Recollections - Six

Howard Mandel's
Miles - Ornette - Cecil
Jazz Beyond Jazz [1]

> "A creator is not in advance of his generation but he is the first of his contemporaries to be conscious of what is happening to his generation."
>
> *Picasso* – Gertrude Stein (1938) [2]

Subjects on whom Howard Mandel might have chosen to write could have been drawn from a wide range of outstanding American improvising musicians. Why he chose Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman, and Cecil Taylor seems to be uncomplicated: he's utterly passionate about them. And his passion exudes from almost every line of text. Clearly he's been on their trail for many years. Clearly he's listened repeatedly to their records. Clearly he's thought deeply and widely about what they do and why they do it. Clearly his respect for their art knows no bounds. Clearly he's made a consistent effort to catch them 'live' and consider their music in light of their personhood. And clearly, this was not merely a task for a discerning professional writer.

Mandel's critical integrity can be best summed up in his own words: "I've often avoided asking Ornette anything of substance when we've met in casual circumstances, not wanting to risk getting a meaningful answer that I couldn't take down by pen or capture on tape and study later, when I had time to cogitate on it." (p.121) And again through his own words his priorities are made patently clear: "If you haven't heard their records, stop reading immediately and listen to anything you can find from Ornette's '58 debut *Something Else!!!!* through his early '60s Atlantic dates." (p.144) Indeed, the music comes first.

Mandel writes with humility enough to defer to his subjects in conversation and, paramountly, to their music-making. Anything but submissive, his deferral is based on personal security and this because his humility has the strength of being genuine. It is to this that Ornette in particular, when face-to-face with Mandel, responds with an open heart. That Mandel's three subjects of study are African Americans seems not to have influenced his choice, though this I can't say for sure. But whatever the case in this regard his interest, without question, concerns the men, their musico-artistic expression, and their monumental contribution to what is arguably one of America's greatest cultural resources: Jazz, and the musical modes of expression that find their roots firmly planted in its fertile soil.

Mandel has a genuine soft spot for Ornette. The music, to be sure, but also due perhaps to Ornette's commitment to an expressive/creative environment that reflects his stance on social organization; one that is going to function at its most efficient, with an ear towards generating the greatest 'good', when the individuals who comprise it are respected as equal contributors and given the requisite space to make their contribution as free and independent entities, concurrently acknowledge their community in its full capacity: one of co-operation. Ornette presents this

commitment not as a politician but rather as a humanitarian. Enter Ornette's world of 'Harmolodics'. But one should not be too quick to settle on a particular conception of Harmolodics, as Dewey Redman points out: "The only person that can really explain harmolodics to you is Ornette. … it's complex." (p.153) As with the many avant-garde prime movers who've spent time with Ornette – Edward Blackwell, Charlie Haden, Don Cherry, Dewey Redman, Billy Higgins, just to name a few of the more obvious ones – guitarist and member of Ornette's first Prime Time, Bern Nix, puts it in a nutshell: "But the thing about playing with Ornette is he gets you back in contact with why you wanted to play music in the first place". (p.158) And later Prime Time co-operationist, guitarist, Kenny Wessel says: "You can't predict the next thing, but if you open yourself up it takes you where you've never been in a concert before." (p.179) Ornette: "[C]lassifications of music limit what you can appreciate. And, being a player, I decided I was never going to just think about the caste system in music. … [I've been working] to remove the caste system from all forms of expression, to remove our caste system from all information." (pp.188~89) And for Ornette, crucially, this includes removing the notion of *style*. (p.201)

Unashamedly, Mandel is passionate about all three of his subjects. Having said this though it's necessary to point out that while Miles and Ornette are given roughly the same amount of space – approximately ninety pages each – Cecil is covered in half that page count. This may be explained by Mandel's opening comment to the Taylor section of his text: "I've met Cecil Taylor but I can't say I know him. I've listened to his music assiduously for more than 40 years but I'm still not quite sure I've really heard it." (p.203)

But Mandel throws down the pro-Cecil gauntlet against the 'scoffers who say, "My child can do that"' and claims that these are 'as philistine as any proposing that babies' splatters compare to Jackson Pollack's.' (p.205) His simile is well chosen too, although I'd wager Cecil is considerably less self-abusive than his likeness was! The tone of his Cecil section then moves on to greater sophistication, offering some truly wonderful insights into a creative artist (perhaps genius, even) who may well prove over the course of the next 'n'-years to make as big an impact on piano playing as did Beethoven and List. For some, this may already holds true.

Cecil's New England Conservatory training is no secret for those who've followed his music-making. In my own experience of discussing Cecil with other musicians, particularly in the early '70s, he, as with Ornette too, always had to be compared to other more conventional players. And of course, in making the comparison at all, the point is missed. Cecil is one of those rare and exceptional artists; a one-off, an original in the true sense of the word. As I read Mandel's approach to understanding Cecil it amounts to this: there is no way to prepare for Cecil's onslaught; there is no sense in trying to justify his keyboard technique/style/attitude by referring it to conventional training (conservatoire or elsewhere); there is no sense in trying to force standard structural principles onto his music which, in the event, finds its structure via other means. If you want to make sense of Cecil, listen with an open heart; one that doesn't bring to the event pre-determination … of any sort. Then let the passage of time have its way. Mandel openly confesses that his own "uncertainty about what I've experienced in his [Cecil's] performances stems not from any doubt about his premise but from being overwhelmed by the logarithmically multiplying complexities of his music." (p.207) In fact, Mandel spends many pages on the kinds of frustrations he, personally, wades through in an attempt to fathom Cecil's oceanic complexity. And he does so in a way that is anything but seeking to carve out a mould into which Cecil might be poured. If Mandel is seeking anything it is, I think, a way to rationalize the fathomless. And validation has no place in his seeking. "The act of listening to Cecil's music is, for me, the act of trying to follow it, and of each time being returned to examine my own ways of comprehending music." (p.211) When put like this, I tend to think that a greater gift no one could offer!

As with the book's other two subjects, Mandel spends considerable space discussing Cecil's collaborators, both in collaboration with him as well as being artists in their own right. From this stems many gems along the narrative's way. Joseph Jarman: "It's meaningless to repeat what one of the masters has done, note for note. We are not as good as the master was by repeating his notes … We need to play our own music and incorporate the master's ideas, but show they're an influence, not an infliction." (p.219) And Ed Blackwell: "With Ornette I got to the point where instead of anticipating where the one [the first downbeat of a measure] would be, I'd listen to him for where *he* would put it. And the same way with Cecil. You can't just go ahead and say one is one; it's going to be *here*, or it's going to be *there*. Sometimes it's going to be somewhere else." (p.241)

Cecil Taylor: "There are two things we start to realize when we get older: that there is a duty to serve – the inner self, but also to serve those who would be listening – and that the reason one serves is because one wants to express the joy of living, and so it becomes a celebration of life." (p.230)

Miles Davis, the first subject discussed by Mandel in his book, is viewed from the perspective of his music and the immeasurable contribution his music has made to an ever-widening image of what jazz might or could be. The anomaly here is that through to the late-1960s it was Miles himself who in many ways defined jazz. Indeed, this is something that can hardly be said of either Ornette or Cecil, at least when considered in light of 'standard' criteria. In fact it was Miles who, in certain respects, made the criteria standard.

Miles was, it seems, every 'true' jazz-lover's sweetheart until he went AWOL. His trajectory took a turn from around the time of "Stuff" (recorded May 1968 and released on *Miles In The Sky*). And unlike the rocky way his people-marriages trod, his electric-marriage was to last the rest of his life. Mandel does discuss Miles' personal fiascos, certainly not as gossip but rather, and as with his early musical life too, as a means towards reaching an understanding. Although Mandel spends considerable space on Miles' early life in music it is, I think, largely to contextualizing his later electric period. This said, Mandel writes with an even hand, not making artistic judgements that imply one better than the other.

But it was from the recordings made in '68 ~ '69 and according to Mandel, *In A Silent Way* in particular, that etch "Miles' electric departure" (p.57) onto music history. Concurrent with this it seems, is Miles' adoption of a somewhat different attitude to the recording process – tapping into the new sound-world that electronics facilitated while leaving a great deal more of the compositional decisions to be made in the moment and this through his "complete confidence in his cohort's e.s.p." (p.61) Between then and his 1975 retirement Miles explored and experimented relentlessly. However, the significance Mandel places upon *Bitches Brew* (recorded August 19 ~ 21, 1969, in New York City) amounts to nothing less than a paradigm shift for jazz: "[A]ll *Bitches Brew*'s players productively pursued parallel paths for years to come, launched by Miles' direction." (p.63) His key collaborators: Wayne Shorter, Joe Zawinul, Chick Corea, John McLaughlin, Dave Holland, Jack DeJohnette, were joined by Harvey Brooks, Bennie Maupin, Larry Young, Lenny White, Charles Alias, and Jim Riley to make up the band. Mandel writes several pages tracing the path travelled through recordings, concerts, the music and people with whom Miles collaborated during this seven-year period, and while en route draws our attention to the impact made by the social ethos of the times and crucially, the no-small-role played by Teo Macero, producer of the resultant music-as-released. (p.66.ff) And in the mix we find composers as diverse as J.S. Bach and Stockhausen as possible influences on the direction taken. 'Vote for Miles' … "*On The Corner* was and remains gloriously confrontational." (p.79)

After five years of countless battles with health and general well-being – surgeries, leg infections, pneumonia, hip replacement, larynx nodes, bleeding ulcers, diabetes, insomnia, impotence – Miles re-emerged in 1980. He was to play for another eleven years. After getting off to what seems to be a rough start – "I had

reservations about Miles' music then, but extended it the benefits of my doubts," (pp.84~5) – by 1983, *Decoy*, "He has revived spirit and chops" (p.87) and with this, Miles had again become the 'standard setter'. *Decoy* was "topping jazz sales charts and getting MTV play as a four-minute video." (pp.88~9)

From this point in Mandel's text, a revealing interview follows that he'd conducted with Miles by phone.

> Miles: "If I can play a low F sharp, loud and clear, then I know my tone is there. I had to work real hard to get that tone back when I came back; it took me two years to get it right. Now that's back, I'm gonna keep it."
> Mandel: How important is tone to Miles?
> Miles: "If you don't have a pleasant sound you can't play any melody. And my head is full of melodies … I'm always tempted to play something difficult, and usually it's a ballad, you know – the rest of the stuff is easy …" (pp.91~2)

After four weeks in a coma, Miles passed on September 28, 1991, at St. John's Hospital and Health Center in Santa Monica, California. Reflecting, Marcus Miller said: "The first thing I learned from Miles was about being true to yourself." John Scofield said a similar thing: "What I learned from him was that he went with his feelings of the moment. You have to learn to trust your own human instrument, to read what's supposed to happen. That for me is the greatest message of Miles." (p. 106)

Howard Mandel's book, *Miles, Ornette, Cecil* unfolds his firm belief that these three creative individuals are the embodiment of *Jazz Beyond Jazz* … The Avant-Garde.

PUBLISHING NOTICE: *Recollections – Six Howard Mandel's Miles - Ornette - Cecil : Jazz Beyond Jazz* was first published on the Extempore website, January, 2011. I'd like to thank the editor, Miriam Zolin, for publishing it and for her blessing for me to republish it here. You'll find other postings of interest written by myself and others at www.extempore.com.au

---

[1] Mandel, Howard. *Miles - Ornette - Cecil : Jazz Beyond Jazz*. New York and London: Routledge, 2008

[2] Mandel, 2008, cited as an epigram, p.vii