

## *Recollections - One*

CECIL TAYLOR

"The greatness in jazz occurs  
because it includes all the *mores*  
and folkways of Negroes  
during the last fifty years."

(Cecil Taylor in Frank Kofsky,  
*Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*)

Preamble: I've recently been sharing regular communications with the wonderfully talented and endowed musician, Simon Barker. He mentioned in one of these exchanges that Cecil Taylor is scheduled to visit Australia in June of this year. Simon expressed an interest in ... well, why not put it in his own words? "One day I'd love to have a chat about your thoughts on Cecil (whose coming here in June..yipppeee), Rashied, and the AACM." Anyway, I gave Simon's expressed interest a little thought and figured, it may be of marginal (doubtful, questionable!) worth to a few others were I to write down some recollections. I guess it was Simon's "yipppeee" that did it. I might also mention here that my dear friend, Hamish Stuart, with whom I share an ongoing form of life-as-lived, draws from me, time to time, recollections of other people who, like Cecil Taylor, have been and continue to be really important in my life as creative beacons. The clarity of their light does not diminish even as passing time makes its inevitable claims.

Marcel Proust once wrote, "[T]rue beauty is the only thing that cannot respond to what a romantic imagination anticipates." He was reflecting on a concert in which he'd heard a Mozart piano concerto. The pianist was Saint-Saëns. His point here being that if in the event of this or any performance living up to expectations, then it could hardly be considered creative &/or original. Proust also thought that beauty and truth were originally and inextricably linked as in "eternal friendship", having absolutely nothing to do with "charm". His points are germane with regard to Cecil Taylor.

In more recent times the creative-music milieu, in Australia at least, seems to have changed somewhat. People like Cecil Taylor (creative innovators) are now getting gigs. The past couple of years in particular have been witness to a steady stream that includes some of the most significant prime movers in improvised music. This is not only a good thing for them (nice work if you can get it!), but it's a great thing for Australians who have an eye/ear directed towards alternative modes and means of creative expression. Concurrent with this more recent stream of imports is an ever increasing field in Australia on/in which genuine creative impetus is being planted. This home-grown variety of creative pursuit is absolutely crucial. It signals the gaze turned towards a very real concern, to wit, matters of location, space, place, characteristics stemming from these, and the truth embraced through an expression about them, of them, for them, and because of them. John Shand's recent book, *Jazz - The Australian Accent*, paints this view with clarity and precision. If you reside in Australia and happen to be reading this little bit of



muttering by me, you'll no doubt know much more about this matter than I do. Significantly though, hearing/seeing these landmark innovators in the flesh, at first hand, without the mediation of entrepreneurs and production teams, CD packaging, old film footage cut for only the exciting bits then rendered completely out of context, star syndrome promotion, and the myriad other negative derivatives born of second-/third-hand exposure, the mystery is removed. These are real people playing real music, doing so for reasons of their own, in their own way, leaving you, the recipient, in a position to sort out for yourself, questions of relevance.

Back in the early 1970s in Sydney, Australia, when I first heard Cecil Taylor, things were very different. I doubt that I knew, or knew of, more than three or four other musicians who shared, even in part, my irrepressible enthusiasm for Cecil's music. Here was a painter of sound, of energy, of emotion, of belief and commitment. A person prepared to put his life on the line in creative statements that exuded, relentlessly, a sense of humanity. Almost without fail, the mention of Cecil in the company of other musicians (and especially piano players) would draw the most negative of comments, a kind of "Who's he?", or worst of all, bland (read blind) dismissal. I couldn't understand this then. I don't understand it today. The very moment I heard his musical expression, I related. That wonderful energy and absoluteness boomed from the speakers and in so doing, mowed down almost every prejudice I had. What *has* stood, the by now long test of time and through to the present in fact, are the things it didn't mow down: commitment, devotion, obvious dedication, and above all else, spirit. My Taylor record collection included the album, *Into to Hot - the Gil Evans Orchestra*. The title though is quite misleading. Interestingly, the tracks alternate between compositional material by John Carisi, performed by the GE Orchestra, and Cecil Taylor with his own band of musicians. According to the liner-notes Cecil describes his musical approach as "constructivist", explaining that "the emphasis in each piece is on building a whole, totally integrated structure." He goes on to talk about other related aspects of his expression, aspects that bear allusions to aesthetic concerns as well as the sociopolitical. Back then, the thought never entered my mind that I might, one day, get to hear Cecil Taylor play live.

It was Roger Frampton who introduced me to Cecil. Roger introduced me to several other important innovators too. I'll recollect those stories perhaps at another time. *Looking Ahead* was the album, vinyl of course. I pretty quickly acquired a small Cecil Taylor collection. It started with *Conquistador*, then *New York City R & B* and *Unit Structures*. I no longer remember the order that followed but it included *Innovations*; *Nuits de la Fondation Maeght - vols. 1, 2, & 3*; the *Jazz Composer's Orchestra*; and the above mentioned *Into the Hot*. And when it became available on Cecil's Unit Core Records, I sent away for a copy of *Spring of Two Blue-j's*, recorded at Town Hall, NYC, November 4, 1973, dedicated to Ben Webster. For Sydney in the early '70s this was a pretty good representation of Cecil's music. With the arrival of each new addition I'd rush over to Roger's and we'd sit and listen, looking at each-other with excitement and, often, in total disbelief. But it was real ... all of it. I still have, to this day, all those vinyl records. Roger and I would listen to and discuss that music for hours. We never expressed nor remotely considered any desire to emulate Cecil. It was more than obvious to us both that to do so would be to miss the point entirely. And anyway, we were pretty hell-bent on speaking with our own voices, such as they were at that stage. We spent a huge amount of time playing together in those days too, Roger and I. This also included Jack Thorncraft who, as I recall, was the only bass player in Sydney at the time, not only prepared to join our explorations but enjoyed doing so while himself contributing enormously to the creative output.

But what was it about Cecil's music that offered so much? After all, there was very little that Sydney had in common with New York. The cultural environment was a



totally different thing. I hesitate to go down this road but, perhaps for now it will suffice to touch on it a little. In a strange kind of way I think Sydney (maybe Australia) was very repressive in those days. It was still, by and large and to be sure, in attitudes, a British Colony. I capitalize the word colony because most people with whom I'd grown up, and certainly their parents, thought about it in this way. It was a Colony and Great Britain was its source. My own mother would refer to England as 'home', constantly. In fact, this became a serious issue between us as the years passed. The irony being of course, she'd never once, at that stage, been there. This was the image though and all implied by it. Most of the people I knew were not only happy to accept this colonizationist kind of thinking, but more simplistically, it never occurred to them ... at all!, that they were infected. I, on the other hand, felt the infection intensely and rejected it as being unfair, unreasonable, unkind, and, mostly, unthinking. Pick up a 1950s school history text book and read a page or two sometime. It'll give you a perfect insight into this colonial frame of mind. All is justified, as long as it is justified by the Crown. It meant, among many things, that we were answerable and needed permission, often just to breathe. The recent 'Lost Generations' issue is all indicative. So, given this general cultural ethos, you can imagine how the music of Cecil Taylor might have been heard. Cecil seemed to have very few enthusiasts in his NYC home. Sydney, Australia ... Forget about it! Well, in point of fact, I didn't forget about it and neither did a few others. Should I repeat? "A *few* others". But I *was* inspired I assure you. And it certainly wasn't inspiration about music for music's sake. It was all about freedom ... freedom to feel, freedom to think, to speak, to act, and to do so without apologies. Yes, I was inspired by Cecil. And I was *encouraged*. Perhaps a short quote is appropriate here, it comes from the back cover of *Innovations*:

There is no music without order -  
if that music comes from a man's innards.  
But that order is not necessarily related to any single criterion  
of what order should be as imposed from the outside.  
Whether that criterion is the song form or  
what some critics think jazz should be.  
This is not a question, then of "freedom"  
as opposed to "non-freedom" but is rather  
a question of recognizing different ideas  
and expressions of order.

Cecil Taylor

Reading this as a young person with musico-artistic aspirations in the early 1970s I was inspired and encouraged. This clear statement of Cecil's revealing strong, defined intention showed me another way of seeing my own personal situation. There it was in the music, to feel and think about, and there it was in text, to feel and to think about. And feel, and think, I did. Lots of it in fact. Roger and I never really discussed too much our innermost motivation, our paramusical *raison d'être*. We'd found unity in the music-making itself. This was our point of departure. Roger was born in Portsmouth, England. Had we discussed this matter I think we'd have discovered different perspectives, indeed, perhaps incommensurable. But one thing we both related to, and this without question, was Cecil's utter commitment, his spirit, and his voice. And we were inspired by it.

As time passed and I thought more deeply about Cecil's music, two aspects of it began to emerge that were to become essential to my own developing efforts: colour and structure. I'll not say too much here regarding this matter as it could easily become protracted. But I should, I feel, clarify this a little. Although Cecil's music was certainly not an isolated guiding light, it did prove to be substantial. It wasn't



only his approach to the piano but rather, it was the music in *toto*. Alto saxophonist Jimmy Lyons puts his experience of creative collaboration with Taylor succinctly: "Playing with Cecil made me think differently about what music's about. It's not about any cycle of fifths, it's about *sound*." (Valerie Wilmer, *As Serious As Your Life*) To my mind Cecil's concept confused the lines of distinction between instruments and confronted, head on, the problem of role playing. The way I heard it, timbre and intensity became the fusing element that bound together his ear for colour. As I interpreted this, colour, combined with structures - structures that could take long spans of time to unfold - enabled possibilities for multi-layering, i.e., structures within/withon, structures. By the mid-'70s I'd developed my own take on this idea and to this day it continues to take shape. The crucial component in this is, I believe, the question of articulation as this applies to both background and foreground structural components.

Finally, it was in 1980 as I recall, that I got to hear Cecil play live. The concert was a solo piano outing. The location was NYC, Central Park. The time was round mid-night. Cecil played a Bösendorfer Concert Grand. He played for about seventy minutes if my memory serves correctly. What an occasion this was. All was confirmed ... and then some. I don't pretend to be well versed nor particularly insightful regarding the music of Cecil Taylor. Possibly nobody could be. There is much more there than meets the ear on any one occasion and this can be substantiated by multiple listenings to any one piece. There will always be something come to the fore you haven't noticed previously. It might be to do with the sounds and their 'order'. It might be to do with intensities of feeling, energy, and the like. It might be to do with that impossible to define intersection where notes and rhythms become aural/emotive colours. It's almost as if Cecil defies the reification intrinsic to the medium of sound recording. There is no easy way, no short cut, into the world of Cecil Taylor. Cecil is about as far removed from the fast fix as your wildest imagination might conjure.

"Cecil is adventurous, and creative,  
and he decided to be on his own, to go his own way.  
[F]or me to work as a percussionist with Cecil  
- just like working with, say Bud [Powell] and Anthony [Braxton] and Charlie Parker -  
it gave me the impetus to find something different myself.  
It helped me grow."

(Max Roach in Howard Mandel,  
*Miles, Ornette, Cecil - Jazz Beyond Jazz*)

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