JOHN ARTHUR “JAKI” BYARD:
CONSTRUCTING A TRADITION

By

SCOTT E. BROWN

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Dissertation Director:

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Defining components of a jazz tradition and their relative value as relates to the work and career of any particular musician has often proved to be a perpetually confounding exercise. This thesis explores a different paradigm of assessment for situating the musician in the art form that begins with the musician herself or himself as the inherent directional beacon that provides an outward facing starting point for consideration, rather than simply applying an externally imposed set of assumptions about necessary prerequisites or seeming a priori truths. The music and life of John Arthur “Jaki” Byard is a particular case in point for application of this mode of analysis. I will argue that Byard’s approach to his music, which includes a broad embrace of history, form, experimentation, collaboration, and individuality, provides a more elastic framework for notions of inclusion and exclusion. Byard’s development as a musician and the scholarly, critical, and commercial response to it, as well as the reflections of his students and colleagues, will be examined as supportive of this conclusion.
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Peter Katz and Leslie Haynes provided helpful information and contacts. Leslie was Jaki Byard’s neighbor growing up in Hollis Queens, New York. Although not a musician herself, she introduced me to her brother Graham Haynes who, at a very young age, was strongly musically inclined and spent considerable time with Jaki Byard. I am most grateful to Graham for the several hours we spent talking about Byard. Graham provided a personalized perspective from someone who was mentored by Byard starting at a young age but who was never a formal student. I am also grateful to pianist Fred Hersch for the time he spent with me discussing his experiences as Byard’s student, especially his impressions of him as a teacher. He also provided me with a copy of approximately 100 pages of Byard’s teaching materials. The compilation includes, in Byard’s hand, transcriptions of several of his tunes, tunes of others, and exercises with commentary.

Chet Williamson’s excellent biography of Jaki Byard, *Falling Rains of Life—The Jaki Byard Story* (Holliston, MA: Projects Publishing, 2018), has been a vital resource of biographical information. Williamson has compiled the recollections of numerous musicians who were Byard’s students, his colleagues at the institutions where he taught
for many decades, and others who played with him. They offer a fascinating glimpse into the life of Jaki Byard. I appreciated our conversations about Jaki Byard and his help with permissions.

For a brief six weeks, I was able to brag that my daughter Laurie Lawhorn and I were both Masters students, as she was completing her degree in social work when I first enrolled in the Jazz History program. I am grateful to her and her husband Drew, who is a musician, for their support. Finally, and most importantly, I am indebted to my wife Lisa for her love and steadfast support for me while I participated in the Masters program and wrote this thesis. I could not have done it without her.
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**INTRODUCTION**

Pianist Jaki Byard has posed characterization conundrums for scholars, critics, fans and commercial structures nearly from the outset of his performing life. His career spanned most of the history of jazz in the 20th century, and he moved easily through it as a musician. Yet there remained the perceived difficulty of tying him in to the jazz tradition. Defining a jazz tradition in the first place has been the hobgoblin of jazz discourse since the moldy figs of the 1940s began to rail against the big bands, much less the beboppers. Byard’s music in some ways is transparent, embodying identifiable emblems of jazz past and, in his time, present, and perhaps a future. Despite this, with a few notable exceptions, he was not thought of as a unique voice in the music. Many intentions have been imputed to his approach by writers and his own students. These rely in large part on deploying conventional attitudes toward the notions of “tradition” as a performance practice (linear narrativity), academic pursuit (ontological delimitations, canon establishment) and historicized culture surrogate (“great man” methodology). These approaches to situating Byard in jazz history highlight the perennial tensions implicit in the consideration of an art form that deifies its elders but prioritizes “innovation,” and the dilemmas in assessing the component choices available and adopted within these constructs of old and new. Byard chose broadly, and his palette is most often described as eclectic. But by both embracing and rejecting these notions, Byard, as performer, composer, and teacher, resists many of these conventions, and eclecticism as conclusory explanation is an insufficient endpoint of mediation.

His insistence on historical reference has often been interpreted as tribute (a term he used himself), but this insufficiently explains his frequent invocation of these
elements. More often, his historicized turns are externally characterized as parody or, more derisively, as tongue-in-cheek ridicule. Byard often was a contradictory spokesperson for his own intentions. His puckish humor could masquerade as a lack of seriousness, and his didactic expositions to students and interviewers could be terse, with wry, underhanded jabs at history, race, music, culture, and commercial structures. His compositions and performances reflect these same instincts.

I argue that the philosophical underpinnings of the conventional methodologies assigned to framing notions of tradition rely on inherent value judgments and that Jaki Byard chose to disregard these imposed definitional guardrails. Byard evinced a humanistic approach to music that rejected dogmatic contingencies that perpetuated, in his view, an artifice of parochialism. He endured neglect and marginalization while many of his protégés went on to notable acclaim. His personal disappointments do not detract from the success of his mission, thus providing object lessons in arguing for and realizing presentation of jazz piano as a cohesive tradition despite cultural, academic, and commercial structures that thrive on and perpetuate fragmentation. He responded to any attempt to pigeonhole his music with the blunt instruments of verbal and musical irony expertly executed with precision. Jaki Byard was a near universally respected “jazzman,” and as such, he gives us permission to view a jazz tradition, if we choose, in the most open-ended manner, where intention to the art and its ancestry trumps imposed relative valuations. For some, this may only be a small slice temporally or stylistically, but by following his lead, we can assess the cornucopia of offerings of varied musicians in relationship in this tradition, from note-for-note repertory to abstract deconstruction.
CHAPTER 1
FORMATIVE BIOGRAPHY—PART I
WORCESTER

One of the most striking and elemental aspects of Byard’s music is his interpolation of what might best be described as pre-bebop jazz piano styles. The word “interpolation” seems most fitting because external observers have imputed to this finding a notion of foreignness, of something done purposefully rather than organically, something that otherwise would not seem to fit. Byard would reach deep into the 19th and early 20th centuries as far back as Louis Moreau Gottschalk and Scott Joplin to mine constructs for his use. In particular, he frequently invoked the sound of James P. Johnson, Fats Waller, and Earl Hines. But by the time he was drawing critical observation, his œuvre was decidedly “modern.” Why would a musician who was hanging with the likes of Charles Mingus, Eric Dolphy, and Rahsaan Roland Kirk feel compelled to articulate ancient musical gestures, sometimes with little re-engineering? To begin to answer this question, we must begin with Byard’s musical upbringing.

Jaki Byard was born in Worcester, MA, on June 15, 1922. This put him solidly in the generation of musicians who were old enough to hear the first generation of jazz musicians playing in their prime and young enough to have been part of the sea change in jazz music that convention holds separated “traditional” from “modern” jazz. His exposure to traditional styles first came from family. The blues was a prominent sound at home. He recalled, “The blues rocked our house as a kid. I’ll never forget it.”\(^1\) His father, John, Sr., was a brass musician who played in both local brass bands and in jazz bands

from the early 1920s. Byard, who later became renowned as a multi-instrumentalist, first learned trumpet fingering from his father. Most importantly at this early stage was the piano in the family home. His maternal grandmother, Melvina Hannibal, was born in 1878 and accompanied silent movies on piano. Byard told National Public Radio, “My grandmother used to play. She used to play for the movie houses. That's how we got the piano because after the [silent] movie industry folded up, they gave her the piano. And my grandmother gave my mother the piano. They put the piano in my house, and that's how I got started.”

His mother Geraldine was also a pianist and played for the Zion A.M.E. church. His first formal lessons in classical music were with local teacher Grace Johnson Brown starting at age five or age seven. He also recalled her teaching him rudiments of jazz on popular tunes like “Stardust” at the urging of his mother. Despite her strong church ties, and perhaps because her husband was playing it, Byard’s mother found nothing objectionable in jazz. Perhaps most importantly, Byard encountered stride piano from another relative. He said in an interview with *Worcester Magazine*, “I remember, this is maybe 50, 60 years ago, my uncle used to rehearse at the house. [He] used to play what they called ‘stride’ or left-hand accompaniment, I called it. I used to watch him do it and I more or less copped what he was doing.”

As the depression put a stop to his formal lessons with Grace Johnson Brown, he devised his own autodidactic methodology of learning. His father remained a guide, playing the radio broadcasts of Benny Goodman on the *Camel Caravan* series and

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3 Ibid., p. 20.
5 Williamson, p. 60.
pointedly making note of the featured pianist Teddy Wilson. Jaki partook of the musical bounty of touring bands who played at Quinsigamond Lake that included many pianist/band leaders such as Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Claude Hopkins, Fletcher Henderson, and especially Earl “Fatha” Hines and Fats Waller. “…in 1939 you could get to hear him for fifty cents,” Byard remarked. He checked out records of classical composers including Chopin, Beethoven, Ravel, and Stravinsky at the public library. Later in life, Byard ran with other musicians who were known to harbor deep interest and great respect for their musical ancestors but did not manifest those relationships as directly or as often as Byard did in their music. Reed player Rahsaan Roland Kirk was one of the more notable with whom Byard recorded. They interacted outside the recording studio and shared experience with a technology that brought to life for them the genetic code of musicians past—the piano roll. Byard accessed rolls as a teenager in Worcester. Kirk continued to study them into the 1960s. Byard recalled of Kirk, “He used to buy old piano rolls and play along with them. When he was living in Philadelphia, he’d call me up, ‘Hey, listen to this…’ It would be someone like Jelly Roll [Morton] Pete Johnson, or James P. Johnson. He’d make a guessing game out of it. That was our socializing.”

In some respects, Byard was an accidental pianist. Because his father had given him instruction in brass instruments, he began playing with Freddy Bates and his Nighthawks on trumpet around age 14. The regular pianist with the band, Pete Price, played in the then- popular Waller style. When Price and a brief successor both retired,

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6 Lyons, p. 187.
7 Ibid., p. 190.
8 Ibid., p. 190.
Byard, who had already mastered that style on piano, took the piano chair. “That’s when my career as a piano player started. I was about 16 then,” recalled Byard. Only a few years later, Byard had fully mastered the jazz piano language of the late 1930s. Pianist and writer Don Asher recalled the first time he heard Byard, during the summer of 1940:

I was passing an even more unassuming establishment—“Dominic's Café” painted on insect-caked glass backed by ratty-looking bamboo blinds—[and] the door opened to the humid night. And what poured out that door was as wide and surging as a swollen river. A skinny white drummer and the colored piano player Duke had spoken of: a big heavy-shouldered fellow in a blue shirt and brown pants. His eyes seemed remote glistened with ardor and tension.

But the sound … it was jubilant, cocky, it leaped and shouted. I can't say how long I stood in the doorway more inside than out, oblivious to the shadowy, questioning faces, washed by echoes of all the music I had ever read about – the Harlem house-rent parties (where legend had it the players could devour a pig’s foot or swig from a bottle of beer while the left hand alone pumped both melody and rhythm), the strut of Southland cakewalks and brass band parades, and endless, linked choruses of pile-driving boogie-woogie that went lickety-split like a night train slamming across prairie tracks. Heads were snapping and fingers popping on the little patch of a dance floor, the piano player's galloping stride springing off walls and bodies and needing no support, drums merely aboard for the ride like a kid hanging piggyback on the massive blue-shirted shoulders, a weightless toy train hitched to a life-size diesel. The little room seemed ready to explode, hardly able to contain the cadences pouring out the doorway and into the street, engulfing me in waves of vibration that set my scalp tingling and tripped a wild, grainy current down my backbone. When the set was over I edged my way through the jostling crowd, honing in on the blue shirt and sweating dark face, as single-minded and needful as a hungry pup sniffing a backyard barbecue.

Immediately after this encounter, Asher, a classically trained high school freshman, arranged to study with Byard, who was himself still a senior at Commerce High School. Foreshadowing his advice to later students, Byard told Asher, “‘Listen to the rags, Hines and the early striders,’ he told me during that first lesson 50 years ago.

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‘That’s where it all comes from.’”¹¹ Fifty years later, in the early 1990s, pianist Pierre Christophe studied with Byard in New York and recalled Byard’s essential if not essentialist pedagogic message. “You had to study the old masters from Scott Joplin to James P. Johnson, Fats Waller, Earl Hines and so on,” recalled Christophe. The directive was one of full engagement such that he concluded, “I have to say, in 4 years with him we never had time to study be-bop. He was very open-minded and loved all the great players from Fats Waller to Chick Corea, but he said as piano students we were supposed to study the masters from the beginning of jazz.”¹²

Clearly, by 1940, Byard had embraced and prioritized the foundational essence of the first forty years of jazz piano. He didn’t stop there in his own osmotic capture of subsequent styles, but he was insistent that any serious student couldn’t start in the middle. A committed jazz player needed not only didactic knowledge of the tradition but pianistic fluency in its languages. In many ways, he foreshadowed a comment by James P. Johnson, who wrote in 1947, “The most important point that I can see is that the jazz musicians of the future will have to be able to play all different kinds of jazz—in all its treatments—just like the classical musician who, in one concert, might range from Bach to Copland.”¹³ Johnson wrote his comment as a response to bebop and the rejection of older styles. Bebop had not yet arisen when Byard tutored Asher in mining music of decades past. From a 21st century vantage, the pre-bebop piano styles tend to be conflated as part of an undistinguishable “traditional” jazz ethos. But for Asher, ragtime

¹¹ Don Asher. Liner notes to Jaki Byard, At Maybeck, Concord Jazz CCD- 4511, 1992, Compact Disc.
¹² Williamson, p.293.
and stride and perhaps even the playing of Hines were thought of as old fashioned and dated by 1940. Waller was popular despite his heavily Johnson influenced stride playing (he was, after all, personally instructed by him for years), no doubt propelled by his infectious personality, stage presence, audience connection, and propulsive swing. For Asher, Byard made these styles come alive in that first encounter. For Byard, it was musical anthropology that required respect and animation. Over the next fifty years, he never wavered in his insistence that this earliest music must come first. He rejected the relativistic value judgments inherent in chronological comparisons that equate “the new” with better. This concept will be explored later in this paper. Most importantly, his notions of historical construction were set by 1940, a fact that illuminates and explicates his frequent use of these “trad” musical touchstones throughout his career.

Byard was a serious student of the music and a craftsman driven to develop unmatched pianistic competency. Byard was one of the founders of a local club where musicians gathered and played, called the Saxtrum Club—so named by him as a contraction of saxophone, trumpet, and drums, all instruments on which Byard was more than proficient. He practiced at the expense of sleep and other necessities. His student at the time, Don Asher, noting the serious nature of Byard’s practice routine, recalled, “On nights when there were no sessions at the Saxtrum, he’d lock the door early from the inside. Neighbors reported the practicing went on all night—scales and exercises, octave runs, random improvisations, Bach inventions and Chopin etudes. At 7:30, he’d emerge to make his first high school class; the club floor would be littered with cigarette butts.
and empty Pepsi bottles.”14 If he knew he had an audience outside the door, especially of other youngsters, he indulged in, “some whomping way-back whore-house piano, a big, pumping, joyous sound” that sparked the imaginations of his admirers as “being present at a spectacular parade, hearing a whole history of the music from the New Orleans cribs and levees on up the river.”15 While in his teens, he was providing arrangements for Freddie Bates, marking the initiation of this important aspect of his musical life also at an early age.

Byard prioritized the earliest of piano musics, but he listened to the music of his time, in real time. He was an explorer of the next big thing as it was big. His rationale for continuous, incremental musical integration was multifaceted, and his articulation of it, to some degree, depended on who was asking. It could be utilitarian or academic, entertaining or self-fulfilling. When asked if he consciously worked to acquire a broad array of jazz piano styles, Byard said:

When I came up, Fats Waller was in vogue. Then there was Nat “King” Cole and Basie. I played like Fats first, but the guys in the bands I worked with wanted something more modern, so I doodled around like Basie and played like King Cole. Then Erroll Garner came on the scene, and I listened to him. Throughout the years, as a soloist, I did different styles because it’s a good way to do the gigs, playing popular piano styles. I remember being on a Bud Powell kick at about twenty five years old. That’s when I decided to get into music more and listen to everything. Bebop was an age of revelation. It made everyone want to study more. For me, listening to Bud, after a while, I could start to anticipate every change of chord, everything he was going to do. I decided there’s got to be more to music than this. So I listened to lots of other people. I remember getting into Lennie Tristano’s thing for a while. They all became part of my act.16

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14 Don Asher. “Jazz Emperor’ Jaki Byard’s Rare S.F. Appearance,” The San Francisco Examiner, 6 August 1978, p. 244.
16 Lyons, p. 190.
Behind the trappings of a mercenary journeyman musician implied in his recounting of his stylistic acclimation is a rabidly curious intellect that was fortunate to live in a time when piano styles were evolving at a rapid pace, but one that did not outstrip his capacity to absorb its variety. New England jazz writer and radio producer Tom Reney quotes the poet Stanley Kunitz about the provincial “blue-collar” set piece that was his hometown of Worcester, toughing out life in the shadow of Boston, and Byard as a breakthrough figure, noting, “Worcester was a place where one was continually challenged to navigate close-minded thickets that reinforced what Kunitz called the city’s ‘parochial climate.’ But here and there were trailblazers to the wider world, and Jaki Byard was undoubtedly our man in jazz.”¹⁷ He goes on to theorize that Byard’s approach was in reaction to this constrained environment, writing, “Perhaps it was his own sense of personal liberation from Worcester’s ‘parochial climate’ (not to mention racism, which I heard and witnessed numerous displays of in my youth) that inspired Jaki to become one of the most worldly of jazz musicians. Like a kid in the proverbial candy store, he embraced and utilized everything, including classical music, but the extraordinary ability he had to internalize it all and make it his own spoke not of self-indulgence but of the ‘ruminations of a genius,’ as Bad Plus co-founder Ethan Iverson wrote in 2014.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Williamson, p. 6.
¹⁸ Ibid., p. 8.
Byard first encountered Art Tatum in 1941 and absorbed his harmonic exploration and style of expansive arpeggios and runs with a heavy undergirding of stride. This expanded the palette he had established on the popular styles of Nat Cole, Count Basie, Earl Hines, and the older stride players. In 1942, Byard moved to Boston but his stay was short. He was drafted into the army in April 1943. He played the trombone in the 337th band. Along with the baritone horn, Byard’s father taught him to play the trombone by learning Sousa marches. At some point, his roommates included pianist Ernie Washington and drummer Kenny Clarke. Before being drafted, Clarke had worked with Thelonious Monk in the house band at Minton’s Playhouse, the mythologized birthplace of bebop. In 1941, Minton’s was inhabited by a variety of musicians, including many beholden to the swing style. Bebop was also being incubated, and Monk and Clarke were on the innovative edge of the proceedings at Minton’s.

Byard was first stationed in Massachusetts, followed by Alabama and then Florida. He was discharged in March 1946. While in Florida, Byard was introduced to a local band that included two youngsters, Nat and older brother Julian “Cannonball” Adderley. The younger Adderley recalls Byard mentoring them for several months and introducing them to a new music that was coming into vogue in the jazz community after

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the recording ban of 1942-1944. He describes their first exposure to the new music through Byard, which they later came to know as bebop:

… a few years later we were playing during the war and they had an army base near where we were and a man named Jaki Byard was in the army. He was a trombone player. He came and he heard our little band and said, “These little guys got a chance.” So he took us—we and Cannonball—he took us to a little, what we call a greasy spoon, right, and they had a record on the juke box, “Sorta Kinda.” Trummy Young, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, and Jaki Byard said, “Sit here and listen to these.” He said to Cannon, “You listen to the alto player,” and to me, “You listen to the trumpet player and get what it is they have.” He spent about two or three months working with us, showing us, you know. We were just kids and he was in the service, a soldier, and that was a very important part of our development because we had never heard of Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker until Jaki Byard took us. Then he introduced us to Wardell Gray and Dexter Gordon and Billy Eckstine’s big bands then became important because we knew who the players were and that’s how we got into bebop, from Jaki Byard.20

The Gillespie/Parker recording of “Kinda Sorta” was recorded on January 4, 1945, in a session led by trombone player and composer of the tune, James “Trummie” Young.21 It is the first meeting of Gillespie and Parker on record, and although the tune is rendered as a small-group swing novelty with lyrics sung by Young, Gillespie and Parker’s brief solos display their bebop stylings, which would become even more prominent on record when they recorded together again the next month. Nat Adderley would have been about fourteen years old, and Cannonball, seventeen.

The above anecdote, given the potential for its post hoc revisionism as a remote recollection, reveals Byard’s deep-seated natural musical inquisitiveness and his immense maturity. He had come out of the Worcester music scene several years earlier steeped in the swing traditions of homegrown musicians and innumerable high-profile players with

touring bands. He had fully integrated the piano stylings across the range from stride to Nat Cole and Art Tatum. Bebop as a style had just been coined when “Kinda Sorta” was released, and yet Byard was already drawn to the innovations he could hear in Gillespie and Parker, essentially hearing it only on record. His inclination as didact drew him to mentor the young Adderleys, although they were not much younger than Don Asher had been. At only 23 years old, he was naturally drawn to new sounds and the desire to share those revelations.

After his discharge from the military, he spent a few months in New York on 52nd Street, which at that time, had degenerated into the clutches of burgeoning social ills, displacing the jazz it had become known for. “I just didn’t dig it. So I came back to Boston.” he said.\(^{22}\) Denied a place at the New England Conservatory ostensibly due to veterans’ quotas (although one can’t help but think race may have played a role), he undertook serious private study and mirrored the curriculum he found on his own using local libraries. He played several years and toured with Earl Bostic, although the association was musically incompatible. He said, “My guys on piano were Bud Powell and Erroll Garner, who played behind the beat, while Bostic liked to go forward. We didn’t get along too well.”\(^{23}\) He described his experience with Bostic in an interview:

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\text{Byard: In the first place he fired me, which is cool. He gave me two weeks’ notice, and I said, “I’ll give you two minutes.” I quit. There’s a reason for that. I was with him for about three years, and I never played the music the way he wanted me to play it. Until one night, we were at the Apollo Theater and I played the music note for note, everything he wanted. That was the night he fired me. You know, I thought I was doing something great. He says, “Jaki you’re fired.” (laughter) }
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\(^{22}\) Williamson, p. 68.  
\(^{23}\) Ibid., p. 76.
Interviewer: He figured that you had been yanking his chain all along.

Byard: He never explained, but I think that’s what it was. After three years, and then I played the tunes the way he wanted… He was a nice guy.

Interviewer: What do you think of the music he played?

Byard: It was good. We used to swing. I wrote a couple of tunes for him. One of them was called “Blip Boogie.” I’ll never forget this. They called it race music. We were playing in Washington D.C. and Baltimore in Black shows. The managers of the theaters liked “Blip Boogie,” and they used to play it as you enter the theaters before the movies. After those two cities he scratched “Blip Boogie.” It was getting too popular and it wasn’t his tune. It was good.  

Ironically, the last tune Byard recorded with Bostic was entitled, “Earl Blows a Fuse.”

Nonetheless, Byard considered it his first big break.

More to his liking, Byard congregated with a group of musicians fully dedicated to bebop that included Sam Rivers, Gigi Gryce, and bandleader Jimmie Martin. Byard played trombone and arranged for Martin with his band renamed the Boston Beboppers.

Charlie Parker was a frequent guest when in town. Byard became fully immersed in the bebop ethos, including adopting the accoutrements of fashion such as wearing a beret. He credits the inquisitiveness of the bebop originators with his own interest in non-jazz music, telling an interviewer:

I remember the first time hearing Stravinsky’s scores back in the ’40s … it really knocked us for a loop. Then I listened to Bartok. It was through Charlie Parker. We became interested in Bartok because he was a lover of Bartok. I’d like to make this statement: That particular era, which they call the bebop era, I call it the era of revelation in improvisation. Because at that time, I remember we were just playing clichés and licks, but out of all the musicians that were popular then, it was Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, a guy named Clyde Hart, and several other musicians that were going ahead harmonically. These are the guys that gave us our inspiration.

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26 Williamson, p. 83.
27 Ibid., p. 130.
During the late ’40s and into the 1950s, Byard worked in many big bands, playing piano as well as saxophone and trombone, and arranging. The academic institutions in Boston created a crucible for talent, and these young players rendered high-quality music for the local scene, but their modern bent was not broadly popular. The Melody Lounge in the nearby town of Lynn afforded a hospitable venue for the newer music alongside the more popular big band dance music. There Byard began to refocus on piano with saxophone player Charlie Mariano. Byard could do it all, and Mariano reflected on his experience with Byard, saying, “I learned a lot simply by playing with Jaki. Jaki’s playing brought to life the whole, great history of jazz piano, from Fats Waller via Art Tatum to Bud Powell. Although he copies none of them. His playing is all himself. He simply is aware of what’s been before, what’s beside of him, and he’s able to merge it.”

Although smitten by the new sound of bebop, Byard refused to discard the notion of a historical continuum that offered musical relevance. He had a unique ability to “merge” into a cohesive offering what was at the time thought of as different musics.

This group of young musicians created the Jazz Workshop, an informal music school of sorts where students played all day with the “faculty” rather than employ formal instruction with classes and theory assignments. At some point, the overlapping staff of the Schillinger House and the Jazz Workshop merged and became the Berklee College of Music. Trumpet player Herb Pomeroy was one of the creators and founded a 13-piece rehearsal band that included Byard. Sadly never recorded, Byard described it as “fiery” and featured one of his most enduring pieces, “Aluminum Baby.” Byard later joined Pomeroy’s orchestra in the mid-1950s and recorded his tune. Byard played

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28 Williamson, p. 89.
29 Ibid., p. 96.
saxophone and contributed many of the arrangements but was eventually forced out by other members of the sax section for his unconventional solos.\(^{30}\)

Of particular importance in Byard’s time with Pomeroy was the “A Living History of Jazz” program. While working on this program, Byard opened his own music studio on Newbury Street in Boston, and with other staff, offered “advanced composition and instrument technique.”\(^{31}\) Pomeroy had been commissioned by the women of the Smith College Club of Wellesley, MA, to create this historical overview as a scholarship fundraiser and an educational endeavor for their suburban audience. Byard wrote all original music, demonstrating the styles of jazz from the beginning to the present (mid-1950s). Local disc jockey John McLellan provided a narration of the history.\(^{32}\) The goal was to be both “entertaining and educational.” Despite slow ticket sales, the concert opened on November 9, 1956, to a packed house at the Wellesley junior high school auditorium, a space described as “acoustically perfect.” The first half of the program moved from work songs and religious hymns and proceeded chronologically through New Orleans jazz and the swing era, providing “imitations” of major figures, including Armstrong, Beiderbecke, Ellington, Lunceford, Goodman, and Basie. The second half picked up in 1941, showcasing Byard’s renderings of Parker, Gillespie, Davis, Woody Herman, and Gerry Mulligan. The program concluded with the Pomeroy band playing their own book with Byard’s arrangements. The future of jazz was represented by a Byard original, “Jazz Suite Opus 3,” described as “atonal.”\(^{33}\) McLellan and Byard spent considerable time reviewing the jazz literature and auditioning numerous recordings,

\(^{30}\) Ibid., pp. 100-101.
\(^{31}\) *Down Beat*, 3 October 1956, p. 47.
\(^{32}\) *Down Beat*, 3 October 1956, p. 9.
including piano rolls, before deciding on the areas of focus. McLellan’s narration drew from writers such as Ulanov (A History of Jazz In America, 1952), Hodier (Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence, 1956), and others who had begun to articulate theories of a jazz tradition by considering the development of the music and, in so doing, repair the rifts created by stylistic activists proclaiming the purity of early jazz versus swing versus bebop. McLellan also sought to defang the tendencies of folk purists when discussing the essence of what characterizes jazz. In particular, as the Down Beat reviewer noted, McLellan stressed that elements such as syncopation, improvisation, and sonority, “are not of themselves exclusive properties of the jazz musician, but are rather the elements with which he works to devise his particular mode of expression.”34

McLellan’s commentary took a decidedly anti-essentialist bent. The notion that musical elements that characterize the jazz sound were perhaps universal and deployed in a recognizable manner to demarcate the overall genre deracialized the notion of jazz as an exclusively Black music. The choice of musicians to highlight during the performance reinforced an “American” sentiment, as did the mixed-race band. This practice was in stark contrast to the rigidly segregated city Boston still was, including in its musical endeavors having separate white and Black unions. It would have been easier for Pomeroy and Byard to play well-known standards plucked from the renowned list of musicians they highlighted. Instead, Byard wrote original works in their styles. Although the framework of the presentation was indicative of the linear “great man” narrative, Byard was looking for authenticity and originality within that construct of a jazz tradition and resisted the canonical approach to a history. There was a risk. The context of the

34 Down Beat, 26 December 1956, p. 8.
event was intended to be educational for an audience of upper-class, white suburbanites who presumably knew little about jazz and who attended, perhaps as a result of community pressure to support the fundraiser. As the date drew near, ticket sales were weak, but ultimately the hall was full. In another respect, that may have been Byard’s ideal audience for an effort of all original material, which the critics noted was “quite convincing.”³⁵ Pomeroy continued to present this program at universities in New England and at the Apollo Theater in 1958. The Apollo concert included guest appearances by Willie the lion Smith, Sonny Terry, Zoot Sims, Sol Yaged, Candido, and Big Miller, and was to be recorded by United Artists.³⁶ Byard had by then left the band.

After leaving Pomeroy, Byard played solo piano and with a trio often at The Stable in Boston. Pianist Hal Galper recalls Byard playing intermission piano between Pomeroy big band sets, observing, “As a pianist he was ambidextrous, could play anything in his left hand he could play in his right and had a unique and original style. He used to play intermission solo piano at The Stable opposite Herb’s band, often out-swinging the band to standing ovations with his four-to-the-bar left-hand imitation of Erroll Garner.”³⁷ Although Byard was unique in his insistence on incorporation of any element of jazz in his playing and composing, a practice usually characterized most often as a bow to historicization, he was as much forward thinking and sought to push the limits of time, structure, and improvisation. Thus far, Byard had been inclined to absorb the jazz piano styles he encountered as they emerged from the 1920s through the mid-50s. By the mid-50s, according to his own account, his desire to stretch the boundaries of

³⁵ Ibid., p.8.
³⁷ Williamson, p.102.
jazz into what would become known as free jazz became part of his expanded conception. In later years, to characterize the stylistic range in his playing, critics would invoke the span of influence from James P. Johnson to Cecil Taylor, the poster child of the avant-garde, implying equal influence from both Taylor as much as Johnson. But unlike his integration of stylistic conceptions of others up to that point, his adoption of this avant-garde break from tradition, he insists, was of his own design.

Taylor, born in 1929, began study at the New England Conservatory in 1952, where he spent three years. Reed player Michael Marcus, who played with Byard late in life but established a warm relationship, recalls Byard’s recollections of Taylor as a youngster, noting, “Cecil’s father used to bring Cecil to hear Jaki when he was like 16 years old.” He paraphrased Byard, “Man Cecil Taylor, I invented that style of playing.” “I would play that style [James P. Johnson, Erroll Garner, Earl Hines] with my left hand and then I’d play Charles Ives and Stravinsky in my right. I was playing free like that 10 years before Cecil. I invented that style.” Marcus concluded Byard did not evince bitterness but rather frustration that he was not acknowledged as the originator of that style. Taylor had released his first recording, *Jazz Advance*, in September 1956, on the Transition label. As Gary Giddins notes, especially on the track entitled “Rickickshaw” (as it appears on the original release), the components of Taylor’s later style are already clearly evident. The attention it drew resulted in an invitation to the 1957 Newport Jazz Festival in a segment showcasing experimental jazz, and more recordings over the next several years.

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39 Williamson, p. 250.
Byard, on the other hand, made no recordings on piano in a small group or solo between 1951 (his work with Mariano) and 1960. The 1950-51 dates with Charlie Mariano on alto saxophone, Herb Pomeroy on trumpet, Jack Carter on bass, and Peter Littman on drums give no indication of a move toward a revolutionary break. His recorded work with Earl Bostic in 1949 reveal him to be fluent in blues and R&B, with the occasional hint of modernism breaking through, likely the source of tension between the two. The following year, he recorded high quality bebop with Charlie Mariano, along with credible impressionistic tunes like “Diane’s Melody,” a Byard original written for his daughter. His next small group session in April 1960 was Eric Dolphy’s date *Outward Bound*, originally on the New Jazz label, with Freddie Hubbard on trumpet, Dolphy on reeds, George Tucker on bass, and Roy Haynes on drums. It was Dolphy’s first date as a leader. By this time, Byard had fully assimilated the new melodic, harmonic and rhythmic language. There is, therefore, no aural evidence available to judge Byard’s claim to have moved to an idiosyncratic avant-garde methodology before the advent of Cecil Taylor. Byard’s description of juxtaposing traditional left-hand figures against right-hand forms taken from other sources was not the innovation conceived by Taylor. Byard had adopted some of Taylor’s highly percussive, high-energy abstractions, part of what has been characterized as Byard’s ultimate “eclecticism.” Giddins points out Taylor was “profoundly anti-eclectic,” concluding, “every note and method in a Taylor performance is instantly recognizable as uniquely his own.”41 Byard’s mosaics convey his unique voice in their constructed whole. Taylor had immense affection for Byard, and it is possible if not likely that Byard’s unique juxtapositions were of some influence on

41 Ibid., p. 459.
Taylor, but we may still be left with the chicken-and-egg conundrum in ascribing influence.

A less than fruitful run with Maynard Ferguson eventually led to the introduction to Eric Dolphy and a reunion with his old Boston colleague Sam Rivers. His association with Rahsaan Roland Kirk was especially satisfying, as Kirk shared respect and interest in music and musicians who came before. He called Byard “The Living Emperor of Jazz Piano.” The 1960s were fruitful times for Byard as a sideman in modern jazz, and by far, Byard’s most important association during the 1960s was with Charles Mingus.

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CHAPTER 3

FORMATIVE BIOGRAPHY—PART III

MINGUS, NEW YORK, AND DEATH

Several stories are told about how and when Byard first met Mingus sometime in 1959 or 1960. Vibraphonist Al Francis was playing in Greenwich Village and relates not only the first encounter with Mingus but also encounters with Cecil Taylor, recalling, “Jaki would sit in when off the road [with Maynard Ferguson], and will never forget when Cecil Taylor peeked in. Jaki played even further out than Taylor in his own style that I would see on the TV show with Jaki years later. One night Jaki and I on break from Café Wha? went around the corner to hear Mingus, who asked Jaki to sit in. The rest is history.”43 Gene Santoro recalls Mingus came to hear Byard at Club 82 in the Village, and that Byard subsequently sat in with Mingus at the Five Spot.44 Others credit Eric Dolphy with making the introduction.45 But Byard himself told Len Lyons that trumpeter Don Ellis cajoled Byard to come from Boston to play for Mingus at the Showplace in New York. “I sat in with him,” said Byard, “and that was it.”46 Byard officially joined Mingus in 1962, auspiciously sharing the piano chair with Toshiko Akiyoshi in Mingus’s Town Hall concert of October.47 Of his recruitment, he recalled Mingus’s need for his style of playing and his own affinity for it, saying:

43 Williamson, p. 112.
44 Ibid., p. 144.
46 Lyons, p. 188.
47 Lord Discography.
Mingus had to get a piano player that could play “old-fashioned” for his Town Hall concert. There ain’t too many cats that can go that way, play stride… I used to dig rent parties. There was a cat named Walter Henderson who used to play at rent parties around Hartford, Conn., and I used to go down there to visit my grandmother who lived there. I’d go all around to these parties with my parents. I used to sit right by the piano … this Henderson would get that thing going in F#, it was a lot of fun.\textsuperscript{48}

Byard and Mingus were the same age and shared aspirations as composers and improvisers with a reverence for the earlier music. Mingus loved Byard’s integration of undisguised stride piano and, especially during their Jazz Workshop tour in 1964, gave Byard premier opportunities for his solo playing. On several occasions, the set would open with Byard playing his own composition A.T.F.W., a tribute to Art Tatum and Fats Waller.\textsuperscript{49} Byard told Marian McPartland, “He [Mingus] used to make me play five or six minutes before each concert. My theory was that he used to make me play my tunes so I could play his tunes.”\textsuperscript{50} Byard frequently used the unaccompanied time to showcase his penchant for incorporating the older styles, especially stride. There was likely more to it for Mingus in giving Byard solo time than simply composer reciprocity. Mingus is seen smiling during a Byard solo on “Take the A Train” as Byard bookends two choruses of stride piano between bebop choruses.\textsuperscript{51} Byard offers another explanation regarding Mingus’s band leading. He told an interviewer, “Mingus did a funny thing; all of a sudden he’d stop the rhythm [bass and drums]. I remember the first time it happened. I


said to myself, now why did he do that? What’s going on? After a few times, I figured, the hell with it, if I’m playing alone, I’ll play whatever I want, so I’d stride, play excerpts from concertos, anything. The public used to dig it, so I don’t think he minded.”

On the “Take the A Train” solo, however, one can see Byard, not Mingus, cuing the rhythm section to lay out just before the stride choruses. Not only did Mingus not mind, his affection for stride piano is well known.

Mingus was a mercurial and often difficult person to work with, but Byard provided a foil of sorts that expanded the breadth of Mingus’s group efforts. Despite verbal abuse, insults, and threats, Byard had an affection for Mingus and understood his ego structure. But he could put up with it only so long. He relates an episode involving real potential physical violence which prompted his departure after six years with Mingus. He relayed on several occasions the episode, when while on a gig, Mingus came after him with an ax, and Byard defended himself by grabbing a fire extinguisher. Although Mingus backed down and entreated him to come back out to play blues, Byard left the band.

A few years later, he rejoined Mingus. After Mingus’s death, Byard played in tribute bands to the bassist that were organized by his wife Sue.

By the 1970s, Byard had become seriously disenchanted with the commercial recording industry as well as the infrastructure that supported live music. Despite the acclaimed work he had done with Mingus, Dolphy, Kirk, and others, his own star had failed to rise beyond adulation from within the jazz community. Filmmaker Dan Algrant, while still only a student at Harvard, undertook to provide a glimpse into Byard’s

52 Lyons, p. 189.
53 Marian McPartland’s Piano Jazz; Williamson, p. 150.
greatness, complexity, and obscurity. He began his effort in the fall of 1978 and included interviews with Ron Carter and Bill Evans, conversations and performance footage with Byard, and Byard’s home movies. Carter and Evans both bemoaned the lack of recognition of Byard from the general public despite how well deserved it was. Byard admitted his passive style when it came to self-promotion, describing his wait-and-see attitude when it came to being called for gigs. Carter implied he was overshadowed by Mingus, saying, “If Jaki had been with a Miles Davis kind of leader for 10 years, rather than a Charles Mingus kind of leader, he would have gotten a little more ink.” Evans thought Byard’s own choices handicapped his renown. Byard had acknowledged that for the first twenty years of his serious piano life, adopting and incorporating the styles of popular pianists was helpful in securing employment. In later years, he became more cynical about the effects on one’s playing caused by copying the styles of others. Pierre Christophe recalled Byard’s ultimate realization of the importance of developing one’s own style, quoting Byard, “When I was 20 you had to play like Nat King Cole to get gigs, when I was 25 you had to play like Bud Powell to get gigs, when I was 30 you had to play like Horace Silver to get gigs, when I was 35 you had to play like Bill Evans to get gigs. I figured out it’s better to play the way you really want to play and stick to it, whatever other people think.” Remarkably, Byard never discarded all those influences, but the resulting style limited his attraction to a music culture that focused on the next new thing, completely missing the uniqueness of his synthesis. Graham Haynes, a fine trumpet player and son of renowned drummer Roy Haynes, recalled growing up with the

56 Williamson, p. 293.
Byards, as they were neighbors. He too observed Byard’s lack of business sense but implied Byard wished to avoid contention and stress. He never had a manager. He put up with poor pay and the slights of oversight rather than risk confrontation.57

Jaki Byard was murdered on February 11, 1999, as he sat in his living room. The circumstances were unusual. At first he appeared to have a nose bleed indicative of a death by natural causes, but a single bullet entry was quickly found on his nose. Suicide was ruled out based on crime scene evidence, including no evidence of a gun. In addition, Byard was not known to have issues with depression. However, Graham Haynes, who knew him very well personally, had observed a psychological decline in Byard after the death of his wife Louise five years earlier from cancer. He became more detached, less present, and, even with his music, lost some of his enthusiasm and seemed only to “go through the motions.” Haynes also observed a diminution of Byard’s pianistic abilities as he entered his mid-70s.58 Byard was 75 at the time of his death. The authorities believe the assailant was known to him.59 The case remains unsolved despite several moments over the years of renewed interest by the authorities.

57 Graham Haynes. Phone interview with author, 8 October 2019.
58 Ibid.
CHAPTER 4
THE BYARD STYLE—THE INGREDIENTS

HUMOR

Byard’s ultimately landed on a personal style through a synthesis not only of the multiple musical styles he integrated, but also other non-musical aspects of his nature and inherent talents. One critical factor that helped shape his philosophy and presentation was his humor. His biographer describes him as “old school” when it came to his penchant for adding non-musical antics to his stage presence.60 Herb Pomeroy commented, “We used to do a history of jazz program for which he wrote a lot of original music. He was able to play all these piano styles and was a very dominant force in the program. He would get out in front of the band, take off his shoes and socks, roll up his pant legs, and sort of moan and groan like a blues singer out in the field, unabashedly accompanying himself with his two-string guitar.”61 One night while playing a club in Worcester, without interrupting his playing, he reached into his pocket and placed a set of toy chattering teeth on the piano as a response to noisy club patrons. Byard was often an animated player, smiling, yelping, and squealing when especially pleased with where his music was going in the moment. It “would probably make for an interesting Jaki Byard Wind-Up doll, don’t you think,” commented writer Steven Cerra.62

Byard’s humor often articulated wry, coded swipes at political, social, commercial, and racial realities. He adopted a series of consonant nouns with the common suffix “tion,” most with sociopolitical implications, to describe the multiple

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60 Williamson, p. 100.
61 Ibid., p. 100.
62 Ibid., p. 103.
roles a musician must play. He used these notions in his teaching but also in his routine discourse. He named his trio with Al Francis and Ray Olivieri, both white musicians, “Jaki Byard & AFRO.” When asked about the origin of the name of his big band, the Apollo Stompers, Byard said, “[It] comes from the Greek god Apollo, the spaceship Apollo, and all the Apollo theaters throughout the world. Then you might see a truck go by that says ‘Apollo Cleaners’ on it.” Byard was not immune to overstepping when attempting to mix political musical statements and his at times off center humor. He had composed a suite about Israel; when introducing it in performance he told a joke about violence in the region and was challenged by an audience member. Perhaps uncharacteristically for one known to be both generous and conflict avoidant, he took offense and responded in a patronizing manner.

Part of his humor manifested as what observers described as unpredictability. Drummer Tom Grignon who played with the Apollo Stompers recalled, “He taught me so much, and was always funny, unpredictable and an amazing musician. He played both piano and tenor sax in the band. I remember one night during his sax solo, he walked out the front door of the club while we were all playing. He probably played on the sidewalk for several minutes—I couldn’t see him from the bandstand—and then he came back in, all the while the big band kept playing hard.” Peter Watrous focused on Byard’s audience laughter throughout an hour-long solo recital, not only in reaction to verbal amusements but also when moments of recognition arose as Byard wound his way

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64 Williamson, p. 112.
65 Ibid., p. 169.
67 Williamson, p. 169.
through his idiomatic musical disguises. He observed, “Mr. Byard, one of jazz’s great surrealists, is a comic who hasn’t a moment’s fear of disturbing the sanctity of the performance; in *Family Suite*, after pounding discordantly but in rhythm for a moment, he turned to the audience and said, ‘That’s a family argument,’ and kept on playing.”

“The pleasure Mr. Byard gets from banging genres against one another is easily translated by the audience. When the melody of the tune finally appeared, subdued and in radically different context from the standard interpretations of the tune, the audience laughed in recognition. Mr. Byard has proved once again that wit has healthy transformative powers, and that the jazz tradition is endlessly flexible.”

Byard’s application of disparate touchstones of sound across jazz idioms destabilizes the audience expectation of interpretation/performance. When the moment of recognition ultimately comes, it manifests as a form of levity with the requisite audience reaction of laughter. Critics have tagged Byard’s use of pre-bebop styles as tongue-in-cheek digression. Thelonious Monk was also critically cornered as employing caricature when he dug up stride piano from the depths of his musical upbringing. Byard rejected this motive, telling one writer that he, “never played anything tongue-in-cheek.”

The distinctions between the natural humorous proclivities of a Byard or a Monk become intermingled with parody in the eyes and ears of jazz critics. The music can be humorous and playful without degradation. But Byard was insistent that his intentions were of consequence, saying “I might do it with humor, but it’s still serious because I mean what

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I’m doing.”70 Byard and Monk had idiosyncratic stage personalities, and especially in the case of Monk, they spilled over into non-performance public view. Byard understood Monk in this regard. When both pianists were playing at a festival, an eager interviewer asked Byard if Monk was in a talking mood. Byard responded, “I think he is. He said good morning to me.”71 Marian McPartland credits Byard’s success to the “intuitive ease” and “certain elegance” with which he constructs his musical deliverables, words she used in her introduction of him when he was a guest on her radio show Piano Jazz. When she asked him if her introduction was to his liking, his wit came to the fore telling her, “You forgot that he’s eclectic, whatever that means.”72

Byard frequently evinced what could be construed as irreverence. Tenor player Mike Kaplan quotes Byard’s patter for the set closer as follows: “We’re gonna play this tune as fast as we can. So, we can take a break as fast as we can. So, we can hit the bar as fast as we can. So, we can get back and play the last set as fast as we can. So, we can go home and get some shut eye as fast as we can.”73 His frequent “goofing and mugging” while playing has been attributed to his work with Mingus,74 but clearly this was an inherent element of his own personality as it manifested many years earlier, as with the “A Living History of Jazz” concerts. One aspect of the live presentation of his big band may have come more directly from Mingus. Graham Haynes, who was in the band, observed, “He’d do that thing that Mingus would do. He would stop the band, like if the

72 Marian McPartland’s Piano Jazz.
73 Williamson, p. 296.
74 Ibid., p. 298.
band made a mistake, he would stop the band and then rehearse in front of the audience. He would say, ‘This is a workshop. This is a jazz workshop.’”\(^\text{75}\) It may have been off-putting to those expecting only a serious demeanor from a musician of Byard’s stature and experience.

Much of his humor and wit, both verbal and musical, contemplated wry observations of racial coding of music over the decades. Hankus Netsky, a Byard student who became chair of the New England Conservatory (NEC) jazz department from the mid-80s through the mid-90s, highlighted Byard’s annual history of jazz lecture. He recalled, “He would remind us that when he was a child, Paul Whiteman was the ‘King of Jazz,’ Benny Goodman was the ‘King of Swing,’ and Duke Ellington was the ‘King of Jungle Music.’ The irony of these classifications was, of course, lost on no one in the class. Jaki would open the door of the classroom, let us take in a little of whatever Brahms or Chopin was being played down the hall, and close the door in mock disgust, complaining about being surrounded by ‘saloon music.’”\(^\text{76}\) His NEC faculty colleague Ran Blake understood the multifaceted humor—part anger, both personal and cultural, part self-deprecat ing, part instinctive, and part an expression of affection.\(^\text{77}\) Byard had by nature a humorous spirit that was frequently evident in his personal life. “He was a funny guy, a hilarious guy,” noted Haynes for whom Byard was like a second father.\(^\text{78}\)

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\(^\text{75}\) Haynes, interview.


\(^\text{78}\) Haynes, interview.
at the Charles Playhouse, Byard and his trio were playing opposite Boston’s newest comic discovery, Jay Leno. One wonders if Byard had intentions of trading places.

The dialogue between Byard and his audiences of fans and critics is a complex set of actions and reactions that strike at the interconnection between his multi-tiered humor and the aesthetic experience. Mordechai Gordon identifies similarities but also draws distinctions between the two. They can both share optimal effect when approached with a “playful attitude,” having the expectation of feeling pleasure or being amused, and involving “the play of the imagination.” Humor can also disarm conflict while communicating truths “because it transforms frankness into a less threatening and confrontational style of discourse,” a tool used by Byard to great effect as someone whose inclination was to avoid outright conflict. Gordon quotes John Morreall, who notes that humor “is based on a conceptual shift, a jolt to our picture of the way things are supposed to be.” He goes on to emphasize that the shift can be cognitive or affective, is usually sudden rather than as a result of gradual understanding, and results from the amusement triggered by “an incongruity that challenges the ordinary way we organize some information conceptually (incongruity theory).” The aesthetic experience can and usually does (or should) create a cognitive/affective change at deeper levels. It may be pleasurable but often is not, and requires reflection, interpretation, and revelation.

81 Ibid., p. 114.
82 Ibid., p. 116.
83 Ibid., p. 116.
Byard presented a panoply of admixed humor and aesthetic experience musically and verbally. Using Gordon’s concepts, we observe that when humor and the aesthetic experience are experienced concurrently, the cognitive and affective shifts can lead to an interpretive conflation and misattribution of one’s conclusions. Recognition of humor in his playing (which will be discussed in greater detail) is really about the aesthetic experience. It requires multiple levels of reflection so that the immediate feeling of amusement should be refined with a deeper appreciation of the incongruity Byard introduces in the performance. Byard complicates the challenge for his audience with his verbal humor, which is experienced more immediately, although it, too, begs for greater reflection. Especially with regard to the music, Gordon points out that greater understanding of the tenants and framework represented in the experience, whether humor or aesthetic, “can help us refine our perceptiveness and enhance our ability to detect the qualities of artworks and various incongruities in humor . . . .”\textsuperscript{84} Ultimately, however, an individual experience is a matter of personal evaluative processes. Gordon concludes with an instruction helpful in conceptualizing and reacting to the humor enmeshed in a Byard aesthetic experience, writing, “To be on stronger footing, we should acknowledge both the various connections and the significant differences between humor and aesthetic experience. In this way, we can avoid the tendency to confuse the correlation between the two with identity and equivalence.”\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., p. 113.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., p. 120.
PLAYING STYLE

Barry Harris, confirming the organically derived core of Byard’s style, attributes Byard’s strength at playing stride to his exposure as a teenager in the mid-1930s, since he born in 1922. Stride was still in vogue at that time. James P, Johnson, Fats Waller, and Willie the lion Smith were still very active, and the style had started to be filtered through Art Tatum and Teddy Wilson. The authenticity of his playing of older jazz styles and his penchant for prioritizing history impressed early players like Wilson, who, having heard Byard around 1980, said, “I just heard a very interesting pianist in Europe—Jaki Byard. He does a fascinating history of jazz piano, from ragtime to stride to Earl Hines, the era I came up in, Art Tatum, and also what’s generally in vogue today.” Kevin Whitehead, in a 2014 review of a release of a live performance by Byard at the Keystone Corner in San Francisco, a venue he frequented, summarized the post “neotrad” and “antitrad” (i.e., postmodern) reconciliations of what Byard had been doing ostensibly since the beginning of his career. Whitehead commented, “Playing stride piano was no gimmick for Byard. It was part of the arsenal of techniques and styles on call, whenever he sat at the keys. A modernist who valued the innovations of any age, Byard could play new and old ideas at the same time.” In a similar vein, Boston jazz historian Richard Vacca notes Byard demonstrated “… a rather remarkable facility for integrating bits and pieces from across the spectrum into his improvisations, combining and recombining these elements to

87 Lyons, p. 63.
create passages wholly new.” These notions of the flexibility in mediation of innovation within a historical framework will be explored further.

Byard’s penchant for music “wholly new” was demonstrated early on with his work for the “A Living History of Jazz.” Byard was not a revivalist nor was he drawn to a repertory approach in his own performances. There are no known examples of him recording or playing live any of the stride piano repertory such as “Carolina Shout” or “Handful of Keys,” but he played the standards associated with the stride composers such as Waller’s “Black and Blue.” Byard did participate in the George Wein–sponsored New York Jazz Repertory Company concert of May 24, 1975, entitled “A Rent Party,” remembering Fats Waller, James P. Johnson, Luckey Roberts, and Willie the lion Smith. The other pianists who played included first-generation originators Eubie Blake and Claude Hopkins, and second generation protégés well known for their stride piano renderings, including Dick Hyman, Dick Wellstood, Mike Lipskin, and Brooks Kerr. He never recorded any Fats Waller compositions (but was known to quote him between tunes with, “One never knows, do one?” and recorded only one by James P. Johnson, excerpts from Johnson’s piano rhapsody “Yamecraw.” He knew the music of Louis Gottschalk, which he performed, as well as Joplin, and performed four Joplin rags (“The Entertainer,” “The Easy Winners,” “The Chrysanthemum,” and “The Cascades”) as part of Gunther Schuller’s NEC ragtime ensemble when it debuted live at a 19th- and

early 20th-century musical Americana festival that Schuller put together. The ragtime performances were not solos but the piano parts from the arrangements in the celebrated “The Red Back Book,” a rare compendium of professional orchestrations of mostly Joplin rags. A year later, Schuller recorded a number of pieces, but Byard was not the pianist. Byard did record “The Entertainer” solo but hardly played it as written.

Byard never recorded any of the impressionistic compositions of Willie the lion Smith but was intrigued by him. Byard’s piano was covered in photos of other pianists, including one of Smith front and center. Also on the piano was a photo of the stride pianist Joe Turner. It was Byard’s interest in Smith that led him to discover Duke Ellington. Byard told an interviewer, “Duke was one of the great artists, but I didn’t really check him out until later in life. I was digging Basie, Stan Kenton, Jimmie Lunceford. I was influenced by their approach to writing orchestrations. I became interested in (Ellington’s) piano playing and his dedication to people like Willie ‘The Lion’ Smith.” He would ultimately cover a number of Ellington (and Strayhorn) tunes. While avoiding the cannon of stride piano, the style pervades his solo work. He insisted, however, that his students learn something from the canon. Fred Hersch learned Eubie Blake’s “Charleston Rag.”

Byard loved to shoot super 8 home movies with a focus on his family life. He would have liked to have been a filmmaker. His biographer Chet Williamson describes his playing as “visually compelling” and makes a connection between Byard’s approach

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96 Algrant, 1979, film documentary.
97 Williamson, p. 188.
98 Fred Hersch. Interview with author, 15 November 2019, apartment of Fred Hersch.
to his variegated musical portraits, medleys, episodes, excerpts, and tributes and the filming techniques he used that help bind and connect what appear to be separate themes and motives. He notes that in his playing Byard uses the musical equivalent of film-like techniques including jump cuts, cross-cutting, dissolves, deep focus, oblique angles, and mise-en-scene such that “you can almost ‘see’ the images he is trying to evoke with sound.”

This is an intriguing analogy that describes a methodology of coherence for the way Byard uses disparate techniques and styles.

*New York Times* critic John S. Wilson noted that Byard, when playing solo piano, would play through with no breaks. During the course of what seems a long medley, he has at his disposal the lifetime integration of pianistic tools that he uses as he might change camera technique. “He is a quick-change artist,” wrote Wilson, “who fits all these parts into a compelling and unified structure that inevitably puts the tunes in unusual perspectives.”

The brilliance is how he does this when what seems to be simply “eclectic” pastiche becomes a cohesive work of art.

Underlying his choices is his deep commitment to the historical continuum while finding his own voice. Gary Giddins observed that the emotions in Byard’s playing go beyond the superficiality of eclecticism as gimmick, noting his style was “his own and unmistakable, by turns hard, percussive, witty, sentimental, sardonic, whimsical, subversive, ebullient, anguished.”

Giddins observed Byard’s operational use of broad styles as “tools to make improvisations engaging and lucid,” but also noted the receptive outcomes for an audience potentially polarized by partisan jazz divisions. Commenting

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99 Williamson, p. 229.
on a live performance of “C-Jam Blues” by Byard and saxophonist Eric Kloss, Giddins noted how the juxtaposition of Dixieland and free jazz reduces hardened sectarian inclinations, writing, “The contrast between the beginning and end of jazz, rather than the rapprochement between the two that avant-gardists often aim for, enhanced both. To modernist ears, Dixieland lost the stigma of old-timeyness; to traditionalist ears, new music became accessible.”102 With this deconstruction of “tunnel vision,” Giddins considers Byard “the father of the new tolerance.”103 Writer Howard Litwak acknowledged that Byard was a “rewarding musical thinker and teacher,” and his synthesis of diverse idioms was expressed “without sounding either academic or frivolous.”104 Dr. Billy Taylor reconciled Byard’s musical breadth of using “abstract and traditional techniques,” noting that he could demonstrate “the compatibility and validity of both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ approaches to jazz” in his own personal style.105 He also noted Byard’s skill at spontaneity, opining, “He does the things that he has in mind in and of the moment.”106 The latter notion gives the impression of a haphazard mixture rather than the carefully crafted methods Byard relied on.

A veneer of the idiosyncratic defines Byard’s sound as he resists rote replication of the jazz history he loved so well. Pianist Lou Terricciano described the singularity that emerged, noting, “The man had his own voice. It was quirky, kind of zany but it was very

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106 Williamson, p. 289.
much his own. Nobody played like that.”¹⁰⁷ Not only does a definable Byard style lie beneath the mosaic, but the cohesive pictures he usually delivers is dependent on it.¹⁰⁸ Giddins, who wrote extensively about Byard, including liner notes for him, summed up the stylistic product of Byard’s roiling ingredients, writing, “He has managed to refine a baldly eclectic approach into a distinctive, personal style that is both creative and jocular. In applying his quick intelligence, percussive touch and quixotic variations to a vast repertoire of piano styles, both jazz and classical, he has evolved a rich keyboard diction that is in itself stylistically original.”¹⁰⁹

Byard was perpetually intrigued with discovery. It brought some criticism when his choices were thought incongruous.¹¹⁰ Perhaps they didn’t always work, but he maintained his “sense of adventure,” as his student pianist Bruce Barth noted.¹¹¹ Don Asher summarized the emotional range of Byard’s playing as “a prodigious full-keyboard style informed with wit, ebullience and daring: on one level rollicking and bravura, on another tender, lyrical, explorative.”¹¹² He took many chances when introducing non-traditional diversions into a traditional superstructure. Fred Hersch, one of Byard’s most prominent students, began studying with him at the New England Conservatory in 1975. He had this impression of Byard’s alchemy, noting, “His general fearlessness was

¹⁰⁷ Williamson, p. 289.
¹¹¹ Williamson, p. 330.
¹¹² Asher, 1978, p. 244.
something that I really took. I mean he was irreverent in the best way. He is to me one of the more distinctive stylists in jazz piano certainly of the relatively modern era. He was sort of looked at as sort of an oddity in a way.”¹¹³ Hersch identified other unique qualities in Byard’s playing. He observes, “Your eighth note lines are like your cymbal beat. Jaki’s had a swinging but weirdly detached sense about them. You could hear the different hand positions that he was using. It was not as elegant as Hank Jones, or quite as lyrical as Tommy Flanagan. But definitely super swinging and kinda sloppy in a good way.”¹¹⁴ Byard ebulliently admitted how satisfying this approach was to him, telling an interviewer, “I believe in the theory that variety is the spice of life and by going into the piano that way I get great pleasure out of it.”¹¹⁵

**TEACHING**

Byard was hired by Gunther Schuller to teach arranging and improvisation in the newly founded “Afro-American Music” program at NEC in 1969. Although Byard was always instinctively drawn to teaching, his formal hire at NEC and at other music schools was also one of financial necessity. But Byard fit well into Schuller’s vision for his budding department. Susan Lee Calkins notes that Byard “managed to combine his creative abilities and personal convictions by infusing topics of cultural history into his

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¹¹³ Hersch, Interview.
¹¹⁴ Ibid.
musical instruction—a living example of Schuller’s ‘compleat musician.’”¹¹⁶ He taught there until 1984. At the behest of Jackie McLean, he was brought on to the faculty of the Hartt College of Music at the University of Hartford in 1975. Over the years, he also taught at the New School, Manhattan School of Music (from 1989 until his death), Northeastern University, The University of Massachusetts, Bennington College, the Alms Lewis School of Fine Arts (in 1980), the Brooklyn Conservatory, Harvard University, Yale University (which awarded him their Duke Ellington Fellowship award in 1977¹¹⁷), and yearly at Bismarck State College in North Dakota (for 25 years until 1996). He gave many one-off “master appearances” for both high school and college students.¹¹⁸ John Ronsheim, director of the Antioch College music department, had sponsored Byard at Antioch and proclaimed, “Byard is the finest jazz piano teacher alive …. “¹¹⁹

Byard had an ability to allay student anxieties in line with his aversion to competition, comparison, and value judgment. When a student musician confessed her status as an apprentice, Byard responded with, “I am too.”¹²⁰ He thought of himself as a perpetual student who himself learned through the process of teaching.¹²¹ Byard’s ability to decipher jazz and impart information drew many students.¹²² His teaching style included structured exercises for some, seemed to others as unstructured, and to others

¹¹⁷ “Jaki Byard In Concert at Museum Theater,” Echoes-Sentinel (Warren Township, New Jersey), 2 February 1978, p. 36.
¹¹⁸ Ibid.
¹¹⁹ Snyder, p. 31.
¹²¹ Snyder, p. 31.
still as individual mind reading. Byard made no bones about the need for serious practice of scales, keys, triads, modes, etc.\textsuperscript{123} Percussionist Al Francis studied with Byard in the late 1950s and recalled his insistence on fluency with II-V-I progressions. He then insisted that Francis run the chords with two fingers, vibraphone style à la Lionel Hampton’s piano playing. Byard was a confluence of contradictions. Hal Galper recalled of his 18 lessons with Byard:

\begin{quote}
...a few years later I went over my notebooks from his lessons to find nothing in them. It was then I understood his teaching technique which I have since adopted. Jaki got your mind going, he “swung you,” stimulating your mind to consider new concepts. He wasn’t so much the teacher as a mental catalyst. While I thought he was teaching me I was actually teaching myself. He was a true genius.\textsuperscript{124}
\end{quote}

Joe Berkovitz encountered a similar experience, delivered by Byard with his characteristic humor. He asked his teacher what he should work on, and Byard responded, “Well, how should I know? You’re the student.”\textsuperscript{125} Pianist Alan Pasqua noted, “He taught me how to be a jazz pianist rather than someone who just plays jazz piano. Depending on what he was playing, he had very different approaches to the music. He taught through example rather than just giving you a lesson sheet and sending you home to practice.”\textsuperscript{126} For others, however, practice may have been a needed component. Kathryn Farmer recalls a more “definitive teaching technique,” noting, “Jaki would take you through the cycle of 5ths and 4ths and have you play everything in every key, but in order of the cycles—up a fourth, down a fifth—very systematic very mathematical.” She

\textsuperscript{123} Lyons, p. 191.
\textsuperscript{124} Williamson, p. 114.
\textsuperscript{126} Williamson, p. 163.
also admitted, “Jaki took me from nearly knowing nothing to writing 18-piece big band charts.” Songwriter Margo Guryan discovered Byard’s individualized approach to teaching, commenting, “He didn’t relate to his students in a ‘cookie-cutter’ way. He saw exactly what each person brought to music and related to them on their specific level. I find this a rare quality in a teacher—in any person.” Brad Mehldau, a student of Byard’s at Hartt, commented, “‘You can’t lie,’ my teacher, Jaki Byard once told me. What he meant was that you can’t fool the people. If you sit there and just run between these different bags you took from a bunch of other players, you are in fact trying to hide your true self.” Jason Moran studied with Byard for four years at the Manhattan School, “teaching me everything that he thought I could handle and even more stuff I still haven’t gotten to 20 years later … Jaki had a way of teaching that was less about wagging his finger in my face … he wanted me to understand things about technique, harmony, and rhythm, but then he also wanted me to understand things about life. He seemed to blend those things together pretty seamlessly so I didn’t even know all of it was happening.” Byard could be a font of detailed and rigorous music theory. Steve Davis recalled, “I had an arranging class with him and I remember one day he was explaining the harmonic structure, different chord qualities, voicings, and he probably got a few blank stares. It was a small class, maybe six or eight students. He could tell it was going nowhere with the students. So, he walked to the chalkboard and just whipped out this insane amount of musical information on the grand staff. In less than five minutes, all of a sudden, the chalkboard was just filled with stuff. Today, in this day and age, students

127 Ibid., pp. 165-166.
128 Ibid., p. 115.
129 Ibid., p. 193.
130 Ibid., p. 199.
take out their phones and take a picture of it. Back then, I feverishly copied it down in my little manuscript notebook. I still have them. I remember thinking: This is so good. This is so much information.”

Davis also recalled Byard’s insistence on great detail in musical notation. He objected to what he considered loose terminology such as describing an extended chord as simply an alt (altered) chord. He preferred that one spell out the tensions specifically. If you want a C7 b13 b9 #11 chord, say so. Byard would memorialize much of this information in a handwritten series of notes, exercises, and transcriptions that he gave to his students.

The concept of conservatory education in jazz was new in the late 1960s, and the somewhat loose structure of faculty requirements at NEC gave Byard the latitude he needed to best actualize his teaching style. NEC and Byard student Jed Levy (saxophone) noted, “I didn’t think his classroom stuff was as concise as it probably could be. I still enjoyed it, but the whole environment at the conservatory at the time … it was like you had to find ‘it’ there … there were these great people there and it was easy to get into their orbit, but the teaching thing was not as codified as it is today. In retrospect, I am quite glad of the way it went as far as my own development.”

Byard had a unique way of sizing up his students and his music as two sides of the same coin. Value was to be found in nearly anything, and then utilized, channeled, compiled to produce a unique product. In the music, although elements were recognizable and perhaps ridiculed or dismissed as simply historical reference, Byard found the right admixture that distilled meaning and agency in a cohesive whole. His use of historical touchstones ranged from the sound of imitation (although it rarely was ever replication)

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131 Ibid., p. 195.
132 Ibid., p. 212.
to utilizing social meanings of older structures as scaffolding for more modern componentry. In his students, he encouraged the search for their unique voice. This idea will be further explored below in how Byard mediated the jazz tradition. Byard has often been called a genius. John Sergenian made frequent inquiries of Byard to decipher the modus of that genius. He concluded, “No matter what he was doing I couldn’t quite get him. I’ve met a few geniuses in my life. I’ve always been interested in what makes these people tick … He had a whole different system and way of looking at things.” Part of his system was to impress on his students that music needed to be informed by the forces of the 360-degree environment around the musician. He adopted in a rap-like poetic discourse, a series of nouns all ending with the common suffix “tion”: utilization, politician, presentation, execution, obligation. Byard said “Jazz is teaching the art of improvisation. In order to improvise, musicians have to deal with a thousand ‘tion’ words that deal with jazz.” His teaching philosophy at NEC revolved around his ‘tion’ words. He admitted, however, that it was difficult for him to explain while playing, saying, “it’s not a natural thing.” Although he was not a trained pedagogue or academic, teaching had been of natural interest to him since his high school days. Fred Hersch notes, “He worked at it. He wanted to pass on the knowledge.”

133 Ibid., p. 268.
134 Marvel, p. 31.
136 Hersch, interview.
HUMANITY

For Byard the music was deeply personal and emotional in the most positive way. “Jazz in my language is a four-letter word spelled L-O-V-E,” he told a newspaper reporter. Byard had a generous spirit. Bob Merrill, who was a student at NEC and played in the Stompers, recalled his experience with Byard, noting, “Jaki was so warm and inclusive. He would introduce all the guys, all the soloists. He just wanted people to get into the act.” Writer John F. Goodman observed, “Jaki could conceive and execute most anything on the piano, but the music came ultimately from his soul, not his fingers.” Byard wrote tribute pieces for each of his family members, including their dog, who was killed by a drunk driver. Steve Davis, a student at Hartt, recalled, “Jaki was very kind. He was very down to earth. As I remember, he was pretty eccentric, or at least could be, but he was also very pleasant and encouraging to the students.” In eulogy to Byard, Ervin Ely, director of the jazz ensemble at Bismarck State College where Byard taught for 25 years, noted, “He’d come to Bismarck every year and perform with the students like he was in New York City. And such a gentleman. Always made them feel they were head and shoulders above where they were. He never put anyone down.”

John S. Wilson reviewed the film Anything for Jazz in the New York Times and noted, “This intimate half-hour view of the pianist Jaki Byard shows a warm and

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137 Irwin Block. “Piano Man Jaki Byard Shows His Love of Jazz,” The Gazette (Montreal, Quebec, Canada), 4 July 1986, p. 33.
138 Williamson, p. 170.
139 Ibid., p. 177.
140 Haynes, interview.
141 Williamson, p. 195.
142 Ibid., p. 241.
charming man, open and unpretentious, with very strong family ties.” Byard disliked comparisons. In the film he says, “I don’t like to compete against a person, and that’s what some people do, they put you up, set you up to compete. And they talk about you. Man, so and so tore it up, he broke it up. That’s not too cool.” Writer Fred Bouchard recalled the blindfold test for *Down Beat* that he did with Byard in 1981, noting, “he insisted that everyone get five stars before I dropped the needle. ‘They’re all stars! Heck,’ he harrumphed, ‘I’m a star myself.’” Byard disliked the value judgments implicit in comparisons and competition, which becomes tangibly evident in his duo piano ventures, especially with Earl Hines. His daughter Diane summarized her father’s humanity, commenting, “Bottom-line is he would never try to discourage anyone. He was such a positive person, confident, secure. Yet sometimes, humble to a fault.” But even he suffered injustice only so far. Maynard Ferguson recalled an incident when the band was playing in Detroit “at one of those kinds of clubs you’d rather not be in,” and the owner never paid the musicians. Byard, who was always sensitive to the shabby financial treatment of musicians, said, “That ain’t right,” recalled Ferguson, and Byard proceeded to rip out the strings from the grand piano in the club. In the mid-1970s Byard was involved with a short-lived organization called the Unification of Concerned Jazz Artists. The group included musicians Rashid Ali, Steve Turre, Hilton Ruiz, Steve Lacy, J.R. Mitchell, and Howard McGhee, among others. They sponsored concerts

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143 Ibid., p. 229.  
144 Algrant, 1979.  
145 Williamson, p. 328.  
146 Ibid., p. 280.  
147 Yglesias, p. 941.  
148 Haynes, interview.
around New York and as far as the University of Rochester with a mission to bring audiences and musicians closer together with meet-and-greet time, and to bring a historical context to events with their “Historical Resume of Jazz.” The group may also have been active in advocating for better treatment of musicians. Byard told an interviewer, “I believe music is the best therapy for mankind. You got all that laying on couches, dope and medicines, but music beats ’em all.”

**TRADITION**

Byard was credited with influencing the neoclassical (or “neotrad”) juggernaut spearheaded by Wynton Marsalis, Albert Murray, Stanley Crouch, and others in the 1980s. Byard was flattered and outwardly pleased about the recognition, noting, “Gary Giddins, I think it was, paid me a compliment. He said I was partly responsible for this trend, for getting people to think like that.” When asked about the disadvantage of not owning a “single identity within your own playing,” he responded to Len Lyons, “No, I have to play the way I feel. Some people have told me I ought to stick with one thing, if that’s what you’re getting at. But now my way is coming into vogue.” However, privately he had reservations about the repertory focus of Marsalis’s effort. To him, the concept was void of originality. Jed Levy recalled Byard’s reaction to hearing Marsalis’s

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152 Haynes, interview.
154 Lyons, p. 191.
155 Ibid., p. 191.
music, noting, “I remember at the height of the Wynton Marsalis thing we were at a gig and somehow the subject of Wynton came up. This was early on when he was like a fireball on the scene. Jaki had heard some of it and he said, ‘I don’t get it. Booker Little changed music by the time he was 23.’ At that point, Wynton was copying ’60s Miles. It didn’t resonate with Jaki.”

Writer Dan Lander has noted the all-too-prevalent view that Byard’s use of older identifiable styles is “humorously quaint at best,” but concludes, “Byard’s grasp and integration of historical forms, his ability to embrace tradition and risk taking, was visionary, impacting on a new generation of jazz musicians who understood the history of jazz as a material to build on and work with, at the service of creating something new, rather than as an unmovable weight fixing them to the past.” Unlike many of his students, Byard was never afraid to reference the older styles as recognizable objects, not simply as a springboard to “something new.” At the same time, through his own approach to admixing styles, he did create anew, as in using a stride left hand against a free form right hand, or transmogrifying the essence of the older style into a referential statement. Byard’s insistence on employing broad styles was more than expanding the toolbox. Deploying stride piano was not just about the jazz tradition as a musical event but about the sociohistorical context that was intertwined in it. It is not a one-dimensional style, and Byard deploys it to evoke various images and emotions from blues to rent parties. He also found the cross-cultural connections of musical idioms that exploded notions of essentialism, telling a student who asked him about stride, “…it was no big deal, that you

156 Williamson, p. 216.
could find it in classical music, that it was all part of the piano repertoire.”

Byard veered outside the jazz and classical realms into pop music of the ’60s and ’70s, a time when jazz musicians found little material to absorb as they had done during the heyday of the great American songbook era of the ’20s, ’30s and ’40s. These musical choices, such as “I Know a Place” and “Ode to Billy Joe,” did not always sit well with critics. Byard defended the music as raw material, saying, “These are the folk songs of their day. Mozart and Beethoven used the folk songs of their day, so why shouldn’t I.”

In jazz, Byard’s complex mix was not limited to historical forms. He incorporated what came to be known as the jazz “outside,” the avant-garde of the early 1960s. Although he was associated with others who possessed a historical bent, he adopted the language of free jazz and added it to the string of other styles he incorporated into this playing as he encountered them. At the same time, the advent of free jazz began yet another discursive rift in the consideration of what constituted the jazz tradition. Here, Byard was distinct from the neoclassicist movement he was credited with signaling. Robert Maclean, in his consideration of jazz historiography and the avant-garde, notes:

> The neoclassical response to the 1960s and 1970s aesthetic movements can be caricatured, with some justification, as total rejection, even deafness—as many astute critics have pointed out, the narratives shaped by the three great intellectuals of jazz neo-classicism, Albert Murray, Stanley Crouch, and Wynton Marsalis, more or less ignored musical developments between 1963 or so and Marsalis’s reclamation of a singular jazz “tradition.” Yet the seemingly more reasonable position that the outside—the music that used to be called avant-garde—can be approached as yet another historical manifestation of the jazz impulse, that it can be revered as part of the tradition, and placed in the toolbox along with playing the changes and other musical techniques, is no less an

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example of the jazz neoclassical aesthetic and its fundamental reliance on nostalgia.\textsuperscript{160}

Byard’s jazz tradition was a continuous construction process of inclusion, but it had some limits. He never amended his portfolio to include fusion as it entered the musical landscape and the discourse around it in the late 1960s. He did not adopt electronic instrumentation which would have been required to pursue fusion as a genre. He did, however, adopt material from contemporary pop sources outside the traditional palate of jazz standards, originals and certain classical themes.\textsuperscript{161} Incorporating pop material was anathema to the neoclassicist faction but an essential first step for the “antitrads” in responding to the exclusivity of the “neotrads.”\textsuperscript{162} Although Byard may not have adopted fusion, the “Historical Resume of Jazz,” the musical presentation programmed in 1977 by his colleagues from the Unification of Concerned Jazz Artists that intended to educate audiences on the jazz tradition, did include jazz-rock fusion.\textsuperscript{163}

Byard’s representations reflect components of both the “neotrad” and “antitrad” activists in the debate over defining what constitutes the core and boundaries of the jazz tradition. For the “neotrads,” tradition contained untapped ideas worthy of continued exploration, whereby innovation revealed itself not as radical departure but interpretive expansion of continuity. Hersch defines this as “innovation as synthesis and


\textsuperscript{161} Jaki Byard. “From Them-To Us,” Soul Note SN 1025 CD, 1982. Byard improvises on Bobby Gentry’s “Ode to Billy Joe” and Stevie Wonder’s “Send One your Love.”


elaboration.” Mastery of idiom defined authenticity, dispelled racist romanticization of African Americans as unschooled primitives, and protected social functions that fended off cultural chaos. Byard was in large part sympathetic to these concepts, which had been reflected in his own approach for 30 years, thus prompting recognition as an inspiration for the “neotrad” movement. He departed, however, from other embedded notions, including his adoption of free jazz/avant-garde idioms and non-traditional repertoire. Here, he is more in line with the “antitrads,” who espoused widening the boundaries in a most flexible way. He did not subscribe to their rejection of the notion of continuity as a defining element of the core and its closely related concept of canon per se. Nor would he have been aligned with the deconstructionist notions of rendering the music itself moot and focusing only on the external social structures that define the music—ideas that began to develop in the mid-1990s with the work of Krin Gabbard and, a little later, Sherrie Tucker. Hersch offers a moderated view between the “neotrad” and “antitrad” polemics, writing:

Rather than having to choose between rigid exclusivity and complete openness, I would argue that while there are boundaries around the jazz tradition, those boundaries are moveable, depending on one’s purpose. Certain key figures cannot be reasonably omitted, so extramusical factors operate more fully in constructing the second tier of the canon, where there is more to dispute. Harold H. Kolb, Jr. suggests we see the literary canon “not as a single authoritarian list and not as a pluralist cacophony of innumerable voices but as a tiered set of options, relatively stable at one end, relatively open at the other. One could compare it to an expandable dining room table: there is a stable foundation, but it

164 Charles Hersch, p. 11.
165 Ibid., p. 12.
166 Ibid., p. 16-18.
can be lengthened by adding more leaves, depending on the size of the gathering.”¹⁶⁹

Allowing the individual to set their own boundaries is in some ways an appealing construct, but it doesn’t solve the problem of what then constitutes a generally agreed upon tradition. For Byard, a table that included everything from ragtime to free jazz must have seemed big enough as he approached late middle age.

¹⁶⁹ Charles Hersch, p. 25.
CHAPTER 5

CONSTRUCTING A TRADITION

Nearly a decade after his death, a pithy review of the posthumous release of a solo performance at San Francisco’s Keystone Corner summarized all the superficial clichés and transparent motivations attributed to Byard and his music, referring to him as a “mad genius.” Critic Joseph Blake continued, “With his frenetic, nimble hands and florid, wacky improvisations, Byard ties the dangerously naked, in-the-moment jazz solo form into playful knots—colourful bows of tangential, jazz history–based flights of fancy that vanish with the last live note. The veteran Byard deconstructs Harlem stride, Mingus, Duke, and Jelly Roll’s Latin tinge on what can best be described as ‘wigged out’ Bach to ‘Birth of the Cool.’” He concludes, Byard has “one of the funniest minds in jazz.”

After the decade of the 1960s that included well-received associations with the most respected names in modern jazz, and nine albums under his own name, he remained unknown to most jazz fans. It was not as if Byard had not accumulated a number of awards, including twice winning a Down Beat critics poll. Despite his ability to craft an individual style out of the gamut of recognizable influences from which he drew, few could see beyond the tag of eclecticism. W. Kim Heron noted that Byard “has been so often labelled an eclectic that he grew apprehensive about the label for a time.” “Byard comes by his eclecticism naturally,” wrote Gene Santoro. Byard is one of only very few pianists who lived through most of jazz history. Unlike most who pass through styles

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171 Heron, p. 35.

learned early in their musical lives until hitting upon their own voices and styles, which become longitudinal calling cards, Byard learned and integrated all the styles, at first out of necessity, but then kept them prominently placed in his playing. He evinced a duality of instantiating historical touchstones while configuring his own recognizable style. He did this by defying strict copying but maintaining authentic underlying form and rhythmic sense so that the historical style seemed to be more representative of the originators than it really was at particular times. Byard’s approach to juxtaposition of style and content reflects his aversion to comparison and relative valuation. It is, in his view, potentially, all of equal value. Presenting an apparent musical time capsule in this way can seem to make him an anti-mediator. His ability to maintain genre distinctiveness betrays for his audience only what Jerome Harris called, “surface-level association,” missing the parallel and distinct “relationships among history, culture, group and individual identity, and human expressiveness.” How then does Jaki Byard fit into the jazz tradition, and with his complex aggregations, did he construct his own?

In his classic 1991 essay, Scott DeVeaux takes on the perils of constructing the jazz tradition. Writing at the height of yet another internecine conflict in the jazz world between the neoclassicists and the proponents of free jazz and fusion, DeVeaux compels a “unified field theory” that insists the musics called jazz deserve a tradition and that it is best served by one based predominantly in conceiving of a continuum. He outlines the perennial rhetorical conflict inherent in the “commercial versus artistic” arguments (which in practice, maps to traditional versus modern jazz) and the confounding specter of ethnicity, but he proposes:

The “jazz tradition” reifies the music, insisting that there is an overarching category called jazz, encompassing musics of divergent styles and sensibilities. These musics must be understood not as isolated expressions of particular times or places, but in an organic relationship, as branches of a tree to the trunk. The essence of jazz, in other words, lies not in any one style, or any one cultural or historical context, but in that which links all these things together into a seamless continuum. Jazz is what it is because it is a culmination of all that has come before.174

DeVeaux cites Ross Russell as formulating the first compelling reconciliation of conflicts at play in the late 1940s into a notion of a unified jazz tradition. He published a series of articles in *The Record Changer* beginning in late 1948 and into 1949. The magazine, founded by Bill Grauer and Orrin Keepnews in 1942, began with a focus on traditional jazz, but as the decade and the music evolved, the editors embraced the new sound of bebop. By 1948, Russell was best known as a bebop pioneer. As owner of Dial records, he recorded some of the classic sides of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and others. Russell, who lived in Los Angeles, recognized the innovations of Gillespie and Parker despite the cool reception of local audiences when the two musicians first came to California in late 1945. Russell established a fruitful if conflicted relationship with Parker and was probably instrumental in saving his life and keeping him out of prison. He is credited with having recorded what has been called Parker’s “classic quintet” in 1947, when he moved his operation to New York, essentially to follow Parker. Russell had also published about traditional jazz, including the first article about James P. Johnson in the short-lived magazine *Jazz Information* in 1941. His contributions to the literature about bebop and Johnson were recognized as vital by Martin Williams, who reprinted both in

his 1959 compendium *The Art of Jazz*. In his bebop series, Russell devotes most of his attention to an analysis of the new style, but makes sure to introduce his views of how listeners should approach the changes in musical styles.

Bowen introduces a biological metaphor for the process of evolutionary adoption of musical style, writing, “The biological metaphor provides insight because it is the environment/audience and not the organism which determines which variant will reproduce. The life of a musical work is like the life of a species that changes and reproduces in response to its environment.” That metaphor can be extended with another theory of speciation that supports Russell’s prioritization of continuity rather than fracture. The concept of anagenetic evolution theorizes that new species develop and maintain genetic continuity with their ancestors, as opposed to a cladogenetic process, wherein a new species splits from its ancestral forms and develop incompatibility with them. Russell writes, “The real nature of jazz history is organic. The contemporaries are products of the past which they have absorbed. The total picture of instrumental change and individual experiment equals a musical language which constantly extends, reaffirms, and replenishes itself.” He explains further, “… our music is a whole art extended across time and space of twentieth-century America…,” and chastises “Those who cannot enjoy the music of Morton and Armstrong are truly as poor as those who are unable to understand the no less wonderful art of Lester Young and Charlie Parker.”

He undercuts the attraction of rendering relative value judgments about various jazz styles.

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that serve as justification for retention or abandonment of either old or new, depending on the inclination of the musician, critic, or listener, writing, “The mere fact that a style is contemporary does not mean that it is superior—nor inferior.”

This notion of a jazz tradition was evolving along with Byard. DeVeaux notes that tradition theories “derive from the metaphor of organicism” and that the driver of change is internal. The changing calculation of what constitutes the core of the tradition along with its boundaries has been the persistent axis around which theoretical and actual definitions, inclusions, and exclusions revolve. Who and what are in, and who and what are out? Martin Williams, in his book *The Jazz Tradition*, conceives of a “great man” framework wherein he assigns the role of either innovator or synthesizing composer who elucidates form to each figure—a process that undulates over time in what he refers to as a “Hegelian pendulum.” Other features that he finds defining of the jazz tradition include its primary revolution around rhythm, the importance of influence of the great players, and the development of an individual voice. Of the sixteen artists he profiles, six are pianists, and all fall into his category of synthesizing leaders of form. (It is the likes of Armstrong and Parker whom he considers innovators.) He also notes, for five of them, the foundational importance of ragtime. And for four of the six (Ellington, Basie, Monk, and John Lewis), he specifically notes the influence of stride piano, chiefly through James P. Johnson. In Williams’s jazz tradition framework, we can situate Byard most clearly as a synthesizing composer, and, like the others, vitally influenced by

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178 Ibid.
179 DeVeaux, p. 541.
181 Ibid., p. 6.
182 Ibid., pp. 20-21.
stride piano. Yet we might view Byard’s innovation as the practical reconciliation of a broad swath of jazz style and history in one musician, and often in one composition or rendition. Within a style, however, he employs highly traditional and recognizable referents as well as elastic extensions of any particular style in a way that culminates in an “individual voice.” As Antonio Bowen notes, “Tradition is the history of remembered innovation, and is always changing. Tradition is enforced through reproduction.”

Just as Byard came to acquire his fluency in the full range of jazz piano organically, so too did he organically reconcile how he would handle the notion of the jazz canon as he adopted teaching as an important component of his professional life and identity. Ken Prouty explores the conundrums of canon in academia and for performer-teachers. The criticisms include its exclusionary nature, the misrepresentation of historical functions, the tension of canon-derived improvisation versus self-discovery by the unschooled (tradition versus identity), the power asymmetry this can portend in the academy, the differing utilization of canon in scholarship and the classroom, resistance to history from performance-oriented students, the static and self-perpetuating nature of a chronological narrative based on stylistic eras and musician icons, and, despite these problems, its seeming intractable necessity.

By focusing on the music and the stylistic peculiarities of the lineage of pianists as texts, Byard bypasses the geographical domination of jazz historiographic discourse and canon development that prioritizes a narrative of New Orleans origins. His embrace of Jelly Roll Morton notwithstanding, by foregrounding Joplin, Johnson, Hines, Cole,

183 Bowen, p. 164.
Powell, and so on, Byard demarcates the assessment of jazz piano as distinct from the conventional chronicling. Even before the first jazz academics in the 1950s like Ulanov, Hodeir, and Stearns began a rapprochement of the strident views of moldy figs and modernists, melding the story of jazz styles to construct a jazz tradition that included traditional jazz and bebop, Byard had represented such a thesis in his playing. He did the same with “A Living History of Jazz,” including the roots of jazz as they were conceived in the 1950s as well as his own conception of where jazz was going. The history of jazz piano perhaps lends itself to an outsider approach regardless. While jazz piano is incorporated to some degree into most typical canonic approaches, disproportionately less attention is paid to its development as a distinct tradition, and to the unique place of the piano as a monumental technology of melodic and harmonic contribution relegated to the rhythm section, unless, of course, when it is considered as a solo instrument. Witness the relative attention given to a James P. Johnson/Art Tatum/Bud Powell/Bill Evans narrative compared to a Louis Armstrong/Dizzy Gillespie/Miles Davis, or Coleman Hawkins/Lester Young/Charlie Parker/John Coltrane genealogy. Barry Ulanov, although he dismisses Jelly Roll Morton and James P. Johnson, is one of the first to acknowledge the exceptional, independent, and seemingly chaotic thread of solo jazz piano, writing in 1952, “But when we come to pianists there is trouble; there is nothing orderly about the development of the pianists as jazz instrumentalists … The list is astonishing in its length and … in its quality. Analyzing the records of these men [he does include Mary Lou Williams in his list] carefully, with as little personal prejudice as possible, one can see clearly … that jazz is rich in good pianists, pianists of wit and wisdom and experimental
The lineage of jazz piano certainly is more coherent than Ulanov is willing to concede, a tradition distinct from and subordinated to the familiar narratives of instrumental and ensemble jazz. Bowen analogizes formats as establishing characteristics of tradition and foregrounds the malleability inherent in jazz performance, writing, “Tradition, like a lead sheet, has the effect of establishing essential characteristics, but every performance is an opportunity to reinterpret tradition’s version of what is essential.” What is often described as Byard’s eclecticism is his adoption of the stylistic breadth from a multitude of pianists as noted by Ulanov. By utilizing those elements in performance and composition in new and exciting ways, he establishes what, in his view, is essential.

Davies, in his search for a definition of music writ large, contemplates the historical tradition as contributing to a “sociohistorical definition of music.” He operationalizes the notions of influence and continuum, noting, “A central intention, one that ties the present piece of music making to the prior tradition that led up to and makes it possible, is to use the idiom and resources of that tradition in a fashion that adds something to it. This is consistent with the composer’s rebelling against or trying to change some aspects of the tradition, even as he relies on other of its aspects to bring that intention into effect.” He adds that non-musical considerations are necessary in characterizing the essence of a tradition, including conventions and pragmatic concerns relevant at a particular historical juncture. “… by contextualizing music historically,” he notes, “we may be able to see the presently diverse array of possibilities as emerging in a

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186 Bowen, p. 167.
Byard maintained his historicized inclination throughout his career as a performer and teacher, utilizing the idioms in new and unusual ways that both disrupted conceptions of narrative continuity within the larger jazz tradition and left observers only to reference what seems obvious in his appropriations.

David Cosper, in one of very few scholarly works about Byard, attempts to reconcile his “gestures toward identifiable but inconsistent and nonsequential historical styles” by examining several of Byard’s early 1960s recordings and considering a variety of theories concerning narrative and narrativity. He argues that Byard’s music challenges many of these notions, and due to his insistence on historicizing, Byard himself is left out of the conventional linearity conversation that elevates one performer after another. He describes Byard’s approach as “creative anachronism.” By disrupting notions of a linear narrative, Byard makes John Coltrane’s “Giant Steps” old and W. C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues” new. Cosper further invokes the notion of “weak narrativity” in Byard’s performances, arguing that little coherence is apparent to tie it to “the usual analytic tools” and to identify a story. He suggests Byard disrupts this second notion of narrativity by employing several devices: namely expectation and surprise, cultural memory (in particular the diegetic paradigm), and postmodern narrativity.

Byard’s seemingly unconnected elements of playing, especially in what are characterized as “free” playing, are in reality carefully constructed setups of expectations that will be disrupted in short order. At times, especially when utilizing recognizable stylistic turns, the frustration of dashed expectations deceives the listener into focusing

\(^{188}\) Ibid., p. 547.

only on “quotations, allusions, or parodies of pre-existing melodic material.” The hearing of only obvious representations reinforces conclusions that manifest as humor and simplified attribution of stylistic nuance. Cosper utilizes Renate Lachmann’s diegetic literary theory to suggest Byard is a “‘bearer of witness’ in the negotiation of cultural memory.” He continues, “I consider Jaki Byard’s trans-stylistic improvisation to be both strategic and referential, analogous to the ‘apparatus for remembering by duplication’ that Lachmann asserts is necessary for the preservation of cultural memory.” Cosper returns to his notion of creative anachronism as Byard’s methodology for disrupting linearity in performance. It establishes “a uniquely self-conscious agency” for Byard, foreshadowing the renewal of investigating historical narrative just coming into vogue by the mid to late 1960s.

Cosper further explores the notion of musician as narrator and employs literary theories of the hypertextual narrator who delivers narrative possibilities that the reader (listener) must synthesize; he also discusses the approach of bricolage, wherein structures are built of pre-existing components, partial or complete. He concludes, “… in the music of Jaki Byard, stylistic coherence seems less a goal in and of itself than the means to a rhetorical end. With his gestures toward identifiable but inconsistent and nonsequential historical styles, he seems to take advantage of a listener’s motivation to find stylistic coherence, and then alternately to frustrate and fulfill those expectations.” Finally,
Cosper suggests that the burden of responding to the canon was dealt with by Byard in his “confetti” approach, which utilized parody and narrative framing.

Cosper situates Byard amongst the avant-garde historicists that include Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Charles Mingus, Sun Ra, and to a lesser degree, Eric Dolphy. He posits that their use of historical forms was in some way a response to the pressure of both (or either) a historical canon and narrative. His models, adopted mostly from literary theory, offer intriguing interpretive insights into Byard’s intentions. Byard certainly was negotiating canon, historical narrative, and cultural memory and relished the ability to surprise and confound listener expectation, but he was not simply helicoptered into the early 1960s with a deep toolbox of historical references with which to “respond” to conundrums of narrative reconciliation. Even more than his contemporaries with similar inclinations, Byard’s approach to cultural memory and narrative grew organically as part of his own journey of linearity, encountering, integrating, and mastering jazz form and identities which he never discarded. Anachronistic tensions had been present in the 1940s. His “creative anachronism” was built in continuity and continuously over time. He felt it imperative to keep the historical “burden” front and center, not only in the music but how it was presented. The tradition, with all its musical, historical, cultural, and commercial offerings was not something to be overcome. His innate humor and humanity added dimensions to his work product, rendering results that his listeners need to reconcile themselves. Although we have little recorded evidence before 1960 of his evolution, testimony from fellow musicians and students as presented earlier corroborate this notion.
Georgina Born summarizes concepts of mediation within ontologies described mostly for 20th-century classical music but with implications for how a musician like Byard might have evolved a strategy for real-time mediation of the evolution of jazz style. She references Lawrence Kramer’s notion of “constructive descriptions, meanings that attach themselves to music while appearing to be ‘its own seeming,’ and that have historical agency, installing ‘the past in the present.’”195 Kramer’s concept describes the observation that musical meaning has a degree of stability over time, supporting the concept of “conditioning future musical expressions and compositional practices.”196 However, she refers to Alfred Gell’s time-model that theorizes the relativistic relationship of tradition and innovation. Quoting Gell, she notes:

An artefact or event is never either traditional or innovatory in any absolute sense …. A “traditional” artefact … is only “traditional” when viewed from a latter-day perspective, and as a screen …through which its precursors are adumbrated. Conversely, an “innovatory” object … is innovatory only on condition that we situate ourselves anterior to it in time … so that we can likewise see it as a screen through which still later objects may be protended ….197

She concludes jazz is a music that “exemplifies Gell’s analysis.” Byard evinced this view of the elasticity of the perception of music as traditional versus innovative directly in such compositions as “The Avant-Garde of 1921” and indirectly in his overall approach of mining the breadth of jazz style to suit his intentions for any particular composition or at any given moment while playing. The innovations of 1921 are still innovations and representative of the continuum of tradition when played forty years later.

197 Ibid., p. 21.
Born invokes the notion of “intertextuality” (or “intermusicality”) as described by Ingrid Monson. Employing evaluative principles of ethnomusicology, she argues, “If musicians are saying something—musically, culturally, socially, or politically—when they improvise, the ethnographer must consider in what ways this meaning is articulated, communicated, and perceived by musicians and their audiences. I view jazz improvisation as a mode of social action that musicians selectively employ in their process of communicating.”198 In her study, she in particular assessed three mechanisms of musical irony, one mode of this process of communication. Mechanisms include transformations of material external to the African-American musical tradition, quotations, and “exaggerated, humorous references to well-known musical features of jazz and other African-American musical genres.”199 As an example of the last mechanism, she analyzes Byard’s “Bass-ment Blues,” noting, “Here the sense of irony and humor derives from transformed references to recognized stylistic devices within the jazz tradition.”200 The irony emerges only when laughter of recognition and appreciation is evoked from the audience, a process that requires communality of source understanding. If the audience doesn’t recognize a passage played in stride form, the “intermusical” communication process breaks down. Byard’s parody is often not mimicry, but as Born says, “much more avant-garde,” as it mixes references within a motive or section that may seem incongruent. It is an example of his use of expectation and surprise.

199 Ibid., p. 285.
200 Ibid., pp. 302-3.
Adapting literary theory, Monson prioritizes Henry Louis Gates’s notion of signifyin(g) with the central tenants of “transformation and intertextuality” and quotes Linda Hutcheon’s theory of parody and its potential for multiple outcomes:

Parody, then, in its ironic “trans-contextualization” and inversion, is repetition with a difference. A critical distance is implied between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signaled by irony. But this irony can be playful as well as belittling; it can be critically constructive as well as destructive. The pleasure of parody’s irony comes not from humor in particular but from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual “bouncing” … between complicity and distance.201

Byard is counting on his listeners to distinguish his motivations as they encounter the irony in his parody. He was often irked by the limited interpretation of his approach as unserious. In addition, critics often smooth the challenging edges off Byard’s transformations by invoking easily referenced descriptive parallels to players and styles past. Their presumed intention is to interpret for the listener and help navigate through what should be part of the intermusical dialogistic experience. Byard’s transformations can be subtle and demand a detailed understanding of the styles he uses. When he uses a group of tone clusters in the right hand juxtaposed against a stride left hand, all while retaining the rhythmic inter-relationship between the hands that is characteristic of stride piano, the effect is often stylistically referenced as “repetition” of Waller or Johnson, not recognizing the “difference” of Byard’s stride, which often sounds like neither. But sometimes it does.

Close scrutiny makes it clear that Byard is not simply or repetitively mirroring his stride piano forbearers. He is able to maintain the regular, loping left hand and off-the-beat right hand to a degree of accuracy that makes the comparisons seem logical. But

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Byard is interjecting his original ideas, in many ways similar to Monk when he played stride. Giddins notes the inaccuracy of this frequent stylistic misattribution that is common among critics. In a review of a Byard performance, he writes, “Various stride passages underscored the fact that Byard’s use of lateral left-hand rhythm can no longer be described as homage, implicit or otherwise, to Fats Waller. His stride patterns are as different from Waller’s as Waller’s were from James P. Johnson’s; his rhythmic figures in the right hand and his harmonies in both bespeak an entirely different sensibility—proving that stride … did not petrify 50 years ago.”

Simplifying Byard’s complex parody into a series of homage episodes then leads to the often invoked conclusion that his methodology is eclectic. In such cases, the term is applied in its common vernacular meaning of disparate gatherings rather than in its classical meaning as a methodology in search of resultant excellence.

Donald R. Kelley summarizes the development of the philosophy of eclecticism, noting its origins in Greek and Platonic traditions. Potamon of Alexandria encouraged his students “to learn from a variety of masters” and break from the model of strict discipleship. Later, in 1604, Justus Lipsius re-envisioned Potamon’s goals as avoidance of “dogmatic errors and sectarian disputes.” As eclecticism gained agency as a distinctive option in the history of philosophy, it was associated more with philosophical liberty and anti-authoritarian attitudes. As Kelley notes, “Eclecticism was not a mere accumulation of knowledge or even a reconciliation of doctrines but rather, according to its own lights, a method of separating truth from opinion and falsehood, science from

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204 Ibid., p. 581.
superstition, and so a process of intellectual enlightenment and human progress.”

Eclecticism was further elevated in the early 19th century by French philosopher Victor Cousin, who promoted the idea “to select in all what appears to be true and good, and consequently everlasting,” in addition to goodness and beauty. By the beginning of the 20th century, eclecticism was falling out of favor as a philosophical discipline but was applied more and more to the arts.

Byard’s eclecticism draws its spirit from these historical intentions and functions as musical rather than verbal discourse to aid in knitting together an understandable and idealized version of a jazz tradition. Byard learned truth, goodness, and beauty from a variety of masters. By integrating the lessons into a temporally continuous stylistic amalgam that changed incrementally as new lessons were learned, Byard disarmed tendencies for dogmatic errors and sectarian disputes about stylistic application. Byard also knew the limits of how deeply he could mine his well of truths when playing with other musicians. He recognized the full scope of his approach was not always congruent with others with whom he was playing, noting, “Of course, to some guys Fats Waller’s music is just a point of amusement. When I worked for Eric Dolphy and Booker Ervin, on their dates, they were interested in music only from bebop on. You never played Fats for them. But with Mingus or Rahsaan, they took delight in hearing the way the piano used to be played.”

There is scant criticism of Byard’s employing even the oldest ideas in the jazz tradition, even during the 1960s era of the avant-garde. He could mediate and curate his work product as his personal or community needs demanded. From an early

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205 Ibid., p. 582.
206 Ibid., pp. 577, 579.
207 Lyons, p. 191.
age, Byard’s reluctance to abandon earlier styles in a tradition that prioritizes innovation and the new thing exemplifies the virtues of classical eclecticism, highlighting his intellectual enlightenment and maturity. He never apologized for his approach. He didn’t need to; as his style developed, he did adopt the “new thing,” and he was as respected in the free jazz community as he was admired for his authentic application of older styles, a striking one-man exemplar of human progress. And the result of his efforts, while never achieving widespread popular appeal during his lifetime, have clearly been everlasting. These are the lessons he imparted to his students, the many dozens of whom carry on this notion.

Jason Moran (b. 1975) may be Byard’s most prominent student. He studied with him at the Manhattan School of Music for four years from 1993 graduating in 1997. Moran observed that Byard “seemed to represent everything—all tradition, all modernism, all conceptual ideas—and also have the facility to apply all of it without it ever feeling odd. He taught me tradition and history.” For Byard, it was not simply about technical skill, the specifics of style, or accumulation for its own sake. It was a syncretism of his own design based on “tradition and history” in the same way classical eclecticism relied on the history of ideas. Moran recalled about Byard’s instruction:

Jaki was the oldest cat that I saw who was teaching somewhere, and for some reason I didn’t want to study with anybody who was young. It seemed that Jaki was playing from the center of jazz history, but then you could see that line stretch very far away from it, and that interested me. Had I not come to Manhattan School of Music and studied with Jaki Byard (it’s a combination), I definitely wouldn’t be in the position I am right now. If an older cat tells you something that’s smart, then heed their advice. Jaki sent me 50 stride tunes. “Hmm! Maybe I

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208 Williamson, p. 9.
209 Donald R. Kelley, pp. 585-587.
should learn this stuff. Maybe I should be able to understand how this is built, and
find the freedom within that.”

I knew I was gonna learn a lot of history at the piano, and how to make
that current. When I was studying with him he was showing me all this—the
Erroll Garner thing or the Earl Hines thing or the Art Tatum thing—and how he
modified it. So he would do a stride piano, but what he was doing with his right
hand would sound like they were from two different planets.

He was constantly challenging those bounds of what could be possible
with traditional elements. And that gave me a great respect for tradition from him,
and how important it was to study and how important it was to be really
knowledgeable about it—and still feel like you’re making your contribution
today. Because I’ll never be able to play as good as Earl Hines at all. And what
pianists used to do back then is extremely more technically savvy than people are
doing today. And so I just thought that a lot of the techniques that the pianists
were using you could use today and it would sound like it was new, but it was
really, really old.

Byard’s lessons became cognitively actuated for him over time. As noted, he
concedes that the process of inculcation continued long after his last lesson, especially
Byard’s demonstration of handling the jazz tradition. He said, “Jaki’s got the more weird
stuff that I really need in my playing. He’s got the thing that it’s going to take some time
to figure out how to massage it into place, and into how I want to play.” Moran
acknowledged Byard’s pioneering conception that held together the disparate sonics
represented in the Mingus band, and the challenge of breaking through such a well-
formulated intentionality. Moran admitted, “Everything I think I invented, he actually
already invented, a very long time ago.” Moran struggled with the apparent conflict of
tangible canonic expression and the search for his unique voice. Shortly after Moran’s

https://web.archive.org/web/20100210030206/http://jazz.com/dozens/moran-

211 Bill Beuttler. “Jason Moran.” Make It New-Reshaping Jazz in the 21st Century,
(Amherst, MS: Lever Press, 2019), pp. 36-37.

212 Ibid.
213 Ibid., p. 43.
214 Ibid., p. 42.
graduation from Manhattan, Wynton Marsalis offered him a job with Jazz at Lincoln Center. Repertory was not the direction Moran was taking, although maintaining dialogue with tradition remained a core facet of his music. An appreciation for the JALC approach came into sharper focus for Moran when he accepted the position of artistic director for jazz for the Kennedy Center in 2014. He met with Marsalis, who gave him valuable advice. Moran reflected on the broadening of his view of what vehicles rightfully inhabit the positions of messengers of jazz and its genealogy. He said:

> For me, music needs Jazz at Lincoln Center. It needs somebody that goes up there and says, “This is that old stuff and we really spent a lot of time practicing it.” But on the other hand, you need people who are gonna say, “I’m gonna dig in this dirt, and I’m looking for something, not even sure if there’s anything down there. Just keep digging for stuff.”

Although the maturation of his own synthesis occurred over time, he credited Byard with providing a framework for mediating the delicate balance between replication and iconoclasticism. He said:

> I came up through jazz education, came to New York to study at Manhattan School of Music, but I think a lot of my schoolmates took the rules too seriously. Therefore, their personality was put on a backburner. I knew that was not the correct route. People like Jaki Byard taught me that you could learn the tradition, adhere to the rules just so much, and the music will never imprison you.

He noted the other professors who outwardly rejected what Byard was teaching him.

> Moran has never been too far from the tradition. His first solo record entitled *Modernistic*, after James P. Johnson’s 1929 tune “You’ve Got to Be Modernistic,” included a postmodern reconsideration of Johnson’s tune. Years later, in 2013, he developed a multimedia program entitled “Fats Waller Dance Party” that reimagined Fats

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215 Ibid., p. 28.
216 Ibid., pp. 29-30.
Waller’s music and performance modus. In it, Moran modernized Waller’s music, incorporated dancers into the program, and, in tribute, wore an oversized papier-mâché Waller mask.\footnote{Beuttler, p. 31.} The music was recorded.\footnote{Jason Moran. \textit{All Rise (A Joyful Elegy for Fats Waller)}, Blue Note B001926102 CD, Fall 2013.} Moran stressed the importance of the non-musical discussions he had with Byard on history and social issues, an important facet in framing the music. This appreciation inspired and informed a recent ambitious project.

In 2019, Moran performed James P. Johnson’s “Carolina Shout” as part of an exploration of the experience of African American Migration from the southern United States to the North through song and dance. The production was entitled \textit{Two Wings: The Music of Black America In Migration}, and it was conceived by Moran and his wife Alicia Hall Moran. In his program notes for the performance at Carnegie Hall on March 19, 2019, Moran writes, “There are moments in jazz history that burn brightly. When pianist James P. Johnson recorded his ‘Carolina Shout’ in 1921, the father of the “Harlem Stride” piano style was here to stay. Any pianists uptown would challenge each other with ‘Carolina Shout,’ from Duke Ellington to Johnson’s own pupil Fats Waller.”\footnote{Jason Moran. \textit{Two Wings: The Music of Black America in Migration}, Program notes to Carnegie Hall performance, 19 March 2019 \url{https://twowingsmigration.squarespace.com/carnegie-liner-notes}, accessed 19 March 2021.}

Moran’s rendition of “Carolina Shout” brings into full focus the sociohistorical underpinnings of Byard’s message. The composition exemplifies the migration of the Gullah and Geechie denizens of the South Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands during the second and third decades of the 20th century to the Northeast. Johnson explicitly amalgamated the dance rhythms of the ring shout into ragtime, creating the stride piano
Moran notes the historical importance of Johnson’s cultural transformation of a folk/religious form transplanted through migration into an essential jazz moment. Rather than present Johnson’s seminal work only as fodder for modern interpretation, and perhaps thinking of all those stride tunes Byard had sent him, Moran plays a transcription-based version utilizing sections and figures from Johnson’s piano roll and phonograph recordings. After playing through the multiple strains of the piece in faithful reproduction, Moran interjects his postmodern sensibilities with melodic and harmonic extensions of the tune, his hip-hop sampling approach, and builds on Johnson’s hallmark shuffle rhythms. He ends with the famous faithfully executed coda along with virtuosic arpeggios to highlight the position of the composition as a test piece. Moran’s application of styles, separated by nearly a hundred years, clearly evokes Byard’s notion of fluidity of innovation and historical referents. The production is dedicated to Byard, among others.

Moran’s recollections of studying with Byard, along with those of dozens of his other students, indicate how deeply the ideals of eclecticism pervaded his other significant endeavor, teaching. Eclecticism as a directional imperative in music education has been a subject of discussion for decades. The argument among music educators revolved around the conflict between specialization and comprehensiveness in one’s teaching skills. Best practices seem to favor a broad approach, based both on the real world advantages of musicians with broad skill sets as outcome and the diversity of learning needs of students. Kassner quotes Landis and Carter’s 1972 support for an

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eclectic curriculum, noting, “the diverse innate natures and modes of learning of the
individuals we teach, require, without doubt, every tool available to us.”222 He
distinguishes between comprehensive and eclectic, noting, “While the two terms are
closely related by sharing the quality of diversity, comprehensive connotes broad
inclusive views, while eclecticism connotes using different approaches, not necessarily
including all approaches at any one given time.”223 As a teacher, according to the
comments and recollections of his students, Byard employed what could be described as
an eclectic approach, based on comprehensive knowledge. He was not, however, a
trained educator, although as I have previously noted he possessed strong didactic
inclinations since high school. He had an instinctual draw in his musical conception to
seek the truth and an ideal outcome, reflecting the classical view of eclecticism. This
viewpoint is also apparent in how he chose individual areas of focus for his students.
These could range from II - V - I exercises through the circle of fourths or fifths, running
chord extensions in all keys, strict study of historical stylistic and compositional canon,
composition, arranging, cultivation of an individual voice, and the unimpugnable journey
of individual truth seeking.

Related to the potential variety of content in teaching is the mode of instructional
design—how to teach the concepts. Critique of eclecticism in this regard revolves around
the potential to apply diverse approaches that may be inflexible, incongruent, and lead to

222 Kirk Kassner. “Reflections on Career Development and Eclecticism in Music
223 Ibid., pp. 62-63.
a less than satisfactory outcome. Yanchar and Gabbitas argue that more important than the operational application of diverse theories/approaches of instruction is the management of the process itself, what they call “critical flexibility.” They argue that this departs from an eclectic approach with its potential for conflicting components as the process itself is continuously monitored for its congruence and cohesion, and can withstand changes over time. The process is, in a sense, one of continuous quality improvement. They found that many educators/designers tended to formulate designs of less than specific theoretical components, wherein their tried and true mechanism became “assimilated into a background perspective.” Byard, not a trained pedagogue, had an intuitive sense of this sort of application for his students. His methods included the formal, absorptive, osmotic, observational, and participatory. The number of student reflections of gratitude for their time with Byard and the detailed recollections of his seemingly disparate teaching style attest to the success of his outcomes. As pianist Jeremy Kahn wrote in his tribute to Byard, “Jaki Byard changed my life. And I know I’m not the only one.” In many ways, Byard’s instinctive skill at “critical flexibility” is also at work in his mediation of the diverse styles of jazz piano incorporated in his performances. Through his continual self-monitoring, internal conflict, and incongruity are defended against. Byard’s understanding of this process when playing with other musicians is an example of this type of self-reflection.

225 Yanchar and Gabbitas, pp. 388-392.
226 Ibid., p. 386.
CHAPTER 6

MUSICAL CONSIDERATIONS

PIANO DUOS

Byard recorded with several pianists in duo piano format. Two pianists playing together has the potential to cause substantial stylistic conflict and breakdown in the coherence of a performance. The stylistic breadth available to Byard would suggest that he could play successfully with anyone. His partners, in fact, did span decades of jazz piano style and included Earl Hines, Tommy Flanagan, and Ran Blake. Byard never recorded in studio with Ellington. However, after Byard substituted for him when he was ill in 1973, Ellington insisted that he stay on, and the two played duets. Byard also at times played with Barry Harris at Harris’s Jazz Cultural Theater, where Byard played with his big band, the Apollo Stompers.

Hines was an early influence from the late ’30s when Byard could listen to his band broadcasts on the radio and see him in performance at local venues. The two played in 1965 at the Jazz Piano Workshop in Berlin on October 30, 1965, and traded sets in New York at the Top of the Gate. Byard was pleased with the result of their collaboration.228 The Berlin Workshop included Hines, Teddy Wilson, John Lewis, Lennie Tristano, and Bill Evans. Byard first played with his trio of Reggie Workman on bass and Alan Dawson on drums, on a tune entitled by the concert producers “Free Improvisation.” Through the course of the performance, Byard examines the breadth of jazz piano from stride to Cecil Taylor (not in that order), eventually rendering his tune

228 Vandermark, p. 5.
“Just Rolling Along” in a middle section. David Cosper describes his impression of Byard’s inclusion among this group, writing:

In this context, Byard is introduced [not literally] as the historical eclectic whose performance brings together all of the stylistic elements represented by the other pianists—on one hand, something like the historical index or postscript, cataloguing the history as performed by the other pianists on the event and, on the other, examples of an emergent jazz avant-garde.²²⁹ Yet he sounds nothing like any of the other pianists on the program, and by 1965, the avant-garde had very firmly emerged.

On the program, Hines first plays a duo with Teddy Wilson on “All of Me.” They play two choruses together and a final third chorus, first trading fours and then playing together on the final C section of the ABAC tune. Although Wilson is said to have derived some influence from Hines, their styles are very different and there tends to be a lack of coherence in their collaboration. Hines and Byard collaborate on Hines’s tune “Rosetta.” They play three choruses but trade the first two (with the other in supportive comping role), thus resolving some of the potential conflict of playing together. Byard, not imitating Hines, includes elements more along the lines of Cecil Taylor with his own style of right-hand arpeggiation. In the final chorus, they trade fours for the AAB section and play together in the final A, which Hines dominates. Throughout his performances, Hines keeps his commanding right hand figurations front and center of his playing. He is the elder statesman of the group and came to maturity in the era when keyboard competition was a prioritized social imperative. Although Hines could play a powerful stride left hand, it is not on display in this concert. Byard, however, mediates the elements he uses. His inclination to avoid competition dovetails with his desire for a

²²⁹ Cosper, pp. 186-187.
coherent interaction. He may also have been more sensitive to Hines’s stature and preferred a deferential approach toward a mentor.

The two pianists embraced after the performance, which was very well received by the audience, and the two added an encore number. Byard recalls that producer Don Schlitten was inspired by the success of their duo in Europe and arranged for their recording together on February 14, 1972. On the recording, they play six tunes together and each has a solo. They play a variety of material, including the Byard original boogie-woogie tune “A-TooOle-Oo, Toodle-Oo,” the tango “La Rosita,” several standards, and “Rosetta” in a reprise of their live performance. Hines tends to dominate, usually taking the lead on the first several choruses of each tune. They play seven choruses of “Rosetta.” Hines takes the first chorus and Byard the second, each as an out-of-tempo ballad. Hines leads the third chorus as they up the tempo. In the fourth chorus, Hines continues to lead the melody and Byard introduces a “Boston” style accompaniment. Byard takes the fifth, using mostly a single note right-hand line. Hines leads the sixth chorus, and they play together for most of the final seventh chorus. The patterns for the other tunes are similar. Occasionally they trade fours. When Hines leads and accompanies, his style is uniquely and consistently evident. So is Byard’s. Although he interjects archetypal variety from slow loping stride, as in the opening chorus of “This is Always,” to unison lines in the sixth chorus of “As Long As I Live,” his deep understanding of Hines’s style allows for an integration when leading and accompanying that avoids musical collision.

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231 The “Boston” is a generally regular two handed oompah accompaniment played by the pianist behind another soloist or ensemble.
The potential for overheated competition is subjugated by the objective for coherence, at least on the part of Byard.

Byard performed with Tommy Flanagan as a piano duo on February 7, 1982, at the Keystone Korner. The recording was commercially released in 2013. Once again, Byard has second billing. Flanagan was eight years Byard’s junior, but the two shared many early influences, including Art Tatum, Teddy Wilson, and Nat Cole. Byard’s musical breadth extended wider than Flanagan’s in both directions with his full integration of stride and the avant-garde, and he was fully steeped in late swing and bebop, as was Flanagan. One might conclude they would be highly compatible playing together. The five tunes they play together consist of three bebop staples (“Scrapple From the Apple,” “Our Delight,” and “The Theme”) and two song standards, material with which they are both more than comfortable. They both play the full keyboard with very different styles, a factor that signals caution. Throughout, they are fully engaged, taking on the perilous tack of full confrontation, including while comping behind the other’s melodic lead. They don’t seem concerned with deferral of content. From the perspective of situating their collaboration within a linear narrativity, Byard mostly keeps within the stylistic epoch associated with Flanagan. He does occasionally veer off, deploying his more dissonant and idiosyncratic tendencies. We don’t hear any stride in the duets. At times their alignment within the tradition becomes an overdone synergy and they get in each other’s way, sounding muddy. But the contrast of their distinct styles that can be discerned with careful listening creates a formidable aesthetic experience, precisely the goal of the two-piano format.

Byard recorded with Ran Blake in 1981 in Italy.²³³ Once again, Byard is second billed when, presumably, this was his session. The two were colleagues at NEC, where Blake was head of the third stream department. Blake was not pleased with his duo with Byard. They had played two concerts together in Italy before recording, and Blake felt that they had not gelled. He suggests the record was made in a hurry and that they did not rehearse. Blake commented, “I like Jaki so much as a person but we did cancel each other out.”²³⁴ He commented further, “I’m always too busy to think, because he throws so many fastballs and curves my way—and I probably do to him—that I have to keep on my feet.” He continues about his perception of their incompatible styles and moving out of a comfort zone, saying, “For the most part, we didn’t plan too much. I think there are times on the album where there is compromise, yet we both remain ourselves. And there are times when it’s sort of a surprise. Sometimes we trade roles—sometimes he’s sort of serious and third streamish and he gets humor in me and a sense of swing that, perhaps, I’ve always had, but I’m not known for that.”²³⁵

They recorded two standards, “On Green Dolphin Street” and “Tea for Two,” which were included at Byard’s suggestion that they play older tunes, perhaps proving Blake’s point.²³⁶ They also recorded three co-written compositions, two clearly intended to have third stream intentions, entitled “Prelude” and “Sonata for Two Pianos,” which runs 10’35”. Their third co-composed tune was a blues “entitled “Chromatics.” They included one composition of Blake’s and one of another NEC colleague, but no Byard

²³³ Ran Blake and Jaki Byard. Improvisations-Ran Blake/Jaki Byard Duo, Soul Note (It)SN1022, 1981, LP.
²³⁵ Lee Jeske. Liner notes to Improvisations-Ran Blake/Jaki Byard Duo, Soul Note (It)SN1022, 1981, LP.
²³⁶ Ibid.
originals beside the collaborations. Aside from their very different stylistic focus, playing duo pianos was a new experience for Blake, whereas Byard was steeped in it. He frequently played duos with his students as part of his teaching style. Blake’s didactic approach relied extensively on aural experiences, utilizing listening and singing as primary tools. Indeed, the title of his book is *Primacy of the Ear*.\(^{237}\) In contrast, Byard was very experiential. In addition to his practice of playing with students, he encouraged them to sit in, especially with his band the Apollo Stompers.

On “Tea for Two,” an example perhaps out of Blake’s usual comfort zone, the two pianists progress in what could be considered their typical lanes. They play through the verse, four choruses, repeat the verse, and conclude with a final chorus. During the first and second A sections (the song structure is A1 A2 A3 B) of the first chorus, Byard and Blake play the melody relatively straight; on the opening verse, remaining choruses, and repeat of the verse, Byard plays the melody and provides the rhythmic foundation while Blake adds dissonant interjections. In the second chorus, Byard plays a walking bass while Blake obliquely addresses the melody with a sparse right-hand line. In the third chorus, Byard maintains the walking bass and assumes the melody while Blake interjects dissonant phrases. They play more together in the fourth chorus, and toward the end Byard slips in several bars of moderate tempo stride. After the repeat of the verse, the final chorus again has Byard handling the melody with Blake interjecting his dissonant phrases. To this listener, Byard’s ability to respond to Blake’s dissonant phrasing provides a satisfying cohesion as well as contrast, perhaps not as satisfactory to Blake himself. Blake had recorded many standards. Four years earlier he recorded a solo LP of

standards entitled *Third Stream Recompositions*,\(^{238}\) an obvious statement about his approach. Did he feel playing within a strict form throughout was an element of compromise, an instance of “trading roles”?

On “Sonata for Two Pianos,” it is Byard’s turn to change roles. The piece is a mostly out-of-tempo abstract opus. It is unknown when the two composed it, but it was registered with BMI and with Blake’s publisher, Margun Music. Byard and Blake work off each other with their improvisations. At times, a theme seems to be introduced, notably at 2:02, when the pace is slowed by a series of half notes and then quarter notes. Byard introduces the sense of a regular rhythm in the bass at various times. At 1:08 he plays a repetitive figure, at 3:05 Blake responds to Byard’s pulse, and at 5:30 Byard introduces an alternating bass figure reminiscent of Count Basie. Perhaps this is Byard sounding “sort of serious and third streamish.” Blake seems to want to keep the piece more abstract, frequently pulling it out from the hint of a pulse added by Byard and keeping the dissonance prominent.

Blake maintained a strong affection for Byard but never thought the two were compatible duo partners. Years later, he said, “When recording with Jaki in Milan, I never forgot his passion, his interest going to the pianos. How he would comfort me. I felt honored to be asked to be on the record with him, but it really should have been Mary Lou Williams or other pianists with a man of his history.”\(^{239}\) The album garnered favorable press, with the prolific Scott Yanow commenting, “Because Byard (who can play credibly in virtually every jazz style) is highly flexible, he was able to meet Blake on his own terms and inspire him to play more extrovertedly than usual. Their seven

\(^{238}\) Ran Blake. *Third Stream Recompositions*, Owl (F)OWL017, 1977, LP.  
\(^{239}\) Williamson, p. 307.
collaborations (a pair of standards, one recent obscurity, Blake’s ‘Wende’ and three songs co-written by the pianists) have their playful moments, are quite exploratory, and always hold one’s interest. In other words, this matchup works.\footnote{240}

Ironically, Mary Lou Williams herself had a less than satisfactory attempt at collaboration on stage with a musician solidly in the free jazz camp, Cecil Taylor. She had invited him to play with her in a duo performance at Carnegie Hall in a highly anticipated concert in 1977. Despite her perception that rehearsals were productive and despite Williams’s pedigree embodying a broad swath of jazz history much like Byard, including more modern concepts (she was 12 years older than he), the pairing was ill-fated. The failure of the two to “gel” in concert, as Benjamin Givan has noted, was the result of irreconcilable stylistic differences and Taylor’s insistence on lack of compromise.\footnote{241} Blake noted that compromise was a component of his sense of dissatisfaction with his recording with Byard. The Williams-Taylor debacle was another episode that raised the specter of the debate around the boundaries of the jazz tradition. As Given points out:

\begin{quote}
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 unique 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.\footnote{242}
\end{quote}


\footnote{242}Ibid., pp. 399-400.
It is not clear that third stream musicians necessarily embrace this same ambivalence. Gunther Schuller, who coined the term and was its champion, embraced ragtime and Jelly Roll Morton. But Blake’s comments and reservations about his collaboration with Byard bear a resemblance to those of Taylor’s. Byard had absorbed more of the avant-garde than did Williams, so to the listener like Yanow (and this author), Byard expands the envelope of the tradition and more than admirably acquits himself.

THE INSTRUCTION MANUAL

Byard encouraged his students to transcribe their works, as well as other tunes. He compiled extensive handwritten documents of his own transcriptions as well as formal exercises, all decorated with his own illustrations and commentary. Jason Moran noted the following about this teaching material:

Jaki had two very large binders filled with music that he had transcribed grand style for piano for his own tunes, for Charlie Parker tunes, for all kinds of people’s tunes. A lot of them were stride pieces, dedicated to Fats Waller or Earl Hines or Erroll Garner. Over my four years with him, I may have gone through 100-150 of those pieces. You would work from that material, and also from some exercises on how to do 20-30 permutations on one scale so that you’d learn to hear things in different orders. He did this for chords as well. He had his own intervallic concepts and he had exercises for stretching out your fingers so that you were able to reach larger intervals. It was a really thorough pedagogy.243

Fred Hersch was able to provide this author with a small portion of Byard’s manual; he obtained it many years after he studied with Byard from his own former student David Meder, himself a pianist with a strong interest in methodologies of interacting with the tradition. The contents of the 100 pages include several partial

transcriptions of a wide variety of tunes written by others, Byard’s own tunes, and a number of exercises.

Included is “My One and Only Love,” written in 1952 with music by Guy Wood and lyrics by Robert Mellin. It has become a jazz standard favored not only by vocalists but also by pianists and tenor saxophonists, a recorded legacy that may have especially attracted Byard. He includes two transcriptions of this AABA song form tune, one in F and the other in B major. The latter includes the notation “Maybeck 1991,” referencing his only recorded version released on *Jaki Byard at Maybeck*, Concord records, CCD-4551, 1992, the 17th volume in their solo jazz piano series. Along with his elaborately decorated title page, he includes the following notation:


As might be expected, the Maybeck transcription is not an exact rendering of what he plays. Byard generally used the term “left hand accompaniment” to refer to a typical stride style bass of alternating single notes and chords, which are not represented in the two transcriptions. His concept of left-hand tenths incorporating perfect fourths is noted with his voicing using the 1st, 7th, and 10th tones creating the fourth between the 7th and 10th tones. The tenth is an important building block of stride basses.

Byard’s title page for W. C. Handy’s St. Louis Blues includes the following unusual introductory comment:

Interesting composition based on 12 measures of blues starting with 17 measures of a tinge (tango) then measure 18-29 with repeat (total of 41 measures) two choruses of 12 measure blues- Also measures 28/40 29/41- standard group of chords for last measures—Note the Xmas song “Silent Night Holy Night” might have an influence on the structure of the blues.
The transcription includes the name John Handy at the top, presumably the reed player. He and Byard had played together in the Mingus band in 1964. It does not seem Handy recorded the tune. It is also possible Byard may have had a moment confusing John Handy and W.C. Handy. There is only one page of notation, far short of 41 measures. Byard’s use of the word tinge for the tango section is taken from Jelly Roll Morton’s famous notion that jazz must include the Spanish or Latin tinge. “Silent Night,” composed by Franz Xavier Gruber in 1818, consists of 24 bar verses that do include the three chords associated with the blues—the tonic, subdominant, and dominant seventh. The harmony moves from I to IV and back to I, the characteristic harmonic progression in the blues. The stay on IV is half as long as occurs in the blues, however. If two bars are counted as one, then the piece has a 12 bar structure, also forecasting the classic blues structure. Byard’s comment is an interesting reflection of where his mind goes when searching for influence and continuity. The other two non-Byard tunes in this existing document are Fats Navarro’s “Nostalgia” and Gordon Jenkins’s “Good Bye,” which was well known as Benny Goodman’s closing theme. Byard did not record either of these tunes.

The cover page of the transcription of his original multisection suite “European Episode” is, aside from the tune title, blank, undecorated, and without annotation. The transcription runs eight pages. Byard recorded the tune in studio twice, and multiple live concert versions are available. He recorded three excerpts on his first solo record, *Blues For Smoke*, in 1960.244 He recorded an expanded version with a quintet in 1964, at the

time perhaps intended to be complete in six sections. It was one of his own tunes that he recalled playing as an overture of sorts to the concerts he played with Mingus. He played it in performance frequently over the following twenty years, usually as excerpts of varying length, sometimes with the sections in different order. The transcription does not identify the names of the sections. The three sections recorded as piano solos in 1960 include “Journey,” “Hollis Stomp,” and “Milan to Lyon.” At this early juncture, the inclusion of “Hollis Stomp” is curious. Byard lived in Hollis, Queens, New York, and the tune, Byard claimed, reflects the hectic pace of his life. He recorded “Hollis Stomp” again as a single track in 1969. The tune is based on rhythm changes, but the two versions are otherwise vastly different. The band version identifies six sections, but Byard invoked different names as part of his stage patter and may have added sections over the years. Byard wrote it as a dance suite that he hoped to choreograph and present with twelve dances and a seventeen-piece orchestra. The original six sections are described as follows:

The rapid opening section is subtitled Journey to Brussels, and celebrates his arrival in the lowlands. The second has a rag-time [sic] feeling and is called One-Step, the name of an early popular dance. Part three is called Gallery and relates an experience Jaki had in a small European art gallery that had a beautiful piano in one room. The different chords describe different paintings. Part three merges into the fourth, an excursion in modality, named Gerald after Jaki’s extraordinary young son. Musically Jaki dedicates it to “the lovers of the Miles Davis Quintet.” Express is an airplane trip and the final section, To Milan-

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246 No versions of this are known from extant recordings of Byard with Mingus in concert. Of these preserved performances, Byard’s tribute to Art Tatum and Fats Waller entitled A.T.F.W. is usually played.
247 Ira Gitler. Liner notes to *Jaki Byard Solo Piano*, Prestige 7686, 1969. LP.
Lions, Etc., [sic?] is the enigmatic conclusion whose title summons up all kinds of Italian fantasies.\textsuperscript{249}

At a live performance in 1979, Byard gives an alternate travel log in explaining the sections while deploying his natural sense of irony in satirizing life on the road as unglamorous despite his memorialization of it in a middle-brow vehicle. He tells the audience, “This is all about going from Milan to Pescara, Pescara to Rome, Rome to Paris, Paris back to Barcelona, Barcelona to San Sebastian, San Sebastian to Madrid, Madrid way up to Stockholm to … well anyway European Episode. Here we go.”\textsuperscript{250} The transcription includes 14 sections, mostly of 16-and 8-bar length, but the latter half includes seemingly odd measure lengths. The first five include a stride bass line. It is difficult to correlate names with sections, although the first two seem most consistently referred to as “Journey.” The other stride sections may also be part of “Journey.” The final section is in $\frac{3}{4}$ time and most consistently maps to “Milan.” In most of his performances, he plays it in the latter half of the rendition. The transcription is undated but is likely from the same time frame as the others in this volume, the mid-1990s. His last preserved performance from around this time is a solo recital at Maybeck Recital Hall in 1991. In that concert, he plays “Milan” very early on in his nearly eleven-minute version.\textsuperscript{251}

Another original in the manual, “L.H. Gatewalk Rag” (written as “H.L.” in the manual), was recorded only once in 1978 with a rhythm section.\textsuperscript{252} Byard provided the

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\textsuperscript{249} Himmelstein. 1994. Compact Disc. The renaming of the Milan section, changing Lyon to Lions is either a misprint or another example of the Byard humor.

\textsuperscript{250} Jaki Byard. \textit{The Late Show-An Evening with Jaki Byard}, HighNote HCD 7264, 1979, 2014. Compact Disc.


\end{flushright}
background for the tune, saying, “I wrote this in 1975 for the Springfield Symphony at the request of their conductor, Robert Gutter. They were doing some movie themes, and they planned a surprise for the audience halfway through the concert. The orchestra went into a stride, see, and they showed a short of Laurel and Hardy playing clarinet and French horn. They asked me for some ragtime, but instead of taking an old one, I composed a new one, orchestration and all.”

Byard includes it with instructions for playing a ragtime left hand, writing, “In this type of left hand accompaniment, a choice of one single note, then inversions of triad for first beat, then again one single note, inversion of triad for second beat. Melody of tune in right hand. Follow same procedure only use octaves instead of single tone.” Although it was not a piece he regularly performed, the faithful approach to ragtime that he applied had teaching utility for him.

As opposed to his other originals he entitled as rags (“Psychedelicatessen Rag,” “Top of the Gate Rag,” “Cat’s Cradle Conference Rag”), “Gatewalk” follows classic ragtime form very closely. It is a multi-strain piece with five strains comprised of eight-bar phrases usually repeated to create a typical sixteen-bar ragtime strain. The pattern is A (16) A (16) B (16) C (8) interlude D (16) E (8 + 8 + 5) A (16) coda. The A strain is repeated at the end rather than after the B strain. It goes through three key changes. The syncopations are typical of ragtime rather than Harlem stride, which dominates his other rags. A typical octave chord oompah baseline predominates. The recording follows the transcription quite closely, except for the second eight-bar phrase of the D strain, where Byard improvises dramatic ascending and descending arpeggios. Adding emphasis to the oompah or octaves in the baseline is the tuba of Major Holley. The laughing during the

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interlude likely reflects the programmatic use of the piece as soundtrack to a film comedy short. As with his “A Living History of Jazz,” Byard chose to compose original music authentic to the style.

Only one page is available of his composition “Tribute to the Ticklers” which consists of the opening A theme of this multi-theme composition. Byard’s Maybeck recording follows the transcript closely. It would seem completely in line with Byard’s affection and dedication to the early pianists that he would create a tribute piece to them. He recorded it first on his debut solo record Blues for Smoke in 1960 on the Candid label, with the noted jazz writer Nat Hentoff producing. Hentoff was also an advocate for early jazz including the stride pianists. He was close friends with Willie the lion Smith and editor of the Jazz Review. Although short lived, the publication was highly regarded and had just produced its last issue in August, a few months before Byard’s recording date. Hentoff had decided to serialize Tom Davin’s interviews with James P. Johnson in the last several issues, but the series was incomplete at the time of the magazine’s demise. Byard has said it was Hentoff who suggested the title of his unnamed piece in the recording studio. The piece has several sections of characteristic stride, and perhaps Hentoff thought it appropriate to acknowledge the originators who were top of mind for him at that time. The transcription suggests that Byard may have had an alternate title in mind (although the transcription was made 35 years after he composed it). In his bold calligraphy is the title “Sanctify,” subtitled, “first composition for Tribute to the Ticklers.” That sentiment embodies an even deeper level of consecration than mere

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Much of the manual available to this author consists of exercises focusing on the principles of improvisation that Byard felt were most important, as well as on specific techniques as discussed above such as for practicing tenths and understanding ragtime. He is especially focused on using inversions and the circle of fifths with instructions about moving a fifth tone up or fourth tone down. He provides an explanation of what he calls the “series of combination chords” spanning three octaves, which he divides into simple, compound, and supplementary intervals. Numerous exercises are called “harmonizing scales using chords with 4 tones,” with the title pages covered with his elaborate illustrations and calligraphy. He refers to the skill of notating music in manuscript as calligraphy and encourages practice. There are “drills for major seven nine” and “minor seven nine combine chords.” Some of the writing is difficult to read but remarks regarding finding one’s “own taste” can be discerned. These are all assignments recalled by his students and support Jason Moran’s impression that Byard worked at his own teaching approach.

Many other Byard originals and renditions that are not represented in the manual highlight how he approached tradition and used elements of varied styles in constructing his own narrative or counternarrative. Often, he explicitly resists conventional expectations, including his use of parody of non-musical functions. In his album *Jaki Byard with Strings!* (Prestige 7573), Byard takes on the commercial culture industry, audience expectations, and the commonalities found in song writing across decades while tugging at the history of jazz and its genre distinctions. The title suggests that we are in
store for Byard backgrounded by a lush, heavily arranged string section reminiscent of *Charlie Parker With Strings*. His “string section,” however, is comprised of highly accomplished individual jazz soloists—Ray Nance on violin; George Benson on guitar; Ron Carter on cello; and Richard Davis on bass. Alan Dawson rounds out the personnel on drums and vibraharp. Byard’s deconstruction of historical and cultural markers is best evidenced in his original “Cat’s Cradle Conference Rag.” It begins with Byard playing a few bars of a ragtime left hand with punchy right-hand figures and quickly moves into a sort of shuffle rhythm between the two hands. The “conference” among the other musicians then begins, as Byard has instructed them each in playing a different tune with ostensibly the same chord changes.\(^ {255}\) Byard plays “Take the A Train”; Nance is to play “Jersey Bounce”; Benson, “Darktown Strutter’s Ball”; Davis, “Intermission Riff”; Dawson, “Ring Dem Bells”; and Carter, “Desafinado.” Martin Williams, who observed the session, noted that in the middle of the run-throughs on “Cat’s Cradle,” recording engineer Richard Alderson wondered, “What is Jaki Byard going to do next? You never know.”\(^ {256}\) Williams answers the question, writing, “Byard was not quite through with this arrangement. ‘For the last chorus,’ he announced, moving from his keyboard to the center of the strings, ‘everybody play harmonics in C. Al, play up high. And everybody go for himself on the bridge. Try it.’ They did, and the effect was stunning—the only way to end a performance that had begun like this one.”\(^ {257}\) Byard’s “rag” ended in free jazz.

\(^{257}\) Ibid., p. 4.
After listening to the playback in the booth, he re-entered the studio smiling and announced, “Well, we’ll continue making history.”

Ibid., p. 4.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Jaki Byard has posed challenges to academic theorists, critics, and the more casual listener in the search to situate him historically and to extract a comprehensible object from his musical portrayals. Important facets of Byard as a musician and as a person combine to inform his resultant artistic product. They are knowable, as they are in many ways transparent features of a man known for honesty. He was one of the few prominent musicians who learned and absorbed jazz in real time as it was developing. This “organic” process of accretion has led to the characterization of his adumbrations as eclectic. Byard never discarded his influences and picked from them in a manner that confounded attempts to frame a narrative in his performances. The perception has been that his avoidance of stylistic uniformity leaves him out of the usual framing of a developing tradition and thus has undermined elucidating a place for him as an innovator.

Byard, however, rejected a strict temporal definition of innovation. His approach to antecedent styles was not one of replication but, rather, one of flexible remodeling that would often veer into another style. And he kept adding to the reservoir well into the 1980s, when he sought out contemporary non-jazz music. The appearance of incongruity challenged notions of cohesion for audiences driven by a static evaluative conception. His choices were informed by his deep-rooted respect for the musicians who came before him and the value of their contributions. Byard’s evaluative framework was broad, a reflection of his generosity and aversion to comparative value judgments—not that he had none, as his students attest.
Further confounding listener response is Byard’s use of humor, verbal and musical. Despite criticisms that he was often unserious, a charge that badly irked him, it was part of his nature that he never modified. The conflict created by the competing responses to humor and the aesthetic experience were layered onto the obstacle of narrative identification. Byard insisted that everything he did was intentional, a requisite understanding that was often absent in his listeners. His intentionality demanded respect. Byard was a harbinger of postmodern sensibilities, challenging conventional notions of stylistic unity and congruity as the vehicle for coherence and traditional expectations of narrativity. Cosper maps a theoretical basis for Byard’s methods, but we are still left with the task of making evaluative conclusions.

Byard was unpredictable in music and in life. He relished variety, and it tended to erode aspects of the evaluative process, especially when rendering his multi-themed “suites” (“Family Suite,” “European Episode”). His habit of mix and match, addition and deletion of themes renders identification of what constitutes “the work” difficult. As Henry Martin has pointed out, even with regard to an individual solo, without an understandable narrative, how do we judge what is the “work,” and whether it is successful? Are other criteria such as those identified by Cosper (including “creative anachronism,” “cultural memory,” and the use of surprise and bricolage) as the tools that disrupt conventional expectations to be evaluated in such a way as to direct us to conclusions about success? The paradigms are not conceptually consistent.

I argue that Byard was successful in an era when narrative was the prevailing evaluative yardstick by proposing his own yardstick. Yet each new jazz style itself

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259 Henry Martin. Personal communication, 30 March 2021.
challenged previous notions of what constituted successful artistry. The authenticity of Byard’s referencing history—while at the same time modifying and improvising on it with virtuosic facility—dispels any notion of dabbling. As a teacher, Byard took seriously the import of his catholic approach, but as Martin points out, developing expertise at everything is daunting and perhaps beyond most aspiring musicians. Many of his students, even those clearly destined for great careers, recognized this. They took to heart his admonition to find their own voice. Byard was one of a kind, and the last of a kind, who had the opportunity to acquire his unique approach to conveying his musical message while the tradition was developing. 260 Ultimately perhaps the best yardstick of success is how his humanity shone through his music and persona. Jaki Byard should have the last word. He said, “I’m against all those that talk hate. I don’t hate them, I pity them. I pity their poor souls. I’m against what they’re talking about. If they spent more time trying to spread more happiness, express good music, good thoughts and clean language they would accomplish more as a family, as Americans.” 261

260 This is likely true, the case of Dick Hyman, five years Byard’s junior, notwithstanding. Hyman, too, had internalized all jazz styles along the way but has had a markedly different career trajectory and approach to reconciling the tradition.

Graham Haynes is a professional trumpet player whose family lived nearby the Byard family in Queens, New York. From a young age, given his interest in music, he spent considerable time with Jaki Byard. Although he was never a formal student, he considers Byard a mentor, second father, and friend. I was introduced to Graham through his sister Leslie Haynes who I’ve come to know through the Rutgers-Newark Masters program in Jazz History and Research. Leslie is a recent graduate who has returned to audit additional classes.

Graham Haynes began exploring music beyond the traditional boundaries of the jazz tradition in the late 1970s. He has studied African, Arabic and South Asian music which he incorporates with electronic music, fusion, and hip-hop. His own groups have included M-Base Collective and Graham Haynes and No Image. Haynes has written film scores (Flag Wars, The Promise) and produced multi-media projects. The first approximately five minutes of the interview were lost due to technical problems with the recording. Some sections are inaudible.

**GH:** I was playing with the Apollo Stompers. Jaki had an every-Sunday-night gig at the Five Spot, the new Five Spot. Somebody gave him down the street from the Five
Spot, which is now where Stomp is, the Orpheum Theater. And somebody let him have the Orpheum Theater. I mean, it was an empty theater. Originally it was a movie theater but by like 1975 or 1974 it was empty. So Jaki made a deal with the manager or the owner, and he was able to have a series of shows and jam sessions. I remember we used to, I think, after the Five Spot gig was over, there was a jam session at the Orpheum Theater that Jaki ran. And that was one of my first times [inaudible]. Steve Turre was there, piano player Hilton Ruiz, Bill Saxton was also. You should probably talk to Bill if you can because he was in the Apollo Stompers early on. I believe he might have studied with Jaki also, saxophone player. I was fourteen years old, but I was jamming with these guys, hanging out with Jaki. Jaki’s whole thing was “You need to play, you need to [inaudible].” There were times when I asked Jaki to give me lessons, but he said, “No man, you don’t need any lessons.” I was studying with a guy named Dave Burns. Dave Burns was around 62nd Street [inaudible]. Jaki knew him and knew what he was about, what he was teaching me. He said, “You know David can take care of business.” David played piano, so I was learning chords. But you know when I was hanging out with Jaki, I didn’t really know that much. I was a kid. He let me play. He was like, “Come on come on you need to, come on” That’s how it started. He jump-started my career. He put me in the band. He let me sit in, jam with him.

So um, Jaki had a duo or trio, I think it was a trio at a place, I can’t remember the name of it. But it was like in Chelsea. And he’d go there sometimes. That was a long-running gig he had at this club in Chelsea. He was a
character. He kind of reminded me of W.C. Fields. He had that kind of persona. He was a funny guy. He was a hilarious guy. He could kill you laughing. On the stage he would talk to the audience. And then he would do that thing that Mingus would do. He would stop the band like if the band made a mistake. He would stop the band and then rehearse in front of the audience. He would say to the audience, “Okay, this is a workshop, this is a jazz workshop. We’re gonna stop and we’re gonna rehearse. I hope you don’t mind. We’re gonna rehearse a little bit.” He would stop the band and say we made a mistake. He’d go back to measure 23 to measure 37 [inaudible]. And he’d do this in front of the audience.

By the time I got in the band, the Five Spot gig had ended. The first Five Spot closed. But I was doing most of the gigs with him, we played a few little gigs out here in Queens. There were places out here in Queens to play [inaudible]. The Jazz Cultural Theater, Barry Harris had this loft space called the Jazz Cultural Theater. But it was in all the lofts, was going on. So when we were hanging out with Jaki, we’d go to [inaudible]. Rashid Ali had a loft. The loft scene was happening when he was at, when I was hanging around with Jaki, the loft scene was still happening. So we went to a lot of lofts, jamming and he had gigs there.

There was a lot of stuff happening around the, Reverend Gensel’s church, St. Peter’s Church, the Lutheran church over there. And at that time the church wasn’t there. That church that was on 53rd and Lexington; the church was on Park Avenue then and they were building the place that’s there now. I remember going to the older church one time actually with my dad when Duke Ellington was there; I met Duke Ellington. I got Duke Ellington’s autograph. Then the church
opened up on 53rd Street, and I went there a lot with Jaki also. I remember going to Rahsaan Roland Kirk’s funeral. There were a lot of funerals. There were a lot of functions happening around St. Peter’s Church, so they had regular Sunday what they called “jazz vespers.” Their Sunday service had these; they would have I think Friday night services or Friday evening services, those also had music. Twice a week, they had the jazz vespers, and then the church itself had functions and parties.

I remember seeing John Gensel around at like private parties. So I remember going with Jaki around to see him. I remember when Monk died, going to Monk’s funeral with Jaki. I don’t know if I went with Jaki or I saw Jaki there. Rahsaan Roland Kirk’s funeral was there, Monk’s funeral was there. They had John Coltrane’s funeral there, but that was before my time; I was a little too young. Then they would have something called “all night jazz,” which was like a [inaudible] concert. It started at like six in the evening and went until six in the morning. That was once a year, around this time of year, around the beginning of November, end of October, something like that. I would go with Jaki to that. Stay until three or four in the morning.

I would spend a lot of time with Jaki, a lot of time. Like I said, I was in the band. Yeah Jaki was a character. He was a really, really, really funny guy. He played alto saxophone really well. He could play trumpet, too. He could probably play anything he wanted to play; he was studious like that. He had all these … daughters to sing in the band, so they sang in the band. They had a little dance routine with the band. It was a band/vaudeville, it was kind of like something you
would see at the Apollo back in the 1930s or something, you know. It was like a whole show. Jaki would tell jokes to the audience. I mean it wasn’t like he was selling it like that, but that’s how it was. His own idea of the group, it was entertainment, but then it was serious; it was a little bit of everything. That’s how Jaki was. He was a very, very funny guy. But he was very serious about his music, very serious. And that was really the only world that he lived in was the music world. Anything that was too much stress or too deep, he didn’t want to get into it.

So as a father, it was a little touch and go. His family was a close family. They all lived there up in the house, and his kids were, they went through changes and I saw it. Jaki was just, he didn’t know how to deal with a lot of stuff. He was like into the piano, into writing, into arranging, he was just like into the music. He wasn’t like a real type of father that would really spend a lot of time with the kids unless it had something to do with music. Everything revolved around music for him. It was all about music, music, entertainment, you know. That was his world and anything outside of that didn’t really add up to that much.

**SB:** When you were spending that time with him, did he have a formal teaching gig at that time, too? Was he at the New School or Manhattan or…

**GH:** He was at NEC. I don’t remember Manhattan, but I remember he was at NEC. I remember going up to NEC once with him. Driving to NEC with him and Louise [Byard’s wife] and Gerald [Byard’s son]. I remember that. And I remember also one time—it must have been the same time there was a Jazz Workshop at Paul’s Mall, which were right next to each other. And I remember going with Jaki once,
and Rahsaan was playing at the Jazz Workshop and Sun Ra was playing at Paul’s Mall at this time. As soon as Rahsaan was over, we could go through this door, and then we were in Paul’s Mall, the other club, watching Sun Ra. I’ll never forget that, we’d just go from one to the other.

During all that time he was at NEC, I remember something happened. Jaki left, I don’t remember what it was. I guess they let him go or something. I don’t remember all the details. But at some point he was let go. I know some of his students said he was late sometimes. You should talk to Paul Ritchie. Paul was his student up there. He told me stories about Jaki as a teacher.

SB: I did have the good fortune to see him several times when I was living in New York in the ’80s. In fact, I saw him with the Apollo Stompers and his daughters at the Jazz Cultural Theater several times.

GH: I might have been in the band.

SB: You might have been in the band. [laughter] He was playing the saxophone and the piano. And I saw him with his trio and a small group several times up when Birdland was up on 103rd on the West Side. He played there periodically. I lived around the corner so it was great.

GH: Oh you lived up there.

SB: Yup.

GH: Are you a musician?

SB: No, nope, just a very serious fan and now trying to beef up my academic chops. You know I wrote the book on James P. Johnson, just finishing up a second book on him.
**GH:** [inaudible]

**SB:** Yes, yes. If you give me your address I’ll send it to you.

**GH:** Okay. I’ll text it to you.

**SB:** I was just going to say your sister is taking my class that I’m doing as part of the Rutgers program this semester.

**GH:** She’s still there? She’s still taking classes? I thought she graduated.

**SB:** She did. She’s auditing it, I guess. She’s getting … what we’re using for the class is actually the draft of the new book. So she’s getting all the chapters of the new book.

**GH:** The new James P. Johnson book?

**SB:** Yup. A lot more information in it.

**GH:** [Inaudible] Anything you want to pass on to me. Leslie’s interesting. When I was running around with Jaki, Leslie’s a year older than me so she had her own friends. Sometimes she’d be with us but a lot of times she wouldn’t be because she had her own friends and she wasn’t into the music the way I was. Now she’s getting interested.

**SB:** Oh, interesting.

**GH:** But at that time, she was into the pop music of the day, Earth Wind and Fire and all that stuff. I was into the music early, I got into it early, and I stayed in it.

**SB:** One of the things that has always intrigued me about Jaki and which is kind of one of the things I’m looking to try to expand on and focus on in my thesis is how much over the course of his career he really utilized the whole jazz tradition. From things I’ve been reading, it wasn’t really all that well respected—that approach.
**GH:** He utilized the whole what?

**SB:** The whole jazz tradition.

**GH:** The whole jazz tradition. Yeah, yeah. He was kind of an anomaly that way. He was [inaudible] to the future. In that way, he was kind of like Sun Ra or Mary Lou Williams. They worked from James P. to Cecil Taylor.

**SB:** Yeah, exactly.

**GH:** Played like Cecil. I heard Jaki play like Cecil. He could play like Cecil. He could play, he could imitate James P. really well.

**SB:** Oh yeah.

**GH:** Same with all those guys. He knew all that stuff. He was a little bit like Monk in that way. Monk kind of had that in his playing. Monk had that left hand stride and the way that he voiced. It’s real interesting there’s a lot of musical things and pianistic things that Monk, Jaki, some of the older guys had in common that some of the younger players didn’t have, but Jaki understood what Andrew Hill was doing, what Cecil Taylor was doing, what Chick Corea was doing, what Herbie Hancock was doing. He understood all that. And he could play it if he wanted to. He really understood the older. He could play the whole thing and sounded very authentic in any of those styles. He was a total musician, and he could play the written composed classical music if he wanted to. He had a talent to do that. He understood all that. I don’t know what his training was. He’s from Worcester, MA. Those Boston guys, those Massachusetts guys, they got serious training because they had good schools up there.
So I would imagine he got a full, probably studied the whole classical, you know, from Bach up until Stravinsky. He probably studied all that stuff. He could probably talk about it. He could probably teach it if he wanted to. Those guys from his generation, they were smitten by Jimmie Lunceford and Duke Ellington so that’s the direction they went. But they could play anything. It’s not like he couldn’t play Mozart or [inaudible]. He could have gone in that direction. But he was turned on by Duke and those guys, and they just continue on. He heard something modern, too. I remember once he told me there was some record. We were hanging out late, it was just me and him, and he was telling me yeah this Duke Ellington record, I forget the name of it, it’s like a really, really futuristic, but it’s a record from the ’30s, Sonny Greer and all. At some point, the name of the record will come to me. But he said that was the record that really, really turned his head around.

SB: Did he ever seem to get frustrated that he wasn’t getting the attention that so many other musicians were getting?

GH: Yeah he was but he wasn’t bitter. He could be frustrated, but he never stayed bitter. If he did, I didn’t see it. He never let people see it. He wasn’t bitter that way. He was driven by his music [inaudible]. That was another thing about Jaki. Jaki was not a really good businessman. He was not a career musician. He was not a careerist, Jaki. And because of that, he never really got his due. I did things with Jaki and saw that he should have been much better, he should have had a manager, he should have had better pay [inaudible]). I remember doing some gigs with him. The pay was horrible, horrible. I know it’s hard to have a big band in
the 1970s, 1980s. He was really … sometimes he wasn’t taking care of the business. He was not a businessman. Sometimes we would play gigs and he wouldn’t even check how much we were getting paid. Or how much he was getting paid. We did a couple of gigs out of town with the Apollo Stompers, and I remember one time we played in Baltimore, some museum. I remember another time we played Lake George New York, of all places, some historic kind of place. Jaki sometimes let business slip through his fingers. He was not really astute. He wasn’t shrewd in a business way. He wasn’t really cut out that way, to be on top of the business, to make sure that the money is there. And make sure that any extra money that he’s supposed to get that he got it or make sure he’s supposed to get his publishing, his royalties for compositions he wrote. Jaki was not like that.

There were people back in those days, there were sharks out there. And there were people who would look out for people like Jaki. Maybe they’d give Jaki a call and say, “Hey, did you know that such and such a record re-release. Maybe you can get some money from guys from Impulse records or wherever, you know.” But Jaki was not one to really stay on top of all those things. He wasn’t like that. He wasn’t a real true businessman. He never had a manager as far as I know. I’m sure he was taken advantage of sometimes. And like you say, he was never given his due. He lived in his world of music. I mean music was what really drove him. The pursuit of music and the performance of it. He loved to play. And he loved to write and arrange. And he loved to teach I guess, I mean, I wasn’t his student. I happened to study with Jaki. He didn’t want me to learn anything that I wouldn’t learn natural or something. I think Jaki just wanted me to
be around music, keep doing what I was doing. But once he showed me
something on the piano which had to do with intervals, octaves, or tenths or
something. He had a big stretch for a small hand. He had a small hand. But he had
a very big stretch for a small hand.

SB: That’s why he could play the stride stuff so well maybe.

GH: Yeah, Yeah. But in stride you’re jumping, kind of like you’re leaping. You’re
leaping from one chord to another in the left hand. The actual stretch of a chord,
to be able to stretch like a tenth, you’d have to have big hands. He could probably
almost do it. His hands were small. He did not have big hands.

He was not a businessman. People were always offering him things and
not coming through. I remember a lot of times the Apollo Stompers were
supposed to have like a residency, but it ended before the time it was supposed
to end. And there was something that Jaki was a part of with some other
musicians called the Coalition for Concerned Jazz Artists. I remember this. Way
back in ’77 or something. And Jaki and a bunch of other musicians. I remember
some of the guys were there. Rashid Ali was around, Steve Turre, Hilton Ruiz,
those guys were at the Orpheum Theater. I think that Orpheum Theater thing
was an outgrowth of this, the Unification of Concerned Jazz Artists, that’s what
the name of it was. The Unification of Concerned Jazz Artists. I think that’s how
he got the Orpheum Theater. A lot of musicians even then were talking about how
conditions were bad; there weren’t enough places to play, there wasn’t enough
money. And Jaki, along with other musicians, Steve Lacy, these guys got together
and started the organization. I remember going to a couple of meetings, you
know, because I wanted to be around the musicians. I was not in on the meetings sometimes. They were talking about trying to get better conditions. They actually started taking dues from the musicians and it started turning in to an actual thing, keeping minutes [inaudible]).

Jaki never, he saw people like Chick Corea who studied under him huge, huge, huge superstars. I remember being over Jaki’s house sometimes, and I don’t know if you remember there were two shows that came on Saturday night—one was “In Concert with Don Kirshner,” and the other one was “Midnight Special.” So the music shows, they would come on Saturday or Friday and Saturday nights. And I remember being over his house, and “Return to Forever” once was on one of those shows, and you know Chick Corea was one of Jaki’s students at one time, I think Chick studied with Jaki because they’re both out of Massachusetts. And I remember Jaki saying, “these guys, yeah I can play that.” It was kind of that kind of thing, like what’s the big deal? And I’m sure he was a little bit disgusted with the thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars these guys were making. In the fusion era bands like Mahavishnu and Return to Forever, all these bands and they were making a lot of money. Jaki remembered all of those guys when they were kids.

SB: Did you ever see him much in sort of like a jam session setting where he might have been with especially other pianists?

GH: Well, I remember one time in particular when the Apollo Stompers was playing the Jazz Cultural Theater and Barry Harris had two pianos there at once. And Barry actually played; Barry and Jaki played together. At some point, they actually
played, it was kind of like a battle between the two of them. And that was really interesting, really interesting. Barry Harris pulled out all the stops, but Jaki just, like he knew the whole tradition, the whole tradition from beginning to now. So, Barry was kind of inside Bud Powell. That was really his approach to piano. Seems like a really small period of bebop that he really, his style of piano playing comes down to. Then Jaki would play, and you would hear all the history, you could hear, he would put some James P. Johnson to Cecil Taylor. He heard all that. He just like played just like [inaudible]. And Barry Harris was no slouch. He was in his prime then. That was his school. He had his whole setup. Yeah I’ve seen Jaki play piano with other piano players before. I can’t think of the other piano players. That was kind of a piano players’ hang out, Barry’s place. There were a lot of piano players’ that would come around there. There were some really great ones, too. I can’t think of the names. The blind guy who was an exceptional piano player from New Orleans who was like incredible.

SB: Henry Butler?

GH: No, not him, it was another guy. Before Henry Butler came to New York. Yeah there were a lot of piano players around, all over. Like I said, there were clubs, there were jam sessions all over. There were places out here in Queens, there were places in Brooklyn, places in Harlem, places in the Lower East Side. All over there were, they were kind of like local-geared people. Cause even like out here in Queens there were guys who moved out here to just kind of stay here. There were guys from Duke Ellington’s band who moved out here who still played gigs with Duke, and then Duke died in ’75. They were just like out here. I remember being
at Jaki’s house, and there was a trombone player named Quentin Jackson, he was a trombone player with Duke Ellington. And he just happened to be at the house with Jaki. There were a lot of guys, there were a lot of people out here.

Jaki knew all these people who were out here. He knew all the musicians from the big bands, he knew all of them, he had their numbers. He stayed in touch with these guys. There was an alto player who played lead alto in the Apollo Stompers, his name was Bob Torrence. He lived right up the street. He lived right up the street from us. He could play like Johnny Hodges. If you closed your eyes, you would have thought you were listening to Johnny Hodges. There were guys all around us who could play all this stuff, and Jaki knew all these people. He knew all the ex-Ellington guys, the ex-Basie guys, all of them, you know. He would go to jam sessions out here. There were places to go out here to play, he would go.

SB: Was he fairly busy most of the time, kind of patching all these different things together, or did he have stretches where really, he wasn’t getting called much?

GH: He had stretches when he wasn’t playing gigs, but he was always working on something; but then he was always around the house doing house work. I’d see him around in the yard, in the front of the yard, in the back of the yard, at the supermarket. I’d see him, you know, just kind of like hanging out. And then he would go to Europe. He would go to Europe sometimes for stretches and come back. Jaki had somebody that he knew, he was I guess a wine grower, and he would give Jaki these huge vats of red wine. I don’t know what kind of red wine it was. He would rehearse with the Apollo Stompers in his house. All those guys
would drive all the way out here or just take the subway, take the F train to the last stop. Jaki would go pick ’em up in a car, bring them to the house, and then he’d have this keg, he’d have all these sandwiches laid out. So we would play for a couple hours and then there’d be a break and we’d eat and drink this wine. There was so much wine. It was very difficult to rehearse the rest of the night. We’d be drinking all this wine. And Jaki loved red wine, that was his thing, you know. He was a lot of fun, Jaki.

SB: This is great. This is more than I was hoping for, this information.

GH: Like I said Jaki, was almost like my second father. For a period of time, I spent more time with him than I spent with my own father. His son was my running buddy. So I was over there all the time.

SB: Are his children still living?

GH: Diane lives in Virginia, I think. His son Gerald, I see him out here around, not much. Gerald is still alive. Denise died. All of his kids kind of got tied up in stuff that was very detrimental to them, you know. Denise and Diane both were at some point strung out. And I think to the end, that’s what did Diane. Denise I think she might have had complications from hepatitis and HIV, I don’t know.

SB: Oh my.

GH: And Gerald, well, it’s a bad thing how Jaki died, but was tied in with his son getting into some nonsense with some drug dealer or something. That’s how Jaki was killed. I was not here at the time. By that time, I was living in Westchester and I heard about it. I didn’t believe it when I heard it. But the last time I saw Jaki, Jaki was playing at the knitting factory with Archie Shepp. This must have been
around 1990, this was in the late '90s. Like '97, '98. And Louise had died. Louise had cancer, his wife. She died of cancer. My mother died of breast cancer, then Buttercup died, Bud Powell’s wife, she died. And then Louise died [inaudible]. She died of cancer.

And after Louise died, after a while, you could see Jaki was kind of really slowing down, kind of really wasn’t there. So when I saw him on this gig, he was playing with Archie Shepp, and I went backstage to say hi to Jaki. It was almost like he wasn’t really there. And I went back a couple of times with Jaki. He was just going through the motions. His mind wasn’t really the same. Like once Louise died, I think he just kind of gave, part of him gave up a little bit. I mean he was still playing, but he wasn’t. After a while, I think he was going through some severe, I don’t know, some mental depression kind of thing, even though, he was just very, very quiet. After Louise died, he was just very, very quiet and not as gregarious and not, it really took the wind out of him, you know. But I did see him on some gigs, and that one gig I remember seeing him with Archie Shepp, and it was kind of sad.

So when I heard that he died, I heard it on WKCR on the radio. When I heard that he died, I wasn’t that shocked, but then when I heard that he was murdered [inaudible], a completely different thing. But that time out here in Queens, Hollis, Queens, the crack epidemic hit, things had gotten a little crazy out here. So it was a little bit kind of understandable, you know, in a way. Things were really turned upside down out here in this area. The music scene, all of that it really disappeared. What music there was disappeared; I mean between rap
music, the DJ culture and then crack, jazz pretty much disappeared out here.

Neighborhoods were being turned around. People were losing their homes.

Families were breaking up, it was really horrible, it was horrible.

**SB:** Terrible situation.

**GH:** It was an epidemic throughout the whole country. But here it was another situation.

It was very [inaudible] to me for Jaki. He had been through all that stuff, I mean, with his kids, I mean, he and his daughters. Denise and Diane, they had a hard time. They were both, I think, in methadone treatment, so they went through all that, and Jaki kind of saw all that, and then Louise died, and then he got murdered. So to have it happen that way was kind of, I guess he was given a raw deal. He shouldn’t have gone out that way. He was already half gone already.

**SB:** That’s interesting and sad. And you know, perhaps not unexpected. It happens to a lot of people when they lose a spouse.

**GH:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. They were close. I mean she went with him everywhere. She went with him, anytime he went somewhere, she went with him.

**SB:** How did they meet? Do you know? She was Italian, I think, if I read correctly.

**GH:** She was an Italian American. I don’t know if she was from Italy.

**SB:** Oh I see. I wasn’t sure.

**GH:** I know she was a coat-check girl at Birdland, that’s how they met.

**SB:** Oh, no kidding.

**GH:** I remember that. She was a coat-check girl at Birdland. That’s how she met Jaki and that’s probably how she knew Bud Powell and Buttercup was through Birdland.

Back in the 1950s, 1940s, and ’50s. I don’t know if she was originally from New
York or if she was originally from Boston or the Boston area. I don’t remember. I think she might have been originally from New England because she had a New England accent like he did. They both had that New England Boston [with accent], they went to park [with accent], Yeah they both had that New England accent. She must have been from Boston originally.

SB: I see.

GH: She worked at Birdland, the original Birdland.

SB: On Broadway, was it on Broadway?

GH: On Broadway, yeah.

SB: Yeah, right.

GH: I think that’s how they met, at Birdland. She was a great person. Very, very supportive of him. Very supportive, I mean, you know, she went with him everywhere, all the gigs. Took care of him. Took care of the kids. She was a great person. She was great, a very nice person.

SB: So, do you do a lot of travelling for your playing it sounds like, touring quite a bit?

GH: Um, on and off. On and off. I lived in Europe for a while. I lived in Paris for three years. Then I came back here in ’93. I left in 1990 and came back in ’93. Jaki and Louise and Denise, all the daughters, they were all really in my corner and really happy to see my career take off because they knew me when I was a kid. When I got in the band, I couldn’t even play. It took me years to be able to sight read. That was the thing. Those guys in the Apollo Stompers they were like amazing sight readers. And I got in the band and I was like, wow. I couldn’t play a couple of bars. And he put me in the band anyway. But they were very supportive. Jaki
and the whole family was kind of like, “we’re hearing great things about you, just keep doing what you’re doing. Your parents will be really proud of you.” They really were really in my corner, Jaki and his family. I remember when we did a recording, the Apollo Stompers record. I remember recording that day, there was some problems with the [inaudible] board, but he managed to get it done anyway. That must have been around my last gig, my last playing with the band was that record. I think it’s called Phantasies. P H Phantasies.

SB: Yes, yes. There are two of them I think.

GH: Yes, a volume one and volume two.

SB: This is great. You know I asked about the jam sessions stuff and playing with other pianists because I think you may know there was a short sort of little documentary made about him by some Harvard film school student. Did you ever see that?

GH: No, I didn’t see it. I would love to see it.

SB: It’s on YouTube. It’s called Anything for Jazz.

GH: Uh huh.

SB: And in there Jaki talks about how he wasn’t really into like the whole cutting contest kind of mentality, always trying to outdo other musicians. He didn’t think that was cool. And then I watched the film of that jazz piano workshop, well it wasn’t really a workshop, but, that they did in Berlin in 1965, where they had, I don’t know, six or seven different pianists playing solo and together. He does a duet with Earl Hines. Hines is like flying all over the place and really pulling out all the stops with his pyrotechnics. And Jaki was just sort of laying back. He could have easily…
GH: Yeah but I mean Earl Hines, that was like, you know, Earl Hines was the Louis Armstrong of piano. That would be like me with uh Freddie Hubbard. Jaki Byard grew up listening to Earl Hines, I mean that was one of his idols.

SB: Yeah I suppose that’s true.

GH: What do you do when they put you in a cutting session with one of your idols? One of the greatest, Earl Hines, all those guys, they were so respected by people like Jaki. Duke Ellington, Earl Hines, Willie the lion Smith, those guys were like gods. They were stars, too. They weren’t just great musicians. A lot of people are quick to forget that. It was pop music in the 1930s. They were stars. Duke Ellington was a big star. Earl Hines was a star. Duke Ellington was a star. Louis Armstrong was a star. Cab Calloway, all these guys were like stars. Not just in jazz but I mean in the culture and internationally. Anywhere. It was a major, major thing. It was not like now, because now people … jazz was the music of the time then. It would be like Beyoncé now. Or Jay Z or any one of these rap artists now because the music was that popular. The music was the music of the time in 1930, in 1940. So somebody like Earl Hines, not only to mention that he was probably like Jaki’s idol, he was like larger than life. Jaki also, there are many reasons why he wanted to play in contrast to what Willie the lion, I mean what Earl Hines was doing.

Those guys were kind of shrewd though. The older players, like I know Roy Eldridge, he was my neighbor who lived right around the corner from me. He was a trumpet player who thrived on cutting sessions. He would cut trumpet players. He would go up in the high registers. A lot of the older guys were like that. Eldridge was a generation before Jaki. So the guys who were a generation
before them. You know like Art Tatum, nobody could touch this guy on piano.

Earl Hines, James P., Duke Ellington, Fats Waller. If Art Tatum walked in a room
with all those guys, there was a hush in the room. Art Tatum was the Mozart of
piano.

My dad told me once he had to play a week, he had to play like a month or
something, more than a month with Charlie Parker opposite Art Tatum. It was at
Café Society. Bird would play one set, and then Tatum would play a set. And then
they would play a set, and then Tatum would play a set, for like a month, a couple
of months. Ray Bolger, the guy who played the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*,
came in sat in with Charlie Parker and danced with the band. Billie Holiday came
in and sat in with Charlie Parker. I asked my father, I said did Bird ever play with
Art Tatum, and he said no because Art Tatum, that generation of players, you
didn’t just go and sit in with them. Those were serious guys. The older guys from
that generation they had, they carried themselves in a different way, not like now.
They weren’t really that casual.

**SB:** How interesting.

**GH:** Jaki could play anything he wanted to play. Earl Hines, flying all over the place,
what are you going to do? [laughter] Run for cover, but Jaki could hold his own.
There’s a good film of Monk with Basie and Basie’s just standing like looking at
him, staring at him. What is this guy? Monk comes more out of Duke, but he
comes out of Basie, he comes out of all those guys, Fats. Jaki very much revered
Monk, too. I remember there was a whole period when Monk didn’t play and
everybody was wondering. We hear reports about Monk. Because people knew,
someone who knew the baroness or someone who got word about Monk. Have you heard anything about Thelonious, have you heard anything about Monk, that was going on for years, around Jaki and that whole circle of people.

SB: I think it was sort of a mysterious and concerning period of time.

GH: Did my friend Robin tell you of the Thelonious Monk book? He did a hell of a lot of research, too.

SB: That was a fantastic book. I really, really enjoyed it. It gave me a little more inspiration in my own work to be honest, because he really. It was such great detail, but the narrative, the way he told it was also engaging. I really enjoyed that book a lot.

GH: Yeah he had a lot of in-depth research, really in depth. I remember when he was working on the book. He had to interview my dad a couple of times. He did a hell of a job. I’m reading one of his books now, another book called *Africa Speaks, America Answers*. I’m in the middle of reading now. He gave me the book.

SB: Yeah, I’d like to get to that too.

GH: He talks, I’m at the part where he talks about Randy Weston. Very interesting. I got to know Randy a little bit, I got to hang out with him a little bit.

SB: Yeah, another great player. And a great concept.

GH: Yeah, very distinctive style of playing piano. All those guys were completely, I mean they were all different. Very, very different.

Jaki was a one-of-a-kind guy. I wish he would have been around a little bit longer I could have picked his brain a little bit more. What a great guy. Hell of a
sense of humor. Like I said he’d keep me in stitches. They don’t make ’em like that anymore.

Who do you know that you’re going to talk to?

SB: I thank you for some of the names you’ve given me. Just from some of the internet research I’ve been doing about who, especially pianists, who studied with him, I’m going to reach out to Jason Moran and Fred Hersch and a couple of other people like that who, at least in terms of their bios. I’ve seen an interview with Jason Moran talking about Jaki.

GH: I’ve talked to Jason quite a bit about Jaki. In fact, Jason was in touch with his daughter Diane. I think at one point Jason, somebody, was talking about trying to get some of Jaki’s music. Jason and I have been in touch often, and I was telling him that there’s this Orson Welles film that came out last year last summer. It was a film that he had been working on for a long, long, long, time, and it was finally was released posthumously. And it has some of Jaki’s music in it.

SB: Oh no kidding?

GH: I’m wondering who gets to direct what happens. I mean if you think Jaki’s business was a mess, Orson Welles’s, forget it. The film wasn’t even finished until after her died. I can’t even imagine. Just the rights, who you would talk to, who you would go to. A favorite record of mine which is the music of Nino Rota. It’s called *Amacord [sic]*. It’s got a bunch of different jazz musicians playing Fellini music. These are for Fellini films because Nino Rota was the composer who wrote music for Fellini also. One of my favorite songs on that record is a solo
piano thing by Jaki. He kills me, it’s a stride piano thing. That’s Nino Rota. From 8½ or something.

**SB:** I’m not familiar with that. I’ll have to look for that.

**GH:** It’s a great record, great record.

**SB:** What was it called again?

**GH:** *Amacord.* (spells it) [*sic*]. That’s the name of a film by Fellini, *Amacord* [*sic*].

That’s the name of the record and it’s got a bunch of different, it’s got Steve Lacy on it, Carla Bley, different people on it. But yeah Jaki’s on there. It’s a killer stride piano solo. It’s not just stride, he goes all different places.

**SB:** Right, right. That’s what I love about it.

**GH:** His music makes for good film music, apparently. He would have been probably a really, great film composer if he wanted to go in that direction. I remember around the time Michel Legrand and all these people were making all these film scores, Jaki could have done that easily. He had the mindset to do it but he just didn’t know the right people. He probably would have liked to do it better, too, in his spare time, whatever. That was the time when a lot of filmmakers were soliciting jazz. You know, Mingus did a couple scores.

**SB:** Even Ellington back there in the early ’60s.

**GH:** Yeah, Ellington, Mingus, a lot of people. Blakey, all of them. Jaki would have chewed that up, man. He didn’t know the right people. The people that he knew didn’t have the money or the time or whatever. Jaki needed, he really needed a patron of some type. Or someone who was gonna put him out there and sponsor what he was doing like Monk had with Nica. Or even like she helped Barry Harris
out also. Jaki could have had something like that. Someone like that. But what are
you going to do? You do with what you’ve got.
Pianist Fred Hersch studied with Jaki Byard at the New England Conservatory in 1975. He has gone on to an illustrious career in jazz especially as a solo pianist and in the duo and trio formats. The nine-time Grammy nominee has received numerous awards for his many recordings as a leader. In this interview, he discusses his background and his interactions as a student with Byard, as well as the message and lessons that he took away from his time with him.

FH: I grew up in Cincinnati. Piano was always a part of my life since I was four. I did the classical piano thing, but I liked to improvise. But back then, my improvisations sounded like classical music because that’s the music that I knew. My last year in high school, we got kind of a pretty hip band director, and I remember playing my first sort of real big band charts. I had a great background in theory and composition when I was an elementary schooler. So, chords were easy, rhythm took a little longer. I did not want to be a concert pianist. I went away to a liberal arts school in Iowa, Grinnell College. On my first winter break I stumbled into a jazz club, literally, and was just hooked. I chucked Grinnell. I moved in with another musician. I started hanging out with older cats, learning tunes, listening to
records. No jazz piano teacher. Nothing. A lot of just figuring things out for myself. I did not transcribe. It never really occurred to me to do that. And after about a year and a half of playing professionally in Cincinnati, I realized I had to get out. I mean, I just saw. I mean, it was fun you know, calling tunes, but nobody wanted to do anything other than just get up there and call tunes.

So, I heard that Jaki Byard was teaching at New England Conservatory, and Gunther Schuller had a Cincinnati connection. He was a French hornist in the orchestra; he met his wife there. He had written a piano concerto for my classical piano teacher Jeanne Kirstein. So he was a figure that I was vaguely familiar with. So I got in the car with a friend and his girlfriend and we drove to Boston. And I found Jaki at the school and I kind of went up to him and said, “I came all the way from Cincinnati and I want to study with you. How do I do that?” And he said “Okay, well here’s a room, play something.” So I played two or three tunes, and basically he said, “You’re in.”

So, in August of ’75, I moved to Boston and started working with him. And he was the first person that I was around that really had gravitas. He played with Dolphy, he played with Mingus, he made his own albums. I mean, he was a sideman with Sam Rivers. He was somebody who was there at some really important occasions. And I think ultimately what I got out of him, well first of all, he really got me interested in the early piano players, in stride playing. But not in a historic museum kind of way. But just as an idea really. And I think his general fearlessness was something that I really took. I mean, he was irreverent in the best way. I mean, he is to me one of the more distinctive stylists in jazz piano certainly
of the relatively modern era. He never had the adoration that somebody like Tommy Flanagan got. And I was very close to Tommy. I must have heard him play thirty times. I think his habit of just sort of like breaking into stride at strange moments or, you know I mean, he certainly liked alcohol, like most guys of his generation. You know, I think he burned a lot of bridges. He was sort of looked at as an oddity in a way. He had a big band called the Apollo Stompers. I played piano. He played saxophone, led the band. He was a better than average arranger.

SB: Is this while you were still at New England? That version of the Apollo Stompers?

FH: Yeah, and we played at a little place like down the block from the conservatory. I’d drag in a Fender Rhodes every Wednesday. And he gave me a lot of those exercises, and do this in the circle of fifths, most of which I did not do. I probably could have been a better student. I was kind of in a hurry to get to New York. I was, if anything, overambitious. I didn’t go to New England Conservatory to learn how to play jazz. At that time, it was one of the two or three conservatory places that acknowledged jazz at all. I think Eastman had a graduate program in composition run by Ray Wright. I think David Baker by that time was at Indiana, and that was kind of it. But the thing that was so great about it was that it was a department, not a program. So the only dedicated jazz course was George Russell’s Lydian chromatic concept, which honestly, I felt to be a bunch of bullshit. But there was no dedicated jazz history, there was no small ensembles. You just took the same shit that everybody else took basically. So I had experiences playing at NEC in the wind ensemble and playing with the ragtime ensemble, playing in a contemporary music ensemble, playing chamber music.
Things that, I mean, I really said to myself, “Look you’ve got the rest of your life to practice, but when are you going to get an opportunity to do this.” So I just was kind of omnivorous with everything that was going on with the school. And after about a year with Jaki, I switched to a classical piano teacher named Irma Volpe who wasn’t really “it,” but she got me thinking about some things in a different way.

Jaki was disorganized. Sometimes he didn’t show up, or show up drinking wine. But I continued to hang out with him. As I said, I think I could have learned more from him. But just kind of hearing him play and just the way that he was kind of himself all the time. Sometimes certain tunes I’m playing I kind of feel like I’m kind of channeling him in a weird way. You know, like these big ten note just put your hands down kind of chords, crunchy, that’s something that I associate with him. I play tons of solo concerts. Both he and then, subsequently in New York, Roland Hanna encouraged me. They said you have the makings of a really good solo player. And you should really work at it. That’s become sort of an important part of what I do. And I always include a stride piece in solo concert. As I said, not in a museum way. I’m not gonna outdo Earl Hines or Fats Waller or make it a shtick. Jaki encouraged me, “whatever you do kind of do it your way.” And that was a really great lesson.

SB: How did he sort of frame the idea that it was important to look at these older styles and think about them in terms of you own development as a pianist and as a stylist? This is something I’m especially interested in with him because he seemed to have had that notion and held to it pretty firmly really throughout his whole
career. His first solo recording in the late ’50s has a good amount of stride on it, and he continued to play it so that’s kind of an aspect of him that I’m sort of interested in. How did he impart that notion?

FH: Well, you know, that was of course back in the days of LPs, and used LPs, most of which I still have. He pointed me in the direction, and it was also my taste. I’m much more interested in hearing Earl Hines than I am Art Tatum, much more interested. Earl’s nuts, crazy, and super creative and kind of messy all at the same time. Tatum is like so polished. He kind of steered me a little bit towards Earl Hines and said listen to him and the way he kind of breaks up the patterns and how he’s able to kind of go around the corners with the rhythm. I listened to, I developed a fondness for Teddy Wilson, just as a kind of more elegant version. And I began to see the branches of the jazz piano tree like Earl Hines, Ellington, Monk, Teddy Wilson, Hank Jones, James P. Johnson, Art Tatum, Oscar Peterson. I began to see the branches of the historic tree. These days young kids think it all started with Keith or Brad Mehldau. They don’t really get that thing of what it’s like to really play tunes at the highest level. Every young musician now is expected to be a composer, and they all want to play their own music with their own bands. It’s really hard to compose music. And especially music that’s memorable and well crafted. It takes years. I took something away from these sheets of paper that he handed me. I guess you’ve seen those.

SB: I’ve not. So that’s my next step. I’m still pretty early on in my research.

FH: I have them on my computer. The handwriting is incredible. They’re hard to read but they’re kind of amazing. And I can send you that.
SB: That would be great.

FH: I forget who sent it to me. I have different ones than the other ones that are in his sort of book. But it was a lot of, you know, pattern stuff and playing two-handed chords, the middle then going to the outside, then going from the outside to the inside. He encouraged me to see the piano as all 88 notes, not just what I call the claw and the line. I always felt like he pretty much played what he heard. He definitely has a particular eighth note. I try to talk to students when I teach, “Okay, your eighth note is like your ride cymbal.” And a good drummer will listen to the ride cymbal and go “Billy Higgins, Ed Blackwell, Philly Joe.” They’ll just know. Just by the cymbal beat. Your eighth note lines are like your cymbal beat. Jaki’s had a swinging but weirdly detached sense about them. There was like, you could hear the different hand positions that he was using. It was not as elegant as Hank Jones or quite as lyrical as Tommy Flanagan. But definitely super swinging and kind of sloppy in a good way.

I’ve always been mystified about his career. I’ve seen it, like when I first moved to New York, he would get some gig somewhere, have the gig, and then he’d let all of his students come and sit in and it would sort of turn into a circus. Kind of the way Barry Harris does now, you know. There’s all these kids who come, they sing along, and it’s all “thing.” Jaki was, he didn’t really seize his career, and I don’t know to what extent his wife helped or hurt his career. You can never tell. Jazz wives are a certain breed. I think it’s awful that they never solved his murder. I’ve heard all the various rumors but honestly, he was an older Black
man in Queens, and I’m not sure they devoted all the resources to solving it, probably.

**SB:** It’s easy to write it off.

**FH:** Oh, it’s drug related or whatever.

**SB:** Do you think he took to teaching because he felt he had to make a living, or do you think he really saw himself as a teacher?

**FH:** He worked at it. If you see all these work sheets and things, he wanted to pass on the knowledge. That was back in the early days when musicians of a certain era were just getting into college teaching gigs. Max Roach was up at UMass Amherst, and Rutgers started with maybe it was Kenny Barron or whoever started out there. Cecil Bridgewater or Stanley Cowell. Jackie McLean was at the Hartt School. The economics and the dues of the road, at any level the road is a drag sometimes. Clubs drying up in the US, and you can only go to Europe a certain amount of times.

**SB:** I was just reading about that today actually at the [Rutgers] Institute. The ’70s were a tough time in New York.

**FH:** Very tough.

**SB:** Up and down for all kinds of reasons. The economy.

**FH:** I arrived here in ’77 so I caught that kind of pre-Wyntonization of everything. And it was great. You could hang out with, you know, Art Blakey at the bar, or get high with Chet Baker. You could do that. Everybody was just kind of another cat hanging around looking for a gig. It wasn’t all managers and publicists and concerts. You could just go directly to people. And Jaki certainly made himself
available, I mean he eventually taught at Hartt. He taught at Manhattan. He taught at New England for many years. And when he left New England in 1980, I took his job. So I taught there on and off for 35 years. And it was, of course, a huge honor and a huge responsibility to step into something like that. And probably my first year at doing it, I wasn’t all that great. I learned, developed a teaching style.

SB: Had the program evolved by that time a little bit from sort of from the original intent?

FH: Yeah it was still kind of a weird little department and then you had the “third stream” department which was even weirder. That was Ran Blake. And now that’s called contemporary improvisation. But, of course, now all the programs are very, there’s more. I still think New England is one of the most creative places among schools. There are a few that are not so creative, it’s very paint by numbers and transcribe this. This thing about New England in the late 1970s, mid ’70s, it was really, and it still is, it’s artist teachers. The faculty now, the faculty then. If you took a theory class you were studying with a composer, not with a guy who got a grad degree. They didn’t care shit if you had a degree. I’m sure Jaki Byard didn’t have a degree. Nor did Jimmy Giuffre or any of the other great artists that taught there over the years. Nobody had paper. But if you had something of value to offer and were willing to do it, that that’s kind of how it happened.

As I said I’ve got tons of Jaki’s albums, including a couple rare ones. Like, when I’m in Japan, there’s this great, the biggest jazz record store in the world is in Tokyo. When I go there, I go to the Jaki Byard bin first. See if there’s
anything that I don’t have. And some of them are pretty crappy, the recording quality is not that great, the piano’s out of tune, the rhythm section isn’t all that hooked up. He was always going for it. That was sort of the take away. I have been influenced by him, but I would say Jason Moran has more Jaki Byard influence than I do. More specific, but also Jason is younger, and by the time he got to Jaki, Jaki was old, he was much older. Jason and I are colleagues and friends, but we’re very different musicians. Another guy who studied with Jaki before me was a guy named Alan Pasqua who’s in L.A. Right out of NEC he got the gig with Tony Williams. Anyway, he settled out there. I’m just trying to think of other pianists who really worked with Jaki. Those are the ones who come to mind who’ve had kind of careers.

**SB:** And pretty robust experience with him it sounds like.

**FH:** Yeah, yeah.

**SB:** I had a few phone calls with, we’ve been playing phone tag, with Bruce Barth who studied a little bit with him. He was very eager to want to talk about Jaki, kind of like the way you have been.

**FH:** Bruce was my student, ’cause he came after Jaki had left. So if he studied with him, it was in New York somewhere.

**SB:** Ah, ok.

**FH:** I wasn’t aware that Bruce worked with him. When he was doing his grad degree, I was his teacher. So, 1980 onwards was kind of my turf for the most part. What else can I tell you?
SB: Do you think he [Jaki] self-identified with any particular, for lack of a better word, genre, style? Did he think of himself as part of the avant-garde or did he not think in those terms, having played with a lot of those folks in the ’60s?

FH: Well…

SB: He wasn’t with the real avant-garde I would think.

FH: Yeah but he never would talk about his experience with Mingus. So I don’t know what went on, if he quit or got fired or, how that all ended. But he was part of Mingus’s world for quite a while. The recordings that he’s on with Mingus are great. I think he liked it all. He loved playing tunes, he loved playing stride, he liked composing, he liked playing a little on the outside. He liked being a band pianist. And that’s something that I’ve taken from him ’cause I like all those things, too. You don’t have to say, “Oh I’m a bebopper or I’m a post-bopper or ….” You don’t have to really pigeon-hole yourself. Like I said I think he was one of the more singular pianists in jazz history. The people that you would expect have really studied all the little tributaries and little branches of the tree, branches of branches and understand how jazz piano language evolved from the 20s’. I fear that’s being lost.

SB: Do you think what Wynton has done with his whole thing has been a net plus, a net minus? I know he has, there has been some criticism of him; too narrow a view of what jazz is.

FH: Yeah, maybe a narrow view, maybe like ok all the great jazz has already been played. All we can do is sort of imitate it. Jazz is repertory music. I mean Gunther Schuller was doing that. I was the first to play transcribed Duke Ellington piano
parts that Gunther Schuller did. I mean the actual, all the chords and everything. He was the first person to really do that. To look at jazz or ragtime, whatever, as repertory music. That’s another discussion, you know, what happened in the early ’80s, what’s happening now. That’s another whole discussion. Maybe you have some questions.

SB: Yeah let me see what we might not have covered here. You kind of touched on it a little bit. He really just liked to have a good time when he was doing what he was doing.

FH: Yeah, there’s a lot of joy in his music.

SB: Yeah, and sometimes, a lot of the reviews I’ve been reading of his performances, a lot of times, he was criticized for that because these were people who were expecting the right “presentation of jazz.” He would vary from that by bringing his family up, bringing the audience up, and going into the audience, and sometimes doing those sorts of things.

FH: Yeah, I mean he wasn’t an entertainer in a schloky way. He was certainly unpretentious. I liked that about him a lot. I liked that he would give young people a chance. He was very cognizant of passing it on in a way that he could. He had Cherokee Indian in his background pretty prominently. I’m not sure how that impacted his psyche or his love of alcohol or who knows, but I know that he was, he had a fairly large component of Native American blood. Sometimes he was pretty wild looking. It’s kind of like salt and pepper afro and kind of just a little odd. The pictures that I think of in my memory are the ones where he, on the
covers, where he just looks a little, he looks a little strange, looks a little potentially crazy.

As jazz music has become squeaky clean with kids going to summer jazz camp and going to conservatories and winning competitions, all that kind of shit that goes on now, I am so lucky that I was, like I said, he was the first kind of real character. I mean I played with characters in Cincinnati, and that’s one of the things I loved about the jazz scene was that. I was hanging out with people that my parents probably would not approve of. Whether they were junkies or drinkers or just kind of inappropriate. I loved it. Everybody had nicknames. It was just kind of fun. There was a certain fun about it in the people that hung out around the jazz. That was another whole thing ’cause they were interesting as well. And then I went to New England, and I was around a lot of the faculty, both the classical faculty and the jazz faculty, who were real singular characters. Now things have gotten kind of white washed. The real eccentrics, sort of, have been purged a little bit. And a lot of the guys died off. I mean if I’m 64 Jaki would be probably 90 by now, close. Barry Harris’s age. He’s 91 or 92 or ….

SB: Yeah, he was born in the ’20s Jaki. I forget the exact date.

FH: My mom’s born in 1929, my father 1925, and their 90 and 94, so. He would be up there. There was something kind of romantic about everybody having a personality and a character. I didn’t experience a whole lot of racism as a kid or on the jazz scene. I didn’t experience a lot of racism. I didn’t experience directly any homophobia, but I don’t know what people said when I wasn’t around. Jaki he was kind of inspiring. He was like just be yourself. Just let it fly. See what
happens. Do your homework and once you’re up there, just do what you feel.

That’s a great take-away aside from various musical tidbits I got from him.

SB: There was a twenty-minute or so little film made about Jaki apparently by a Harvard film student, interestingly. And in there, he talks a little bit about how he never thought it was cool to outdo someone. He wasn’t into sort of cutting contest kind of mentality. Did he ever talk about that sort of thing?

FH: No, but he was very generous, he was a generous person. I don’t think he was competitive. I never felt that. And I never heard him say, “Well so and so’s got a bigger career than me,” or “how did he get this or that,” or “why didn’t I get this or that.” He might have thought it.

SB: He didn’t express any bitterness?

FH: He didn’t express any bitterness. In some ways, teaching saved him. Gave him some purpose. Kind of organized his life. It gave him some financial stability. It’s funny, my first sideman gig with kind of a name jazz musician, I was back from New England my first Christmas. And there was a club in Dayton called Gilly’s. I saw Sun Ra there, I saw Mingus, I saw Bill Evans, I saw Teddy Wilson. And I could talk to these people. I went up there. Art Pepper had just released his book Straight Life. He got out of jail. There was a little buzz about him for a minute. And this gut Gilly booked him for like a five-night engagement, which is stupid in Dayton, Ohio. I went up there on opening night ’cause a friend of mine was playing bass and then another friend of mine had come in from New York, young guy, and they were playing in the rhythm section along with this crazy local piano player named Ed Moss. It was really crazy.
I went to the club. It’s a pretty big club, and maybe twenty people there on a Wednesday night or Tuesday night. I could just tell there was something weird gonna happen. I just could tell. Into the first or second tune, Ed Moss took a tuning hammer and started banging the piano. He and Art Pepper got into fuck you. It was this whole thing that just, drama that went off on the stage. No playing mother fucker. That went back and forth. Ed got bounced from the club. This big bartender bounced him. And it was literally like, “is there a piano player in the house?” And so I stepped into that. It was thoroughly unenjoyable. Art wrote these tunes. They were all thirty-two bar kind of bebop tunes, and he’d fuck them up and then yell at me. They were all interchangeable and not very good. I was, I don’t even know if this is what I even want to do. The next week Art was going to New York to the Village Vanguard to record a live album and Jaki Byard was on piano. And apparently Jaki got fired. The weirdness happened there. I don’t know if Jaki quit, got fired, but he was not on the gig. It was maybe George Cables or something.

SB: Just one other thing I had in my notes that I wanted to see if you had any thoughts on or if he ever talked about any of the political stuff that people were invoking, especially with jazz in the ’60s, if there was any intentional aspect there? Did he really think about it in that way?

FH: He may have, but I don’t, I can’t recall precisely. There he was, a Black man in a fairly white environment. George Russell was also African American. There were some Black students. I think he pretty much saw people as people.

SB: Certainly Mingus had very obvious political things in his stuff.
FH: He did, and he certainly had an agenda. Jaki I don’t really think so. He just had a lighter touch about it. He wasn’t, I never heard him talk about “the man” or the system. I just didn’t really hear that from him. Maybe other people would say yes, but I can’t recall it.

SB: And the administration there at New England sort of abided some of his idiosyncrasies and just kind of let him do his thing.

FH: There were tons of characters up there. It was really loose. As a student, even I would, I could just go into the Dean’s office and say, “you know, I know this is required but I really don’t want to take this course,” and he’d say, ”well ok, what do you want to take?” ’Cause I was one of Gunther’s chosen people. So you could just sort of maneuver the system around. It was very loose. Obviously the audition process was very loose. It was just very loose. When I was there, I developed my still love of duo playing. There wasn’t really a great rhythm section at school. It was an okay rhythm section. Not great. I played with some really pretty good rhythm sections in Ohio. Some guys would come down the hallway where the piano studios are, and I’d grab a horn player or grab another piano player and say let’s play two pianos. I enjoy and I still have a very active collaborative career as a duo partner. That was something I took from NEC. And also the first inklings of solo piano certainly. I do recall some lessons where I’d play piano and Jaki would take out a saxophone, which was kind of fun. He wasn’t like a super technical sax player, but he played with a lot of feeling. Certainly could, knew the changes.

SB: I did have a chance to hear him a number of times when I was living in New York back in the ’80s. At Birdland up on the Upper West Side and at Barry Harris’s
Jazz Cultural Theater. He had the Stompers playing there, and I heard him play the saxophone and piano there several times.

FH: So you felt his persona. He was pretty joyous and spontaneous and really didn’t give a fuck. He was like, ok, I’m just gonna do this stride thing now or I’m just gonna take it out for a minute. But it never felt like a bag. Whenever he did whatever he did, it sounded like him. When he played stride, he didn’t sound like Teddy Wilson or Earl Hines. He sounded like Jaki. And when he’d play those long lines that were kind of in and out of the changes in his way, it was a very, very personal approach to that language.

[A few minutes are spent looking at the instruction manual.]

He was really serious about trying to figure out a way to codify things.

SB: Pass it along in a didactic kind of way.

FH: Right. All these chord sheets. He wrote this all out by hand. [Reads from manual.].

He took the time to write this shit out. It’d be hard to read some of it. He had better than average penmanship. Clearly used a ruler.

SB: There are a number of recordings of that, “European Episode.”

FH: Some of them are tunes, some of them are exercises. Who knows what some of them are. There’s a pianist that I got this from named David Meder who’s teaching at the University of North Texas. It’s a big factory down there.

SB: MEDER did you say?

FH: Uh huh. And he gave me this, so he might have done some research on Jaki. I’m sure he has David Meder.com or some such. I think he did some research because
I ran into him, and he said, “Oh you know, I found this when I was working on something.” Maybe he did a paper on Jaki or ….

**SB:** I haven’t run across his name in any of my Googling and JSTOR and all the other databases. I’ll reach out to him for sure.

**FH:** He’s a nice guy. He must have come by this book somehow.

**SB:** So you did not get that yourself when you were studying with him [Jaki]? It came later?

**FH:** I had other loose sheets of paper that I still have in my file. [Finds the sheets in his file, which we review.] So I have different ones. I think this is the, what was the pre-xerox technology with the gel. The mimeograph. This is because it’s purple. I think that’s mimeograph. That’s my writing. And some other things that he gave me that I did not look at. Different fingerings, [inaudible] exercises, Alfred Corteau exercises, Godowsky exercises, all of which lead to tendonitis. Yeah this is mimeograph. It was just little slips of stuff. That’s his writing. Cross-hand arpeggios. Fourths. Ascending descent. That’s something I wrote down. More fingerings. More classical exercises he gave me, none of which I did.

**SB:** You were probably better off for it.

**FH:** I don’t think there’s much here that would add to. I mean you get the idea.
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