

TATUM PETERSON BLEY & McALL: PERFORMANCE AND THE MUSIC

by Ian Muldoon*

The piano is my favourite instrument. It contains an orchestra within its 88 keys. It can thunder, tinkle, harmonise and dance with happiness and much, much more. But for more than 60 years I've been bedevilled by the aura of Art Tatum. Tatum has loomed over jazz, over music, especially pianism, as the "greatest". But what does "greatest" mean? And says who? To me it seems to be a conflict between those who revere technique or see technique as the ultimate determinant of a musician's capability, and those who consider other factors as being relevant to music, composition say, music as art, or jazz as fun and as art. As Judy Bailey reminded me in 1980, "it's all about the music".



Art Tatum (above) has loomed over jazz, over music, especially pianism, as the "greatest"... PHOTO COURTESY DUNCAN SCHIEDT COLLECTION

**Ian Muldoon has been a jazz enthusiast since, as a child, he heard his aunt play Fats Waller and Duke Ellington on the household piano. At around ten years of age he was given a windup record player and a modest supply of steel needles, on which he played his record collection, consisting of two 78s, one featuring Dizzy Gillespie and the other Fats Waller. He listened to Eric Child's ABC radio programs in the 1950s and has been a prolific jazz records collector wherever he lived in the world, including Sydney, Kowloon, Winnipeg, New York and Melbourne. He has been a jazz broadcaster on a number of community radio stations in various cities, and now lives in Coffs Harbour.*

Art Tatum was classically trained for four years by Overton G Rainey. Mr Rainey was of the view that jazz was an inferior music and that Tatum should not pursue it. Virtuoso concert pianists of the 19th and 20th century such as Chopin, Liszt, Busoni and Horowitz were revered as the epitome of pianism. Like any ordinary musician Tatum was motivated by status and the desire to be, if not perfect, at least the very best within one's physical limitations. There was much status in being a concert pianist and very little playing in clubs, or at rent parties. His ambition was to play a concerto with Boston or New York Symphony Orchestras. His drive to perfectionism and his technique are discussed by another major artist of jazz, Rex Stewart:

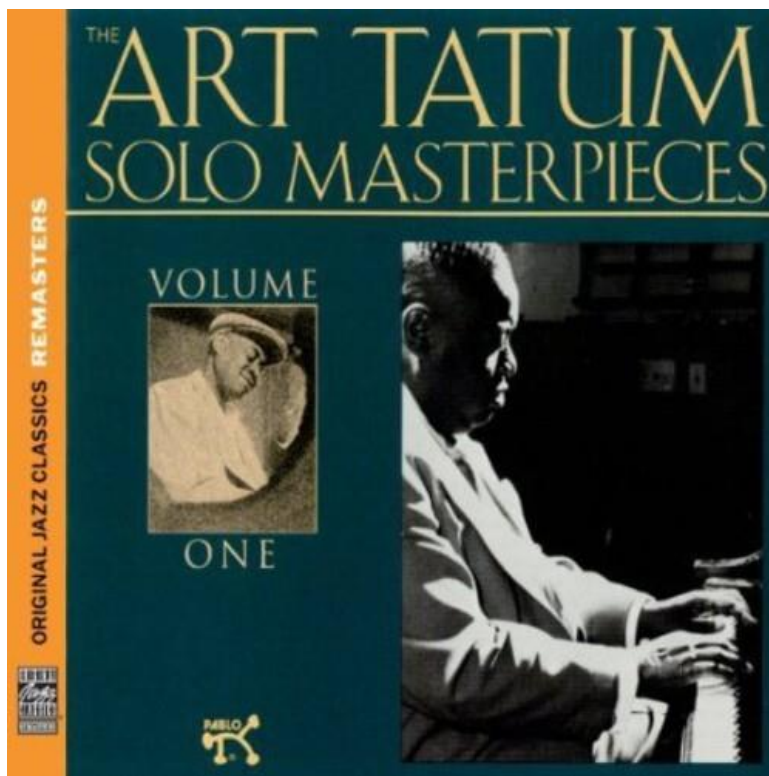
...(Tatum) ran scales and ordinary practice exercises... Another form of practice was unique with Tatum. He constantly manipulated a filbert nut through his fingers, so quickly, that if you tried to watch him, the vision blurred. He worked with one nut until it became sleek and shiny from handling. When it came to replace it, he would go to the market and feel nut after nut - a whole bin full, until he found one just the right shape and size for his exercises. Art's hands were of unusual formation, though just the normal size for a man of his weight and build. But when he wanted to, he somehow could make his hands spread a 12th on the keyboard. The average male hand spans nine or 10 of the white notes, 11 is considered wizard, but 12 is out of this world. Perhaps the spread developed from that seeming relaxation of the fingers - they never rose far above the keyboard and looked almost double-jointed as he ran phenomenally rapid, complex runs. His lightning execution was the result of all that practice, along with the instant communication between his fingers and brain. His touch produced a sound no other pianist has been able to capture. The method he used



Rex Stewart (left) said that anything Tatum could play he could play in any key... PHOTO COURTESY KEITH HOUNSLOW

was his secret, which he never revealed. The Steinway was his favourite piano, but sometimes he played in a club which had a miserable piano with broken ivories and sour notes. He would run his fingers over the keyboard to detect these. Then he would play that night in keys that would avoid as much as possible the bad notes. Anything he could play he could play in any key. (*Downbeat*, 1/12/66).

If we take a simple and beautiful melody like Vincent Youman's *Without a Song*, performed by Tatum in 1956, now part of the eight-volume *The Art Tatum Solo Masterpieces* (Pablo, 1992), he begins in slow tempo stating the melody in a simple way, then again with trills and runs, but restates the melody throughout with arpeggios, convoluted harmonic runs, and much variation.



Another writer puts it this way, describing a typical solo of a standard, as two-handed acrobatics, heavy stride, bluesy asides, dipsy-doodle runs, and thick chords that sound like 12 or 13 fingers are spread out on the keyboard. In the end the listener admires but remains resolutely unmoved. Tatum preferred solo work, was reluctant to subvert himself to be part of a trio say, but would play as a pianist supported by bass and drums. Similarly, as an accompanist he was not at his best.

Pianist Henry Butler saw Tatum as the great soloist and his recordings of standards as nonpareil - "he made them sound like real music" (*Downbeat* 7/99 p65). Does this mean "real music" is music filled with as many notes as you can fit in? Or is it music that sounds like classical music? In my view this is a misplaced understanding of such great songs and what constitutes the art of music. Music is much more than technique, however accomplished. And so-called "classical music" is just one form of music about which more later. There's

the incessant physical practise that Art Tatum did and there's the practise of another kind - the mental one. Tatum was no composer. Nor was he one who engaged in extensive extra-musical studies of the world around him including nature, in order to inform and enlarge his music. Miles Davis once said to John Coltrane: "Do you have to play everything?" And when Coltrane remarked once that he had so much music in him he didn't know how to stop, Davis said: "You can try by taking the horn out of your mouth." Miles Davis had what is called HDMI, which geeks know as High Definition Multimedia Interface but I call it High Developed (Sensitive) Musical Intelligence. Miles Davis had it in spades, as did Paul Bley, as do musicians such as Paul Grabowsky, Andrea Keller, Roger Frampton, and Barney McAll. But Tatum?



Miles Davis & John Coltrane in Paris, 1960: you can try by taking the horn out of your mouth...

Art Tatum's genius as an orchestral player was refracted through the prism of his learned belief of the superiority of performance, the superiority of classical music and the inferiority of his blackness. In another time and place who knows what glories he might have achieved and the world been the beneficiaries of?

Putting aside folk music, the notion of performance is a long one where, in the Western world, the aristocracy engaged musicians to perform. Music was mainly for entertainment and entertainment reached another level with the establishment of opera. In 1637 the Teatro San Cassiano opera house was built. With the industrial revolution performance entertainment boomed with the opening of the Teatro di San Carlo (1737) and in 1778 perhaps the most famous musical theatre of all Teatro alla Scala. Music in these venues was promoted as the epitome of Western culture and civilisation - the glory of the West.

In this regard it is instructive to note that the most prestigious broadcasting outlet in Australia and one of the most respected in the world, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), announced on air on the 5/11/20 that "Music

will ring out once again in the halls of the Sydney Opera House for the first time since the coronavirus shut down performances earlier this year.” The ‘music’ referred to here was a program of opera performances. In fact, “The Don Burrows Celebration of Life through Jazz” concert had taken place just four days earlier on Sunday 1/11/20, to an audience of 500, and featuring 13 leading Australian jazz musicians.

It may be that the word “jazz” has connotations still, that remind many people (ignorant of its achievements) of its origins. Now that the music for many years has been described as “America’s classical music”, and that most of the great artistic advances in music have been made by its practitioners over the past 100 years, and that Harvard University presently has jazz pianist and composer Vijay Iyer leading a graduate programme that concentrates on the terrain between composition and improvisation, you would have thought jazz could be described as music in Australia. With the ABC apparently blind to this art, and a PM who prances into Parliament with a lump of coal, it’s a wonder more of our musicians don’t flock to New York to keep our great artistic exports company: Barney McAll, Linda May Han Oh, Lisa and Nicki Parrott. But yes, it’s true that when jazz emerged out of the slums, honky tonks, bars, and brothels it was seen by humble jazz musicians as a signal achievement to perform at venues such as the Albert Hall, Carnegie Hall or the Sydney Opera House. And that attitude is with us today which is understandable to showcase talent and artists, but much more challenging to expect real creativity.



Two of our great artistic exports who went to New York: Barney McAll (left) and Linda May Han Oh (below)...





Two more of our artistic exports who went to New York, L-R, sisters Nicki Parrott & Lisa Parrott...

Jazz rhythm delights, as does improvisation. Charlie Parker noted that he was composing every night he played, and this depended a great deal on the wellbeing of the player and the atmosphere surrounding its creation. This atmosphere often determined the outcomes even when the musician was feeling down, ill or out of sorts. Miles Davis, HDMI and bar, produced one of the masterpieces of modern recorded music because he was very attuned to that creative fact - the document is *The Complete Live at the Plugged Nickel* (7CD, 1965).



From that programme consider the ballad *My Funny Valentine* (Rodgers/Hart) the 16-minute version. There is chatter, tinkling of glasses, murmuring, laughter, in other words a rich atmosphere, a warm atmosphere, an electric atmosphere of, let's face it, love, of the music of the musicians and of the moment. Davis knows it, the audience knows it. Davis starts playing in a very slow tempo, with long notes, and a long silence between - silence reigns, holds, - the music plays on and plays out with an increase in tempo, until it ends. Similarly with Bill Evans's famous stint at the Village Vanguard, or of various European venues where greats such as Coltrane, Bechet, McLean, Peterson were documented in circumstances conducive to their creativity. Humble Bennetts Lane jazz club in Melbourne was a beauty of a venue. One night, when Bernie McGann was playing at El Rocco, I told him at half-time I was leaving because some patrons were being too loud. Maybe my mistake; maybe some were there for reasons other than the music.

When performing in clubs or other intimate venues, Tatum would insist on the respect engendered by classical performance rituals - silence. But jazz players in bands or groups listen intently to other players, engaging in musical conversation with them, sometimes humming to themselves (Jarrett) or shouting encouragement or yapping in joy. but they also engage the other partner in the process - the listener, or audience. In New York I attended a screening of the film *A Time To Kill* (1996) and witnessed African American audience members yelling at the screen, shouting with joy, and variously expressing opinions. At a performance of a chorus of trombones at Lincoln Centre people started dancing in the aisles. It is common in church services for African Americans to respond vocally to the cadences of preaching. In Australia one may get shooshed for whispering in the theatre or cinema or concert.



During a screening of this film (A Time To Kill, 1996) in New York, African American audience members yelled at the screen, shouting with joy...

Classical orchestras had been established in the USA as temples of European gods in response to the white majority's view of European music as a badge of its supremacy, which meant Tatum's ambitions were doomed to failure. The role of the audience was to sit still and shut up, as the musicians performed the wonders of Western culture. The ambitions of the classically trained Fletcher Henderson, Billy Strayhorn and Nina Simone were also doomed. A black musician would have had no hope of joining, for example, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, no matter how well dressed. In the late 19th century musicians' unions were segregated, a system that lingered until the 1970s (cf Aaron Flagg, *Symphony* magazine).

Indeed, the whole musical education system in the USA and Australia and other countries colonised by European nations, was based on the assumption that Western tonality, major- minor harmony and equal tempered scale is the master language. There was no recognition of Indonesian gamelan music, West African talking drums, or other vast resources of various world musics. Today, as previously noted, one of the most conservative of educational establishments, Harvard University, has jazz pianist and composer Vijay Iyer leading a graduate programme that concentrates on the terrain between composition and improvisation. Things change. But for Oscar Peterson, the legacy of the swing of jazz was enough.

Peterson first took lessons from his dad and was an incredibly conscientious student. From (grade) primary school through (high) secondary school he routinely practiced 12 hours a day, and sometimes up to 18. Some consider Peterson's technique the closest that has come to that of Tatum's but, over the hundreds of records that have documented his career, his shining contributions have been as an accompanist to the likes of masters Ben Webster, Lester Young and Coleman Hawkins, singers such as Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, and as a team member of some of the finest piano trios in the history of the music.



Oscar Peterson (right) first took piano lessons from his father Daniel (left) and was an incredibly conscientious student...

I heard Peterson at a “performance” at the Sydney Opera House. He demonstrated his incredible chops but left the audience impressed but unmoved, which may have had as much to do with the poor sound qualities of that classical music venue, as it had to do with the nature of jazz improvisation which is greatly enhanced by closer connection with that other party in the playing - the audience.

Of all his documents *Night Train* (1962) is a notable summation of the beauties of jazz rhythms and the power of Peterson’s pianism made manifest in collaboration with bassist Ray Brown and drummer Ed Thigpen. Recorded at a time of innovations and advances in jazz, it does look backwards. but it still stands as a signal instance of the profound roots of a music that has had such an impact on all music. With nearly half of the programme dedicated to songs composed or associated with the master Duke Ellington: *Night Train*, a strolling tempo blues; *C Jam Blues* with its great bass opening, four breaks that precede Peterson’s choruses and his gradual ascent to a marvellous climax enough to make angels weep; *Things Ain’t What They Used To Be*, a deep blues with fine bass; *I Got It Bad (And That Ain’t Good)* referencing the essence of Ellingtonia as a slow blues; and *Band Call* which highlights the power of his orchestral playing. There are three homages to the swing era: *Moten Swing* (Durham), *Easy Does It* (Oliver, Young) and *Honey Dripper* (Liggins); one to the Great American Song Book: *Georgia On My Mind* (Carmichael) with its poignant mixture of beauty and sadness; one to the “newer” music *Bag’s Groove* (Jackson) and one original *Hymn To Freedom* (Peterson). The music is mainly blues-based. Aside from Peterson’s deep forward pulsing swing, Ray Brown’s bass is a standout throughout, but especially strong on his solos on *Night Train*, *Bag’s Groove*, and *Things Ain’t What They Used To Be*. Just the *C Jam Blues* make this one track in itself worth the price of admission to one of Peterson’s finest documents. All the music here is a prime example of swing piano trio music.



L-R, Oscar Peterson (piano), Ed Thigpen (drums) and Ray Brown (bass)...

But Peterson was an exhibitionist and a perfectionist like Tatum, and cannot be seen as HDMI in the way say, Monk, can. One favourite, apart from the series recorded in the home of MPS producer Hans Georg Brunner-Schwer to a select audience, is that recorded in 1961 at the London House jazz club and restaurant in Chicago located at the corner of Wacker Drive and Michigan Avenue and originally released as *The Trio*. His take on the track *Chicago* (Fisher) is breathtaking. Again, it took an audience engaging with the three musicians to take the music to another level. Although he loved performing in concert halls and at least twice performed at Carnegie Hall - 50 years apart - he shone and blossomed when working as part of a team in a club, or as an accompanist to masters. In 1999 Peterson's trio played at Carnegie Hall. He was 74 years of age and his fellow Canadian Paul Bley was 67. In 1949 Oscar Peterson had asked the 17-year-old Bley to fulfill his contract at the Alberta Lounge in Montreal. Jack Reilly has remarked: "...in his early playing, Bley was a clone of Oscar Peterson's. Lots of fast right-hand "cooking" improvised melodies and co-ordinated left hand chord comping which enforced and supported the right hand." Boy, did that change quickly when he left Montreal.



In 1950 Bley left Montreal for New York City and Juilliard, and took an entirely different approach to the music. In *Downbeat* in 1955 he said: "Most of the young musicians today are listening hard to schools of the past...and assimilate them into their own playing". This was six years before Wynton Marsalis was born. One of my "electric shock" musical moments was his document on ECM called *Closer* (1966) and especially the composition *Ida Lupino* (Carla Bley).

Ida Lupino is one of the most memorable compositions in modern music, sitting comfortably alongside say *Blue Monk* (Monk) though perhaps not one you can whistle like the latter. The striking recording of it by Paul Bley, HDMI, in a piano trio rendition on the album *Closer*, also on his album *Ramblin'* (1967) and, as a solo on *Open To Love* (1973) made it iconic. The song has been recorded by Achille Gajo Trio, Charlie Haden, Giovanni Guidi, and Mary Halvorson. The

subject of the title is a feminist icon and brilliant film director, especially of Film Noir, and one of the very few female actor/directors ever to forge a Hollywood career of excellence as a director of seven films as well as an actor in 70.

When guitar player Pat Metheny heard Paul Bley's solo on the 1963 recording of *All the Things You Are* (Kern, Oscar Hammerstein II) from the album *Sonny Meets Hawk*, he remarked: "... a whole new universe of harmonic possibilities opened up for me. On one level, what he's doing is very complex, but it's also completely accessible, very open and in the end, something very personal becomes very universal." The album featured Sonny Rollins and Coleman Hawkins, tenors; Bley, piano; Roy McCurdy, drums: and Bob Cranshaw, bass.



Pianist Frank Kimbrough said:

In this solo, he stretches harmony to the breaking point, something that he began doing even before his work with Ornette Coleman five years before. By the time this solo was recorded, Paul had reached a point of maturity with these ideas, that is, finding "landing spots" harmonically, so that he could play where the harmony was GOING, rather than the chord changes at hand, disregarding, ignoring, or playing THROUGH the changes (to fool the listener) to a point of resolution, where the listener would realize that he actually WAS in the right place in the song. It's all about tension and release, where spontaneous melody takes precedence over the original harmony of the tune. Often, Paul would play against the harmony of a phrase until the last bar or two, at which point he would briefly "land" before "taking off" as the next phrase began. (Huffington Post, 18/1/2016).

I have 57 of Bley's documents, more than any other pianist in my collection, and there is not a dud amongst them. Indeed, his earliest are as refreshing as his later ones. The document *Paul Bley 12 (+6) In A Row* (Hatology, 2008, 2nd

Edition) recorded on 23/24 May 1990 at Foundation Artists' House, Boswil, Switzerland, is as intriguing, compelling, interesting and as beautiful as any he has made in a career spanning the years 1949 - 2010. It is a programme of 16 vignettes with eight solo compositions (Bley); seven trios (Bley/Koch/Koglmann); two duos (Bley/Koch) and one duo (Bley/Koglmann). Among many other things his use of the full range of the instrument, especially the lower and the upper ends, is revelatory and quite beautiful. In terms of other artists, he said Louis Armstrong was his greatest influence. In terms of his approach to playing he said: "Chord changes had never interfered with my own way of hearing melody. Whether playing standards with steady time and a given set of chord sequences, or free rhythm and free harmony pieces where the only guide to the improviser is the vivid character of the given written composition, *one's own personality* should be apparent to the listener". The jazz artist speaks.



Paul Bley: one's own personality should be apparent to the listener...

Bley was an educator at the New England Conservatory of Music. He got the Order of Canada in 2008, and died of natural causes on 3/1/16 in Florida.

Bley recorded and worked with Evan Parker, Barre Phillips, Charlie Haden, Paul Motian, Gary Peacock, John Surman, Jane Bunnett, Jimmy Giuffre, Steve Swallow, Peter Ind, Tony Oxley, Milford Graves, Marshall Allen, Charlie Parker,

Lester Young, Charles Mingus, Art Blakey, Archie Shepp, and Ornette Coleman. If the phrase “birds of a feather flock together” means anything, and I believe it does, no more need be said about Bley’s status.

The “sound of surprise” is very much found for me *within* solos by Bley. With Barney McAll it’s *between works* as he is unpredictable in the composition, arrangements, and groups that may be found on any one programme. Where Peterson is like returning to a reliable old friend, McAll is a fresh journey at every stage. McAll is a HDMI.

On ballads, McAll reminds me of Bill Evans’s composition *Peace Piece* in regard to intensity of feeling, touch, and I guess “seriousness” for want of another term. For example his work *Sadoki* from the solo document *Swirl* (2018) which is meditative, hesitant, searching, very very slow, sombre and achingly beautiful. Nor can one ignore his immersion in the roots of African American music, not just blues but church music including gospel. There are even hymn-like overtones in the work *The Churches’ One Foundation Redux*. In his compositions he can be delicate and melodic, as in *Kora*; percussive on *Soro*; pulsing and rondo-like on *Swirl*; discordant and climax building on the *Third Chrysanthemum*; and traditional on *Poverty Wands*. On *Aqua Fortis* he plays the Chucky which is “a treasure box filled with miniature hurdy-gurdies, kalimbas, glockenspiel and recording devices that enable it to loop and manipulate real-time samples.”



There is nothing pretentious about Barney McAll (above) nor about his commitment and love for his chosen art... PHOTO CREDIT ROGER MITCHELL

On initial encountering McAll’s works on a superficial level, before immersion in them, they may seem too too precious and pretentious, but having encountered him over the years in a variety of settings, there is nothing pretentious about

McAll, nor his commitment and love for his chosen art. On his document *Mother of Dreams and Secrets* (Jazzhead, 2006), there are seven compositions by the leader, one folk song, and one by Bjork. In these works he explores the music of Cuba including bata drumming. The title of the album is related to a quote from Jung “The sea is like music: it has all the dreams of the soul within itself and sounds them over”.

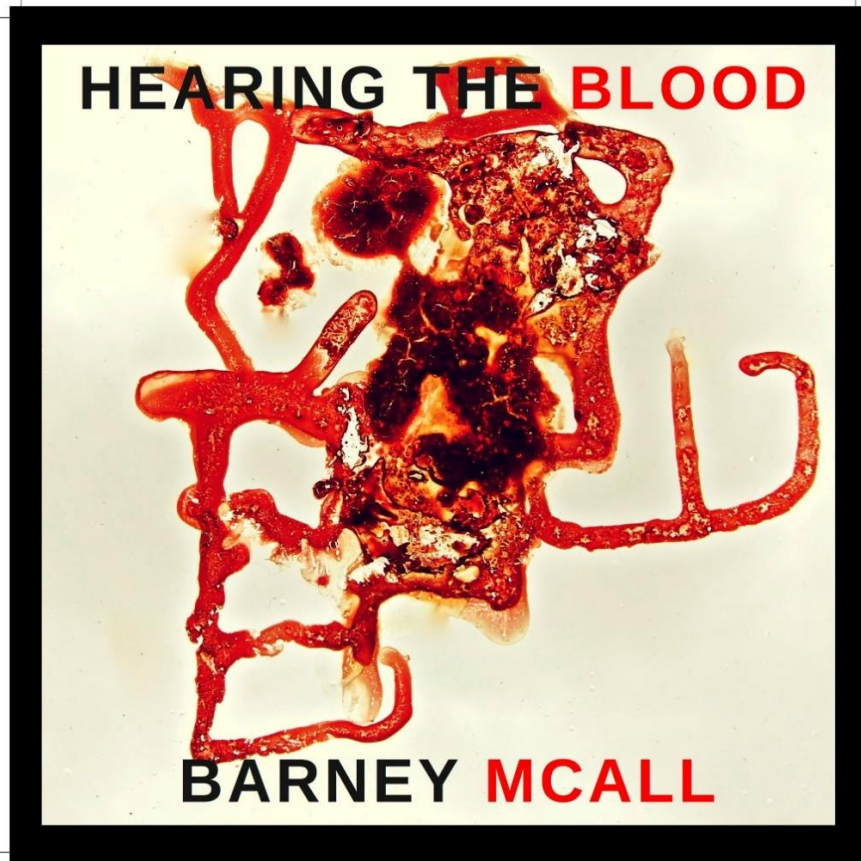


There is a duo on *Yemaya Prayer* (Folklore) with vocal by Dreiser Durruthy Bombale and McAll on piano and chucky. There are two quartet pieces, a sextet, septet, an octet and three nonets. There is considerable emphasis throughout on rhythm and percussion with piano, electric bass, guitar, congas, percussion, drums and bata on the composition *Heavenly Waters* (McAll) for example. Some pieces are quite joyful, others imply church bells. Some very fine solos include flute and piano. The arrangements are standout (cf *Ellegua*) with its percussive effects backing the piano with impressive vocal from the bata player. Dreiser Durruthy Bombale gives the programme striking authenticity.



Vocalist & bata player Dreiser Durruthy Bombale: he gives the programme striking authenticity... PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK

Another remarkable McAll document is *Hearing The Blood* (Extra Celestial Arts, 2017). The title comes from shamanic belief that 'blood' is the location of 'spirit'. Rilke is also quoted regarding the patience required for memories to turn into our blood and become nameless and part of ourselves. All compositions are by McAll except the title track and *That Which Provides*, where vocalist Daniel Merriweather has joint credit on both, and on *Echoless Shore* where Charles C Sawyer and Yvonne McAll share credit. There are nine works.



Musicians are McAll on piano, Chucky, keyboards; Mike Rivett, tenor sax; Carl Morgan, guitar; Jonathan Zwartz, bass; Hamish Stuart, drums and percussion; Adrian Sherriff, trombone; Scott McConnachie, alto sax; Ben Vanderwal on drums on the outro of *Love is the Blood*; Jenn Gavito, flute on *Nock Code*. Vocalist Gian Slater leads a chorus of Miriam Crelin, Louisa Rankin, Allira Wilson and Edward Fairlie on *Echoless Shore*. The influence of the African American church is evident throughout. *On Sorrow House* trilling piano, sax/piano harmony and a bass solo stand out on a very well-recorded album by Ross Ahern. *Gold Cupboard* swings; *Dogface* is rollicking fun with great drumming and a fine arrangement; *Nock Code* has an excellent guitar solo and is, I imagine, a tribute to Mike; *Sigil* has a repetitive orchestral figure underpinning a long tenor solo from Mike Rivett, and is a highlight.

In my view Barney McAll may be spoken of in the same breath as Paul Bley and, now in mid-career, he may very well be entering a golden patch. Already he has distinguished himself as a major arranger, composer and instrumentalist of music - in particular pianism in his chosen genre known as "jazz". Long may he thrive.