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BOOK REVIEWS

Crossing Bar Lines: The Politics and Practices of Black Musical Space

By James Gordon Williams. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021

Steven Lewis

National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, USA
Email: LewisS@si.edu
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In *Crossing Bar Lines: The Politics and Practices of Black Musical Space*, James Gordon Williams argues that African American improvisers use music to reimagine musical, ontological, and physical spaces. These acts of reimagination and reclamation work to subvert white supremacist systems that would lock Black people into a state of what Williams calls "placelessness" (8). Williams explores the work of Terence Blanchard, Billy Higgins, Terri Lyne Carrington, Ambrose Akinmusire, and Andrew Hill to illustrate the ways Black improvisers create alternative spaces in which they affirm Black life and critique white supremacy.

The author's theory of Black musical space builds on the work of Katherine McKittrick, particularly her concept of "Black geographies."[1] As Williams explains, McKittrick argues that Black people respond to their displacement and alienation with creative acts that redefine Black life in terms that reject the limitations imposed by white supremacy (6). Williams frames African American improvisation as "a practice of sonically improvised space-making that contests and disrupts the marginalization that buttresses the falsely imagined neutral and transparent spaces we share" (6). He theorizes the musicians profiled in *Crossing Bar Lines* as "cartographers" whose performances "demonstrate musical and ontological place-making" (6).

Williams borrows the musical phrase "crossing bar lines" to describe the ways in which Black musicians' performances cross hegemonic musical and social barriers. The practice of crossing bar lines within Black musical space both reflects Black humanity and "opens up new interdisciplinary pathways and types of alternative knowledge that elucidate African American improvisatory and musical practices" (16). Taken together, Williams intends for his interlocking concepts of Black musical space and crossing bar lines to offer an alternative to common teleological narratives of jazz history while bringing new attention to the creative work of Black improvisers.

Williams organizes his study into five chapters devoted to individual improvisers. Three chapters cover performances that are explicitly political and comment on topics ranging from police brutality to mass incarceration and homophobia. The pieces covered here include: Terence Blanchard's "Breathless" (2015); Terri Lyne Carrington's "Echo" (2011) and *Waiting Game* (2019); and Ambrose Akinmusire's "My Name Is Oscar" (2011), "Confessions to My Unborn Daughter" (2011), "Rollcall for Those Absent" (2014), and "Free, White, and 21" (2018). Chapters 1 and 4, on Blanchard and Akinmusire, respectively, display Williams's interest in the Black Lives Matter movement and issues of police violence. As he observes in his introduction, *Crossing Bar Lines* is the first study to explore Black improvisers' responses to this movement. Accordingly, his analysis of Blanchard's "Breathless," an original composition dedicated to Eric Garner that incorporates recordings of male and female exhalations, draws connections not only to Garner's murder, but also to the broader plight of marginalized people in the United States. The author asserts that Blanchard

[1]For further discussion of McKittrick's "Black geographies" concept, see Katherine McKittrick, "On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place," *Social & Cultural Geography* 12, no. 8 (2011): 947–63.

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prominently uses sounds of breathing "because he wants the listener to feel submerged in the sonic experience of breathlessness, with no escape from the sound of the systemic chokehold around the symbolic necks of the marginalized" (37). Moving on to another political project, much of Chapter 3 is devoted to Carrington's fight against patriarchy and homophobia in the male-dominated jazz world. Williams persuasively argues that gender injustice must be eliminated for Black musical place-making to achieve its full inclusive potential. Observing that the "practice of inclusive Black musical space at its best" involves accepting "outsiders" who are "discouraged, dehumanized, and devalued for not adhering to patriarchal social habits," he asserts that the "male-centered, gatekeeping sociality of jazz culture has to be eradicated for the music to truly thrive in all of its possible and unimagined permutations" (85). Chapter 2, on Billy Higgins's performance of "Georgia on My Mind," and Chapter 5, on Andrew Hill's performance of "Malachi," deal with music that is not overtly political. However, as Williams discusses in his analyses of both performances, Black music can express political thought without doing so explicitly or being heard as "political" by the listening public (24).

In this book, Williams employs wide-ranging methodologies that combine critical interpretation and ethnographic work with detailed transcriptions of relevant musical examples. His robust discussion of each artist's recorded work is one of this study's great strengths. Williams uses a variety of approaches to formal musical analysis, ranging from straightforward melodic and harmonic transcriptions to narrative descriptions. A particularly interesting example appears in Chapter 4, where he uses a performance graphic to chart the interlocking elements of spoken word, drum improvisation, and vocal inflection across Ambrose Akinmusire's 2011 recording of "My Name Is Oscar." Williams's creative approach to interpreting this piece succeeds in accounting for subtle elements of the performance, such as tone of voice and enunciation that a traditional transcription might fail to convey. Whenever possible, Williams incorporates the musicians' comments on Black musical space, their own musical backgrounds, or other social and political issues in the jazz world. His interviews with Blanchard, Carrington, and Akinmusire add another unique and valuable layer of insight. In the case of Higgins and Hill, both of whom are deceased, Williams makes effective use of pre-existing interviews, archival materials, and interviews with their close associates to bring their ideas to bear on his analyses of their work. Overall, his eclectic interpretations model the balanced approach advocated by Travis A. Jackson in his essay "New Bottle, Old Wine: Whither Jazz Studies?" in which Jackson urges jazz scholars to unite critical theorization and musical analysis with renewed attention to the connections between musicians' points of view and their work in various contexts.[2]

Crossing Bar Lines incorporates the broader history of Black music studies into contemporary debates in Black studies and cultural theory. Williams acknowledges the work of Samuel Floyd and Portia Maultsby as foundational to his own, and their influence is evident in his identification of distinctively Black musical techniques.[3] At the same time, Williams expresses a desire to move beyond the classifications of Black musical characteristics developed by these earlier scholars and toward a more expansive understanding of Black music-making. Though he understands "the important need for Black scholars to create their own canons of Black musical brilliance," he argues that "the cultural production of Black musical space is beyond canonization and cannot be reduced to taxonomies or lists of musical gestures" (20).

Williams's theoretical foundation is further informed by Fred Moten's influential idea of "the break," or the imagined artistic space in which a positive vision of Blackness can be constructed outside of dominant white supremacist narratives.[4] Like Moten's "break," Williams theorizes Black improvised music as a space in which artists can celebrate Black life and imagine alternatives to hegemonic musical and social systems. While aligning himself with key scholars such as Floyd, Maultsby, and Moten,

[2]Travis A. Jackson, "New Bottle, Old Wine: Whither Jazz Studies?," in *Issues in African American Music: Power, Gender, Race, Representation*, ed. Portia K. Maultsby and Mellonee V. Burnim (New York: Routledge, 2016), 41.

[3]Key works include: Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Portia K. Maultsby, "Africanisms in African-American Music," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, 2nd edn., ed. Joseph E. Holloway, 326–55 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005).

[4]Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

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Williams is careful to distance his work from the equally influential Afropessimist theory of Frank Wilderson and its core ideas of Black social death and exclusion from humanity.[5] Indeed, Williams finds Wilderson's stark conception of Black inhumanity to be fundamentally incompatible with the vibrancy and global impact of Black music and with his subjects' dedication to affirming their humanity through their art (18). He points instead to moments of multiracial collaboration from jazz history to illustrate Black musical space's as-yet-unrealized potential to include all of humanity (19).

Crossing Bar Lines is an excellent and timely addition to the literature of jazz studies, critical improvisation studies, and Black studies. With his insightful combination of cultural theory and music analysis, along with his engagement with urgent contemporary issues of race and gender, Williams has provided an especially illuminating look at Black musicians as improvisers and as theorists of politics and culture. His book will be useful for scholars in fields like Black Studies, American Studies, and Women's and Gender Studies who seek a deeper understanding of contemporary Black improvised music and its relevance to ongoing social justice struggles.

Steven Lewis is curator of music and performing arts at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. His research interests include jazz history, African American intellectual history, and the material culture of African American music. Prior to joining the Smithsonian staff, he served as the founding curator of the National Museum of African American Music.

Got To Be Something Here: The Rise of the Minneapolis Sound

By Andrea Swensson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021.

Andrew Flory

Department of Music, Carleton College, Northfield, MN, USA
Email: aflory@carleton.edu
doi:10.1017/S1752196323000238

Among the most exciting books about R&B history published during the last decade is Andrea's Swensson's *Got to Be Something Here: The Rise of the Minneapolis Sound*. Swensson is known best as a print journalist and radio personality in the Twin Cities. She was an editor at *City Pages* and then a correspondent for KCMP ("the Current"), a Minneapolis-based Adult Alternative radio station that is one of a few National Public Radio affiliates featuring popular music. Her focus at the station was local music, which extended into a number of important projects attempting to document music histories of the Twin Cities.

A white woman with an obviously Scandinavian surname, Swensson quickly became one of the most knowledgeable local sources for information about Black popular music in Minneapolis and St. Paul. She has created several large-scale podcasts on the subjects of Prince album suites, like *1999* and *Sign O' the Times*, in conjunction with the Prince estate, the Current, and two record companies. She has also covered the music and work of many other Black musicians in the area.

Swensson's work is on the scholarly side of a large-scale trend that revisits Black histories in music on a local level. Her audience is, in part, the same listeners who support radio stations like KCMP, but also extends into communities of record collectors, soul fanatics, local music buffs, and those interested in recovering lost histories of Black communities. This esoteric soul movement is a cornerstone of the retail music reissue market, for example, where elaborate portfolios of rare Black pop are commonly offered in small batches by labels like Numero Group and Dust to Digital. One popular collection of this sort, *Twin Cities Funk and Soul: Lost R&B Grooves From Minneapolis/St. Paul*, was issued in

[5]Wilderson's most extensive discussion of Afropessimist theory appears in Frank Wilderson, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020).

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