeVeaux, “Core and Boundaries,” Source 2 (2005): 15–30.
fostered internally by individuals in a spirit of solidarity. From her standpoint, black cultural practices had been—and ought still to be—nurtured and affirmed from within, requiring that traditions be upheld by the community’s members. “Community is the word she used all the time in relation to jazz,” her manager, Peter O’Brien, once recalled.

Taylor, by contrast, was an ardent individualist, believing that societal racism enforced African Americans’ distinct communal identity from without, irrespective of the beliefs, actions, and desires of individual African Americans. What black Americans fundamentally shared was their adverse treatment. “My community...is usually on the other side of the tracks,” he explained in 1966. “Although we may live in the same time or in the same place, we are not accorded the means that [other] people who are existing at the same time are accorded. This is true, certainly, on an economic level, it is true in terms of education, and it is most assuredly true socially. Now, whatever I choose to take, you know, or use, or just am attracted to, the reality is that a separation exists.” Black Americans would, in other words, continue to be viewed as a defined social community even without their own active affirmation of the imposed label. What they thought, felt, or did as individuals had no bearing on their identity.

“There is no difference, as long as you’re black, where you come from,” Taylor insisted. “The thing that unites us is the sameness in the oppression that we have undergone at the hand of the white man.” He believed this inescapable reality, however brutal its social ramifications, relieved him as an artist of any “burden of representation” or moral imperative to fortify black collective consciousness by adhering to any of this community’s traditional musical practices. That is, while sharing the characteristic black nationalist conviction that racism is an engrained feature of U.S. society, he was reluctant to fully embrace black nationalism’s concomitant principle of intracommunal unity as a precondition for effective progressive political action. For that matter,
Taylor’s zealous, almost Emersonian, individualist philosophy stands at odds with the markedly communal ethos that suffuses practically the entire diverse spectrum of black American political thought, even its most liberal strains.114 “Blacks of all ideologies,” the political scientist Michael C. Dawson has observed, “would have problems with some Kantian version of the liberal self—a self so alienated from community as to achieve full realization only when it is a self of and for itself.”115 Taylor, never so irredeemably self-centered in his outlook, cannot fairly be branded an outright exception to this overarching norm. But he comes very close.

Naturally, the two pianists’ conceptions of jazz followed logically from their understandings of African American identity. As a communitarian, Williams saw the idiom as a tradition advanced collectively by musicians—potentially of any ethnicity—from one generation to the next, and therefore necessitating some degree of obeisance by individuals to the musical practices of their forerunners and contemporary peers. (Asked to offer advice to student musicians, her first suggestion was “go back to Fats Waller.”)116 For Taylor, jazz was simply an accumulation of black Americans’ varied musical responses to their social conditions—an assemblage of aesthetics designated by a single genre label based on its practitioners’ race and experience of discrimination.117 There were therefore no limits to its stylistic manifestations. For him this was an inviolable principle reflecting nothing less than his basic individual right to respect and dignity. “Music is organization of sound and every man is entitled to his means of how that sound is arrived at,” he declared. “But only if you think of him as a man.”118

So when the two pianists appeared together in public that Sunday evening in the spring of 1977, Mary Lou Williams was in effect inviting Cecil Taylor to collaborate on a symbolic statement of African American collective solidarity by participating in one of that community’s enduring, cherished cultural achievements, namely the performance of jazz—as she


115 Dawson, Black Visions, 256. Spellman writes that “the worst form of adversity” that Taylor experienced was “the alienation from his own... community” (Four Lives in the Bebop Business, 15).

116 Lyons, “Mary Lou Williams,” 73.


118 Wilmer, “Each Man His Own Academy,” 25.
construed it. At the rehearsals his adamant refusal, despite accepting her invitation, to cooperate on anything but his own terms, without the musical fidelity she desired and expected, caused her to fear a humiliating public repudiation—and the concert turned out to signal not merely a rejection of her communitarian aspirations but an incisive riposte to the widespread notion of music in general as a facilitator of social cohesion. Her valiant attempt to forestall this eventuality by summoning her own familiar musical associates, Cranshaw and Roker, may certainly have been well intended. Yet from Taylor’s point of view it was tinged with defiance, inevitably casting him as a disruptive presence—a stranger among an otherwise collegial confraternity. In this light his steadfast commitment to his own creative vision was less an act of selfish obduracy than an inspiring display of courageous fortitude. Williams became his foil. Artistically, financially, and emotionally, her hopes were dashed. But her failure was his success. For all the genuine admiration and fondness he felt toward her (decades later, in his final years, their concert poster still hung on the wall of his home), Taylor remained dedicated, resolutely, to the principle that whatever social identity was foisted on him by a world beyond his control, it was imperative that he define himself, as an individual, in his own musical way. By living out that vital conviction in a dramatic, unwavering fashion, he made the recital he shared with Williams an eloquent, if unruly, testament to African American communal pluralism and individual self-determination. The event was, in that respect, a resounding achievement.

ABSTRACT

Cecil Taylor (1929–2018), who was associated with the postwar black musical avant-garde, and Mary Lou Williams (1910–81), who had roots in jazz’s swing era, met in a notorious 1977 Carnegie Hall recital. These two African American pianists possessed decidedly different temperaments and aesthetic sensibilities; their encounter offers a striking illustration of how conflicts between coexisting performance strategies can reveal a great

119 The principle of solidarity that I ascribe to Williams is more monolithic than the “enabling solidarity” that Michael Eric Dyson has advocated as an emancipatory political strategy “appeal[ing] to the richly varied meanings of cultural practices, the diversity of authentic roles one may express within the repertoire of black cultural identities.” Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xvii.
121 Gottschalk, “Cecil Taylor: Mr. Taylor’s Filibuster.”
deal about musicians’ thought processes and worldviews. Evidence from unpublished manuscripts and letters, published interviews and written commentary by the performers, the accounts of music critics, and musical transcriptions from a commercial recording (the album *Embraced*) reveals that, in addition to demonstrating the performers’ distinct musical idiolects, the concert engaged longstanding debates over jazz’s history and definition as well as broader issues of black American identity. In particular, it dispelled still potent notions of jazz as a genre with a unilinear historical trajectory, and it encapsulated the inherent ambivalence toward the past often exhibited by the jazz avant-garde.

Keywords: avant-garde, Cecil Taylor, *Embraced*, genre, identity, improvisation, jazz, Mary Lou Williams