

**A New Stream Of Discourse**  
*Case Studies into Critical Analyses of Cecil Taylor's Music*

Anthony Caulkins

## **Introduction to Discussions of Cecil Taylor's Music**

It is often difficult to know exactly how to approach the analysis of music that is generally put into the category of 'free' or 'open' improvisation. It seems that the most common method is to direct the bulk of the discussion toward issues of cultural and historical contextualization, while giving relatively little space to analysis of the musical material itself. Through these predominantly sociological approaches, a culture of analysis has been developed around Black American improvised music that often ignores many musical elements that may provide a great deal of insight into the construction and understanding of this music. My use of the phrase 'musical material' assumes some basic difference between the sonic phenomenon occurring during a performance, as well as the accompanying written documentation (i.e. scores, charts, pictures, etc...), and the sociological reasons and implications for that music's existence. I could imagine a situation in which these ideas were not easily separable, but for the purposes of this discussion I will treat them as distinct from one another.

The body of writing surrounding the music of Cecil Taylor is a prime example of this tendency of academics to lean heavily on the sociological issues while leaving the musical ones aside, for the most part. Taylor's music, usually fitting into the category of 'free jazz', tends to pose a certain level of intimidation towards those who choose to write on the subject, from any angle (sociological, musicological, historical, etc...). In fact, his own thoughts and writing on the matter work to dissuade one from trying to tackle the problem of how to discuss, in any rigorous manner, the inner workings and structures of his music. Perhaps as a result of Taylor's resistance to structural analysis, most authors

endeavoring to portray Taylor's music rely on fairly journalistic styles of description, giving evocative and colorful metaphors for discrete musical events that they have heard in his music without saying much in the way of why or how this music works. In a certain light, these qualitative discussions of his music are quite useful as a means of describing Taylor's musical style and practice to those who do not possess knowledge of standard musical jargon, but are searching for a "way in" to his music. The written work of Greg Tate, Howard Mandel, and Alex Ross come to mind as prime examples of this type of writing on Taylor's music. I do not wish to cast these authors' works in a pejorative light, as each of them does strive to provide a high level of cultural analysis of the contexts surrounding Taylor's music, but rather to suggest that the conversation does not have to rely solely on cultural discourse but could benefit from the inclusion of other forms of musical analysis.

For the purposes of this paper, I will look into the works of writers who have endeavored to give academic space to Cecil Taylor's music in ways that do not rely solely on cultural analysis, but also include some level of musical theoretical discussion. Of course, the very idea of bringing a music, such as that of Taylor's, into the musical theoretical discursive space begs some difficult questions that involve the privileging of arguments that deal in the esoteric studies involving pitches and rhythms, understood from a western theoretical point of view. What is the point of imposing certain forms of reductive discourse onto music that seems to resist it in the first place? Why is it important to have published articles that discuss this music in terms of: form, harmony,

rhythm, notation, technique, etcetera? Is this yet another example of having to validate Black music by forcing it to conform to Eurocentric notions of ‘serious’ analysis?

In some ways, the answer to the final question is yes, as I will show with the case studies that I discuss later in this paper. Of course, it is not objectively necessary to develop a body written work on Taylor’s music that incorporates these types of analyses; and my own interest in this development does reveals certain biases towards discussions that are geared in the direction of gestures, pitches, and rhythms of a musical work. However, I do believe further inclusion of Cecil Taylor’s music into these circles of discourse will help to broaden understanding, build greater appreciation, and work towards a demystification of a musical voice that can be quite difficult to access, namely Cecil Taylor’s.

My discussion of academic writing, surrounding Taylor’s music will consist of three written examples, each of which presents its own methods for discussing and analyzing Cecil Taylor’s music, as well as exemplifies a step in the lineage of a culture of discourse still being developed today. These three written examples are: A. B. Spellman’s book, *Four Jazz Lives* (1966), which shows an early attempt to give a space in academic musicological discourse to the avant-garde jazz musicians of the late 1960s; Ekkehard Jost’s book, *Free Jazz* (1974), which presents one of the first standardized methods for describing the musical content and structure of music under the category of ‘free jazz’, giving an example analysis of *Unit Structures*, one of Cecil Taylor’s ensemble works; and finally Kaja Draksler’s dissertation, *Cecil Taylor Life As... Structure Within a Free Improvisation* (2013), which is an unprecedented attempt to develop a theory and

vocabulary for describing Taylor's musical structures and tendencies. Building on a complete transcription of Taylor's solo improvisation, *Live As....* Draksler's dissertation is perhaps the most extensive of each of these discussions, providing a complete transcription, analysis, and proposed theory of Taylor's music that attempts to combine both the musical theoretical side of analysis with the cultural contexts in which the music exists. This is not to suggest that there are no other sources giving musical theoretical descriptions of Taylor's music in the same way as Draksler; Lynette Westendorf,<sup>1</sup> Andrew Bartlett,<sup>2</sup> and Steven Block<sup>3,4</sup> have each published in-depth theoretical articles discussing the structure of Taylor's music. However, Draksler's transcription and development of notation designed for analysis goes beyond both Westendorf and Block in its level of completion and specificity, as well as the scope of its transcribed musical examples.

### **A. B. Spellman - *Four Jazz Lives***

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<sup>1</sup> Lynette Westendorf, "Cecil Taylor: Indent – "Second Layer""", *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 33 No. 1/2 (Winter – Summer 1995), pp. 294 – 326.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Bartlett, "Cecil Taylor, identity energy, and the avant-garde African American body." *Perspectives Of New Music* 33, no. 1-2 (Winter-summer 1995): 274-293.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Block, "'Bemsha Swing": The Transformation of a Bebop Classic to Free Jazz", *Music Theory Spectrum*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Autumn, 1997), pp. 206-231

<sup>4</sup> Steven Block, "Pitch-Class Transformation in Free Jazz", *Music Theory Spectrum*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Autumn, 1990), pp. 181-202.

Alfred Bennett (A. B.) Spellman is a poet, music historian, and critic who became active and influential in the world of American Black music in the late 1950s. At that time he wrote as a critic for several jazz-based publications such as Metronome, Downbeat, and Rhythm Magazine,<sup>5</sup> which allowed him to gain exposure to, and recognition among, the cutting edge jazz musicians of the day. Also during this time, Spellman published his first collection of poetry, entitled *The Beautiful Days*, inserting himself as an artist on the New York scene during an era of cultural and artistic revolution. However, it wasn't until 1966, when he published his pivotal book, originally titled *Four Lives in the Bebop Business* (later changed to *Four Jazz Lives*),<sup>6</sup> describing the lives and musical practices of four of the most influential and avant-garde jazz performers of the day: Cecil Taylor; Ornette Colman; Herbie Nichols; and Jackie McLean, that he became a prominent figure in the development of African American improvised music. This text displayed an unprecedented sensitivity to each of the musicians' musical practices, attempting to give serious scholastic attention to what Spellman considered to be American 'high art', rather than music born solely out of the entertainment industry (a popular assertion by many critics and academics of the time).

*Four Jazz Lives*, reissued with a new introduction in 2004, is comprised of a compilation of material that Spellman assembled from interviews with each of the four artists, combined with some contextual background and interpretative commentary. This

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<sup>5</sup> Biography of A. B. Spellman, "Civic Makers – A. B. Spellman", *The History Makers: The Nation's Largest African American Video Oral History Collection*, December 7, 2004, <http://www.thehistorymakers.com/biography/b-spellman-40>

<sup>6</sup> A. B. Spellman, interview with Willard Jenkins, May 21, 2009, *Ain't But a Few of Us: How Black Jazz Writers Persevere*.

book does not contain much in the way of theoretical analysis of Cecil Taylor's music, but what it does try to do, quite effectively in my opinion, is to give Taylor's music (as well as the music of the other musicians discussed in this book) a serious place in the world of musicological discourse, as well as bring up important questions regarding issues of musical technique in jazz traditions, as opposed to European classical traditions.

The text begins by situating the discussion of four cutting edge jazz musicians within the revolutionary New York arts scene in the late 1960s. Working to give cultural contexts to the musical revolutions being fought by each of these musicians, Spellman gives examples of other concurrent political, cultural, and artistic upheavals of the time. He points to the rise of pacifism in the face of the Vietnam War, the famous Supreme Court ruling in the case, *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*, the rise of the Black Power movement and Malcolm X, the popular musical revolutions of Jimi Hendrix, as well as the influence of the Greenwich Village culture in New York as being the backdrop upon which Cecil Taylor (as well as Ornette Coleman, Herbie Nichols, and Jackie McLean) would lead their own musical wars against old modes of tonality, form, and technique. This context gives certain clues as to why and under what circumstances this music was made, but for the most part does not really address compositional procedures or musical structures, beyond fairly general remarks.

His music is very well made. It always proceeds according to a system and a carefully contrived structure. Pay close attention to all of those notes blasting over you, and you will perceive a lyricism that is frequently tender, always moving. Cecil is the most percussive of pianists...<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A. B. Spellman, *Four Jazz Lives*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004 Reissue – Orig. 1966), Introduction to the New Edition - x.

For the most part Spellman allows Taylor to speak for himself regarding his own music, giving minimal insertion of his own interpretation of what Spellman felt that Taylor was doing. This is an interesting approach to presenting an artist's work that is often forgotten in written analysis of others' work. It can be difficult to allow an artist to comment on what they feel they do without restating or explaining it in your own words with the intention of breaking it down positively or negatively. Spellman, with a high level of respect and reverence for Taylor's music, nicely balances the more 'interviewistic' approach of letting Taylor give his own thoughts, only giving explanation, context, or interpretation when necessary. Spellman, at the end of the original introduction to this book states:

I have tried to let the musicians speak for themselves...It would have been my preference to see published four autobiographies to give as clear a picture as possible of what these musicians think of their own lives. I have shifted and spliced, and moved their ideas around to put them in their most advantageous places, but I have not put words in their mouths. They have enough of their own.<sup>8</sup>

Spellman makes a point to discuss Taylor's constant struggle with his identity as a composer of American Black music, coming out of the New England Conservatory, where studies were centered almost exclusively on the compositional developments of White, Male, European and American composers. This musical training, while playing an important role in Taylor's development, is something that is often used to give his 'far out' explorations a certain authenticity. Spellman is insistent throughout his discussion that Taylor's music exists in the realm of 'high art', with or without the techniques learned within the walls of the conservatory. This insistence of Taylor's music belonging

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., xxiii - xxiv



to the world of ‘high art’ displays a certain necessity, felt by Spellman and many of the avant-garde Black musicians of the 1960s, to give this music a sense of authenticity, using European ‘high art’ as the basis from which to compare the importance of any other type of music. It is similar to the idea of it being acceptable for a classical musician to play in a rock band because they are ‘actually’ good due to their classical training.

This conflict between academic training and Black musical roots is primary to Spellman’s discussion of the conception of Taylor’s music. This is in part due to the rejection that Cecil Taylor suffered from both of the musical worlds in which he existed. The established world of academic music, and the conservatory, would have nothing to do with Taylor and saw his music as being inferior to European forms, due to its relation to jazz and vernacular musics; and the big names in jazz at the time also refused to take his music seriously due to its revolutionary nature, in a direction that was not readily understood. In a quote by Cecil Taylor, he recounts a performance in which Miles Davis walked out while Dizzy Gillespie and Sarah Vaughn made several disparaging remarks while Taylor played.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of this bi-polar rejection, Taylor’s was forced to find his own path navigating his role as an African American composer/improviser. Spellman addresses Taylor’s take on how he fits into the world of composition and music as being aligned primarily with the likes of Duke Ellington and Thelonious Monk, in that he draws on European influences when they are useful to enriching his own musical conceptions “and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 14.

what he does comes as a living idea out of his life's experience, not from a theory.”<sup>10</sup> This statement displays an awareness on the part of Taylor of the complexity of his influences and the value in allowing them to exist in his music without pedantically conforming to anything as rigid as a codified theory.

Another primary issue surrounding Taylor’s music is the idea of piano technique and how practice of certain modes of piano playing are seen as cultural indicators that show performers as belonging to different traditions of performance. Spellman describes Taylor’s reaction to an article published by Gunther Schuller in which he suggests that Thelonious Monk would never think to change his technique, even if it allowed him to improve his musical ability. Schuller’s point of view is, of course, coming from a perspective of treating classical music, and by extension classical piano technique, as the ‘gold standard’ by which everything is measured. Taylor on the other hand has a much broader and more inclusive view of musical technique, that includes the totality of everything a musician does when performing. Taylor uses the antics of a performance by the acclaimed James Brown to exemplify this point.

...when [blues singer and dancer] James Brown goes into his thing, he goes; it's like a complete catharsis...Every fucking thing goes and there ain't no holding back. And it's beautiful...The definition of proper technique in music must then depend on the cultural origins of that music. Kneeling while screaming and ripping off his shirt is not merely a part of James Brown's showmanship, it is an essential of the communication of the highly emotional songs that James Brown sings, and if he moves the audience, that technique is sound.<sup>11</sup>

This primarily musicological approach to discussing Taylor’s music is one that

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 43.

gives a complex image of this musician's musical being and his reasons and motivations for pushing musical boundaries in the ways that he did. This is an important piece of writing in that it began a trend of endeavoring to discuss complex Black American musics at a high level of cultural discourse. What Spellman's treatment does not do is present many of the specifically musical workings within Taylor's compositions and improvisations. It is not until almost ten years later that a comprehensive musical theoretical analysis (dealing with the notes, rhythms, harmonies, and formal structures) of these works is attempted.

### **Ekkehard Jost - *Free Jazz***

Ekkehard Jost is a musicologist, composer, and musician who has devoted several years to the study and practice of what is generally (and somewhat problematically) described as 'free jazz'. In 1974, Jost published the book entitled *Free Jazz*, which displayed an unprecedented attempt at a critical analysis of the musical constructions of several leaders within the Black American avant-garde jazz scene of the 1960s and early 1970s, including John Coltrane, Charles Mingus, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Sun Ra, as well as others. This book served as an alternative analytical presentation of the musics of these artists, constructing arguments primarily out of the building blocks of their music itself, with a comparatively cursory level of discussion regarding the sociological contexts of these musics. In some ways, Jost is incredibly successful in finding clear and succinct language to describe the compositional techniques of these musicians. However, in his attempts to include cultural context concerning their practices, he often ignores large looming questions regarding racial and cultural interactions between Eurocentric

and Afrocentric musical practices. What Jost does tackle is the issue of the lack of monetary value placed upon these artists' musics, which contributed to many of them struggling to make livings once they had found their own explorational voices and rejected the more traditional jazz practices.

Cecil Taylor's career during the past twenty years has been marked by ups and downs that are only too typical of the free-jazz movement. Musical maturation, the acquisition of a personal language, was accompanied by an utter lack of financial success...Not until 1957, after his first record, *Jazz Advance*, was he able to get a regular job at the "Five Spot."<sup>12</sup>

In his introduction, Ekkehard Jost addresses similar observations to those stated in the introduction of this paper, being that there is a good deal of sociological work written about the lives and music of the avant-garde jazz musicians of the 1960s, but comparatively little musical theoretical writing on the subject. Jost states that his goal in writing this text is to give voice to musical discussions which "escape purely sociological analysis" and give preference to "the autonomous musical aspects of the evolution of free jazz".<sup>13</sup> Jost claims that this lack of musical theoretical writing is due to the fact that those who were interested in writing about the music of the avant-garde jazz musicians of the late 1960s were primarily social scientists, in contrast to musicologists (or musical theorists), who did not see this development in music as legitimate and devoted most of their attention to jazz musicians of previous eras. While I am sure that Jost's position on the lack of musicological writing on the topic is largely valid, I would also add that at the time that *Free Jazz* was published, there was a great resistance by artists like Cecil Taylor to have their music discussed using the methods of rationalizing and systematizing

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<sup>12</sup> Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz*, (Gratz, Austria: Da Capo Press, 1974), 68.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

developed by academies in the fields of music theory and musicology. This resistance is a complex issue that would be foolish to ignore as it relates heavily to years of cultural appropriation of American Black musics and to the derivation of musical “authenticity” through passing the Eurocentric tests of complex harmony, rhythm, form, etcetera.

Jost begins his discussion of Taylor’s music by situation Taylor in the 1960s avant-garde beside Ornette Coleman, calling Coleman the “shepherd” and Taylor the “seer”.<sup>14</sup> Jost uses the title of “seer” for Taylor as a way to describe his compositional style as

...marked by unremitting tension between emotionality and constructionistic complexity that is due in part to assimilating contemporary European and American New Music tendencies in the language of free jazz.<sup>15</sup>

This statement, in a somewhat careless way, describes a duality of influence that informs Taylor’s music, without including Taylor’s own issues concerning the interaction between Eurocentric and African American musical cultures. As with his comment about the lack of musical theoretical writing about Taylor’s music, it is not that Jost is incorrect about these influences, but he does not take the time to present the complexities that arise when discussing the social aspects of the the interactions between Black and White cultures in the Western world.

Jost begins his musical analysis of Taylor’s music by discussing his rhythmic tendencies and their relations to the notion of swinging in jazz. Jost gives a transcribed musical example to illustrate how Taylor changes the traditional notion of swing by

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 66.

moving accented pulses from before the beat to either on the beat or after the beat. This discussion serves to exemplify the difference between Taylor's practice and his contemporaries, such as Coltrane and Coleman whose sense of rhythm and flow are much more directly drawn from jazz traditions. Jost states that the flow and rhythms of Taylor's music are more closely related to changes in *energy*, drawing on the definition provided by physicists, rather than being tied to rhythmic structures from jazz forms.

Energy is, more than anything else, a variable of time. It creates motion of results from motion...the kinetic impulses emanating from Cecil Taylor's music are based on the rise and fall of energy...Swing in the traditional sense – the essential rhythmic element of jazz – ceases to exist when musicians play in a free tempo that has no clear metrical identity.<sup>16</sup>

In an early attempt, that Kaja Draksler later builds upon, Jost presents a complete analysis of Cecil Taylor's ensemble improvisation, *Unit Structures*. Jost's analysis is essentially a listed play-by-play of musical events that he hears as important, with basic formal sections highlighted (Anacrusis, Plain 1, Area 1, Plain 2, and Area 2)<sup>17</sup> and some simple transcribed excerpts to give some weight to his choice of sectioning. As there is no overarching metrical structure, nor standard score for this piece, Jost relies on temporal markings to distinguish when events take place.

0:00 The drummer sketches out a simple pattern on the tom-tom...

0:13 Alto saxophone and trumpet enter, accentuating freely at first...

0:23 Bass clarinet and basses (arco) enter successively, forming with the others a stationary chord whose function is mainly coloristic...<sup>18</sup>

This type of descriptive summarizing of improvised music does not seem to illuminate many crucial elements with respect to the nature of Taylor's improvisations. As open

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 69-70.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 78-83.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 78.

improvisation has a somewhat fleeting nature, the more general tendencies of Taylor's are not captured using this type of temporal identification of events. Prior to this timeline of *Unit Structures*, Jost does give some prosaic space to discussing Taylor's musical techniques found throughout his body of music. This section seems to illustrate much deeper and more interesting points about this music.

*Free Jazz'* importance as an early attempt at a complete analysis of a work of open improvisation is clear in that it is cited in almost every musical discussion of Cecil Taylor that I have encountered, post 1974. That being said, the level of insight into the inner workings of this music seems rather superficial, as Jost's method is primarily descriptive rather than analytical. What I see as important about this text is its status along the lineage of critical discourse on these types of improvised music and not its great value to gaining deep knowledge of the music itself.

### **Kaja Draksler - *Cecil Taylor Life As... Structure Within a Free Improvisation***

Kaja Draksler is a pianist, composer, and musicologist who wrote her thesis on Cecil Taylor's music, as part of her Master's study at the Conservatory of Amsterdam. Her method for conducting research into the construction of Taylor's music was revolutionary in the world of musical analysis. To break down his music, Draksler sat down at the piano and learned to play as well as transcribed an entire improvisation of Taylor's. Learning this work required her to embody this music to a degree that goes beyond almost any previous musicological studies of this music. In this embodiment of Taylor's music, Draksler was able to develop a relationship and understanding of this piece that would be impossible from either listening or studying a score alone.

Part of why this method of actually learning the music from a performer's perspective is notable is because transcription and embodiment are such integral portions of jazz based pedagogy. Draksler is at least attempting to take in this music on its own terms, so to speak, before applying her more Eurocentric means of analysis to it.

She begins her written discussion as each of the examples in this paper have, by giving some cultural context to Taylor's music, as well as generally describing it. Something else Draksler does, as well as Spellman and Jost, that several of the more journalistic descriptions do not, is give a clear acknowledgement that Taylor is using some very specific and controlled types of musical material in his improvisations. In fact, it is this coherence to control of musical material that allows Taylor to explore as far and relentlessly as he does.

The material Taylor is using is pre-considered and fairly restricted; therefore, cohesive and at the same time, colorful and varied. He has developed a complete language of his own, which derives from his philosophy of life, his physical approach to the instrument and music in general, and from his heritage(s).<sup>19</sup>

Draksler is also careful in her discussion to point out the importance of Taylor's music as a totality of expression of more than notes and rhythms, as music theorists have a tendency to do, but of himself and his cultural heritages.

As part of her comprehensive investigation into Cecil Taylor's musical methods, she first posits four main behaviors guiding the construction of his music and building what Taylor sees as his personal language. These behaviors are: *fragmented melodies*,<sup>20</sup> usually used as generative material towards the beginnings and endings of his

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<sup>19</sup> Kaja Draksler, *Cecil Taylor Life As... Structure Within a Free Improvisation*, (Trboje, Slovenia, June 2013), 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.



improvisations; *arpeggiated figures/scales*,<sup>21</sup> a primary method of Taylor's in expanding scales into harmonies across the range of the piano; *sustained notes/chords*,<sup>22</sup> used to outline melodies within fragmented or arpeggiated figures; and *clustered chord repetitions/runs*,<sup>23</sup> perhaps Taylor's most notable linguistic method, used in periods of high energy and intensity.

Each of these methods that Draksler describes is accompanied by several meticulously transcribed musical examples, taken from Taylor's piece, *Life As...* What is particularly notable about these transcriptions is Draksler's sensitivity to the inexact nature of Taylor's rhythm when he performs. If one were to take the time to exactly notate everything played, a transcription might end up looking more like a score by Brian Ferneyhough than the basic rhythms and tuplets that Draksler has provided. However, I think that her reliance on fairly basic rhythmic relationships reflects the conception of the music much more accurately than a more rhythmically pedantic edition might. Taylor's use of time in his improvisation has a sense of flow between ideas and it isn't about mathematical grids or strict tempic ratios, but rather about gesture and breath. Even Draksler's notation of fast cluster runs provides a nice blend of specificity, with regards to general range, while still allowing for the fact that these high energy sections of Taylor's music do not necessarily place too high importance on the specific pitches sounding.

Draksler goes on to discuss how expression is built into Taylor's performance

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 14.

through his utilization of several of the piano's intrinsic capabilities, such as dynamic range<sup>24</sup> (especially in contrast to silence), difference in registral characteristic (which Taylor refers to as the cosmological areas of the piano)<sup>25</sup>, pedaling possibilities<sup>26</sup> (the blending and separations of harmonies, as well as overtone interaction), and personally developed techniques (based on a person's autodidactic tendencies and physiological preferences).<sup>27</sup> This is a discussion that seems incredibly important to the practice of composition and improvisation and seems often to be neglected. Beyond notes and rhythms, what is the expressive character of a type of music, and why? As Taylor's music is so much about the totality of experience, Draksler gives space to these expressive musical elements that can be somewhat difficult to discuss in concrete terms. However, as before, she provides concrete musical examples to illustrate how Taylor employs these elements as expressive devices in his performance.

From this point Draksler goes on to give a complete formal theoretical analysis of Cecil Taylor's piece, *Life As...*. Her choices of formal descriptors are strongly based in the classical traditions of musical discussion as she claims that this improvisation is separated into an introduction, development, and recapitulation.<sup>28</sup> These terms, especially development and recapitulation, invoke a certain tie to the formal structures of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, which might seem somewhat antithetical to Taylor's own opinions of his music. However, Draksler goes to great lengths, with several transcribed sections

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 29.

pointing to large-scale harmonic progressions, to provide evidence of this type of structure within *Life As....* What is notable about this formal analysis is that through her transcription, Draksler has been able to point out specific bass movements and internal harmonies that provide modal cohesion in a way that is traditional in many forms of jazz practice.

Cecil Taylor does not use the traditional concept of form in jazz, where a particular harmonic sequence delineates the overall structure of the piece, but he does, in my opinion, use the idea of a melody with a bass movement as the framework, as a silent song in the background.<sup>29</sup>

Draksler is careful not to suggest that there is any unifying ‘chord progression’, key, or even mode, into which Taylor’s music fits, but rather that there are internal consistencies which can be found to reference these types of musical structures.

*Life As...*, as well as other Cecil Taylor’s pieces have neither a functional harmonic structure, with definable tonalit(ies), nor are they atonal. However, Taylor is often “implying a tonality without being strictly tonal” (from a private conversation with V. Iyer, 2012).<sup>30</sup>

Moving on from her formal theoretical discussion of Taylor’s music, Draksler addresses issues surrounding the study and discussion of Cecil Taylor’s music in academic circles, as well as in general. These issues include Taylor’s relationship with written musical notation and his relationship with European classical music.

Draksler describes Taylor’s dislike for standard forms of Western musical notation and describes briefly the system that he developed to represent his music. This system is based on generally describing pitch content, contour, and gesture, with the express purpose of not inhibiting a performer's own voice or creativity when playing.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 37.

According to Draksler's account of Vijay Iyer's opinion on the matter, Taylor was aiming to frame his music as a form of speech and personal narrative.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the abstract black ovals of standard notation were too far removed from ideas of personalized expression. Draksler concludes two basic functions of Taylor's custom notation:

First is to set the musicians free from their common experience with reading music and make them more attentive. And the second is to simplify the communication to ensemble members of different skill levels with conventional notation.<sup>32</sup>

Moving from notation into the complex nature of Cecil Taylor's relationship with classical music, Draksler discusses his constant struggle with his compositional identity. Taylor has always strongly tried to downplay his ties to European traditions and would often give offhand statements suggesting that his music was merely the blues, or something to that effect. Discussion of this relationship is extremely important, in light of the fact that Draksler has just spent several pages giving an incredibly Eurocentric analysis of Taylor's music. Draksler's conclusion to this portion of her dissertation is somewhat obvious, but important nonetheless, showing that Taylor, in the same way as all musicians, draws inspiration from everything in his life. His music might poses qualities similar to thousands of other types of music, but these similarities are not necessary in giving his own practice authenticity, the fact that he does what he does can be seen as an authentic practice.

The totality of Draksler's dissertation provides an important framework for further methods of investigation into musics that have traditionally evaded academic discussion. The fact that Draksler specifically provides multiple angles with which to

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 40.

view and understand Taylor's music, some from a musical theoretical angle and some from a sociological angle, shows that this semi-holistic (providing multiple types of material for the purposes of giving a more complete argument than from a single point of view) approach to musical study can lead deeper understandings of how and why certain musics exist in the ways that they do.

## **Conclusion**

Each of the pieces of writing discussed in this paper belongs to a developing lineage and culture of musical discourse that is still very much in need of further elaboration, if it is to become canonized in the sub-cultures of academia that deal in these types of musical analysis. Spellman's initial attempts to give a serious academic space to Taylor's music were taken further by Jost, who cites Spellman frequently in his text. While Draksler does build on the work of Spellman and Jost in her dissertation, her methods and final product were so much more comprehensive than the output of any of her predecessors. Draksler's approach of embodied learning of the music, sociological study, and musical analysis provides a way of understanding Taylor's music using the terms of multiple disciplines and perhaps gives further insight into his musical practice than any previous written work. Building on her means of research, new cultures of musical analysis can be developed that strive to deal with music as a complex phenomenon that exists in a hybrid space between the notes and the people. Of course, a text such as Draksler's is not something that would be useful outside certain sub-cultures within academia; but what it does, is to create the conditions needed for increased investigation into this music within those academic sub-cultures.

Even if the specific written outcome that Draksler's musical theoretical approach produces is only useful within small academic circles, her technique could certainly be employed from a slightly different angle, but with a stronger cultural or historical focus. In these cases, the final product would contain less information about specific notes, rhythms, and harmonies, but could still be the result of embodied engagement with the music itself and the musical traditions surrounding it. This would of course mean that academic cultures of analysis would have to be changed if there was a desire to include musics such as Taylor's into their canon of discourse.

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