

## WHEN WILL THE BLUES LEAVE?

by Ian Muldoon\*

---

“In music, the only thing that matters is whether you feel it or not.”

-Ornette Coleman, *New York Post*, 11/60

“I had to learn to play like Johnny Hodges because I couldn’t get a job when I played like myself. In fact, that’s why I became a leader. Nobody would let me play with them. So I got my own group and I didn’t have to play like others anymore.”

-Ornette Coleman, *Metronome*, 9/60



*Ornette Coleman, pictured in 1959 ... PHOTO CREDIT WILLIAM CLAXTON*

---

*\*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.*

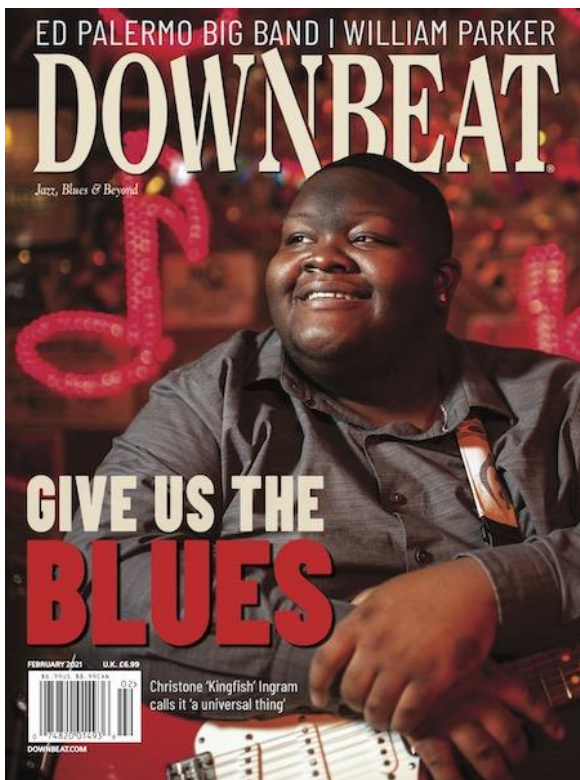
“Once you start understanding the blues, you can feel a larger arc of life.”  
-Bobby Watson, *Downbeat*, 2/21.



*Bobby Watson: you can feel a larger arc of life...*

“At its best, the blues doesn’t simply get rid of sadness, worries and woe, it provides a sense of catharsis, in which these emotions are not just lifted but transformed, providing the listener with joy and hope. And that stems from a different kind of skill than mere music making.”

-J D Considine, “Somewhere, Somebody has the Blues”, *Downbeat*, 2/21  
Cover story “Give Us The Blues”.)



I opened the *New Yorker* (8/2/21 Edition) and went to the section called GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN (GOAT). This section is my first port of call in this magazine because for a moment - just for a moment - I can transport myself to what may be, along with Melbourne, one of the greatest (jazz) cities in the world and imagine - just for a moment - I'm in an apartment on East 53rd St. It's mid-afternoon and we've got the evening ahead of us. We may wander along to MOMA and spend an hour getting in the mood. Have a coffee at the Terrace Cafe in MOMA and later take in Smalls, or the Vanguard, or Birdland and hear some great live music. But it's Covid time and live music is hard to come by, made evident in the GOAT section of the *New Yorker*.

The first thing that's evident is the change in categories of the GOAT section. Once there was a section called "Classics" another was called "Opera" and another "Night Life". Jazz was covered under Night Life, along with stand up, rockabilly, and any other entertainment considered worthy of inclusion by the compiler for his discerning, upmarket, and educated readership. In this latest edition the sections are "Music", "Art", "Dance", "Podcasts", and "Movies". Jazz now comes under Music. But there's more. The featured artist under music - all music - is Joe Lovano. The outlined illustrated notice draws approved attention to his album *Garden Of Expression* which features himself on tenor, Marilyn Crispell, on piano and Carmen Castaldi on drums. My point? Firstly in one of the most prestigious intellectual and cultural magazines for the general reader, "jazz" is now labelled "music" cheek by jowl with opera or the classics. Secondly, Covid is especially hurting live performance of jazz and supporting the artists by buying their albums or donating to Smalls or turning up to Foundry 616 is more important than ever.



*Joe Lovano: the featured artist in the New Yorker's 'Music' section...*  
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

But if the *New Yorker* has always been a fairly accurate reflection of the middle-class zeitgeist, then the good (white) burghers of that sophisticated city have sometimes cocooned themselves. In 1927 in the GOAT section of the 3rd December under Movies was *The Jazz Singer* which was not about jazz, but about Al Jolson. On Broadway George Bernard Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma* was playing. The Cotton Club was not mentioned. In 1927 the *New Yorker* started covering popular records such as *Ben Bernie and the Clicquot Club Eskimos*. "...one could read the magazine for month after month without running across a hint that black people existed" ...\* Neither Duke Ellington nor the Cotton Club were mentioned at a time when the equivalent of Mozart was creating music in that venue, music for the ages much of it replete with the blues.



*The Cotton Club pictured in 1927 at 142<sup>nd</sup> Street and Lenox Avenue, Harlem: neither Duke Ellington nor the Cotton Club were mentioned in the New Yorker... PHOTO CREDIT HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES*

Some evidence among the 1,000 plus Ellington works? *Hot and Bothered* (Ellington) arranged by the composer, Edward Kennedy 'Duke' Ellington who also played piano, with James Wesley 'Bubber' Miley, and Arthur Parker 'Artie' Whetsol on trumpets; Joe 'Tricky' Sam Nanton on trombone; Johnny 'Rabbit' Hodges and Harry Howell Carney on clarinet, alto and baritone saxophones; Albany Leon 'Barney' Bigard on clarinet and tenor saxophone; Fred Guy on banjo; Alonzo 'Lonnie'

---

\**Duke: A Life Of Duke Ellington*, Terry Teachout, Gotham, NYNY, 2014 p 78.

Johnson on guitar; Wellman Braud on bass; William Alexander 'Sonny Greer' on drums and Baby Cox vocal. If there is a better three minutes in music that has the harmony, melody, rhythmic drive, expressive individual sounds, arrangement, engaging and striking vocal and such joyous power, please show it to me. I expect it will be another work by Mr Ellington. Mozart's music has its appeal but Ellington's is an evolutionary advance on it. The blues and rhythm are at the heart of that advance and rarely has the music of European composers such as Olivier-Eugène-Prosper-Charles Messiaen and (Achille) Claude Debussy blended with the rhythms of Africa and the blues of America so convincingly, so delightfully, so artistically powerfully, as it has in the works of Ellington. The adaptation of the complexities of rhythm into modern music has begun, but it's likely to be a singularly long journey. But what about the blues? Aren't the blues too simple for modernity? When will the blues leave?

**Hot and Bothered**

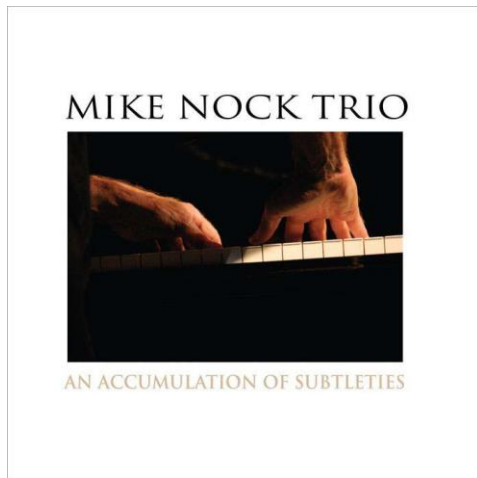
Duke Ellington  
**1928**

The image displays a musical score for the piece 'Hot and Bothered' by Duke Ellington, dated 1928. The score is written for piano and is in the key of B-flat major (two flats) and 4/4 time. The first system shows the piano introduction, with a forte (f) dynamic marking in the right hand and piano (ppp) in the left hand. The second system shows the first and second endings of the main melody, with first ending markings '1. 4.' and '2. 5.' above the notes.

*When Will The Blues Leave?* (*WWTBL?*)(Coleman) was the title of a song on Ornette Coleman's first album *Something Else!!!!*(1959). *Something Else!!!!* had the following titles: *Invisible*, *The Blessing*, *Jayne*, *Chippier*, *The Disguise*, *Angel Voice*, *Alpha*, *When Will The Blues Leave?* and *The Sphinx*. The band was a standard bebop lineup of trumpet, saxophone, piano, bass and drums with personnel as follows: Don Cherry, cornet; Ornette Coleman, alto saxophone; Walter Norris, piano; Don Payne, double bass; and Billy Higgins, drums. That was the last time Coleman was constrained by a piano. But I have to say I just love the title *WWTBL?* It was chosen by Paul Bley (ex-Coleman alumni 1958), Gary Peacock and Paul Motian for the title of their very fine ECM (2019) recording of their 1999 concert in Lugano.

Like Ellington, Coleman used what's known as clear English in his titles, elegant in their simplicity, but where Ellington's titles reflected the mood or tone or sense of his music, Coleman's don't. Some modern musicians like Canadian born Ambrose

Akinmusire whose latest album is called *On The Tender Spot Of Every Calloused Moment* makes one exclaim “Say what?”. I had the same response when I first saw Mike Nock’s double CD *An Accumulation of Subtleties*. I held off buying it because of its title.



When I recall a genius like Bobby Hutcherson and his titles such as *Dialogue* (1965) or *Now!* (1969) or other artists like *Live At The Village Vanguard*, or *Louis Armstrong Plays W C Handy*, the marketing guys get it right. I’m not sure artists thinking up their own titles are the smartest in terms of marketing. With Anthony Braxton, song titles are mathematical signs or formula and I presume one is supposed to think the music is smarter for it, or at a higher level. Some Braxton album titles have numerals expressed in English: *One in Two: Two In One* (HatOLOGY) or *2 by 2* (K2B2).



*Bobby Hutcherson: a genius, with titles such as “Dialogue” (1965) or “Now!” (1969)... PHOTO COURTESY TWITTER*



Well, Ellington is at the highest level and *Hot and Bothered* ain't no second rate "tune". Coleman's are in clear English but they have an enigmatic quality about them. Coleman's (ungrammatical) album *To Whom Who Keeps a Record* (1959) has a sentence broken into four parts for Side One: *Music Always, Brings Goodness, To Us, and Always*; and a postscript broken into three for Side Two: *P.S. Unless One Has, Some Other, and Motive for Its Use*. Some like Roy Eldridge thought Coleman was "taking the Mickey" to coin a phrase. Others thought he was genius, Charlie Haden among them.



*Ornette Coleman (left) on his plastic saxophone, pictured with Don Cherry on pocket trumpet: Coleman was definitely a shock to the musical scene of the day, especially amongst jazz musicians and jazz aficionados...PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ REFLECTIONS*

Beyond the fact that Coleman played a plastic saxophone, which Charlie Parker and Ade Monsbourgh had also played, Coleman was definitely a shock to the musical scene of the day, especially amongst jazz musicians and jazz aficionados. Where the bebop movement was renowned for its harmonic and rhythmic complexities and rules, and was the inspiration and aspiration for the emerging jazz musicians who

revered such practitioners as Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, and especially Charlie Parker, as the hippest, modern, most brilliant musical stars in the jazz firmament, Coleman's return to the blues, and the way he returned to the blues, was both an affront and a paradox, and mightily confusing. The sheer beauty of sound of the great blues artists like Ellington and Armstrong had given way to a thin tone and occasional squawks. The dizzying gyrations of Parker and Gillespie as they explored the changes, sometimes, at dizzying speed, had given way to apparent meandering. And rule breaking.

*WWTBL?* was recorded in 1966 by Bernie McGann on Sarang Bang Records (Auckland) suggesting Coleman was an early influence on McGann. The composition has also been recorded by Paul Bley, John Abercrombie, Kenny Kirkland, Dave Specter, Rich Perry, Marc Copeland, and Tony Miceli. *WWTBL?* was one of a programme of nine original compositions steeped in the blues and the music seemed backward whilst at the same time *avant garde* with one Coleman album called *Free Jazz* (1960).

*Coleman once remarked that he wished he could have an entire ensemble play like an off-tempo Robert Johnson, all scattered emotions and wailing without having to keep time, as if there were nothing more outside than being the King of the Delta Blues (and) there's a hypnotic pulse to the 1959 Lonely Woman that defies explanation. You hear Higgins's high-wire cymbal rides with Charlie Haden strumming against the beat, a disconnected melody to match discombobulated emotions. Coleman said he was inspired to write the song watching a woman fight with a man, but the loneliness is also pure Coleman, a sound that has inspired shock, misunderstanding, even violence.....\**

In short, Coleman was all about feelings and the blues are central to that. Part of Coleman's *curriculum vitae* is R&B.



---

\*David Yaffe, *The Nation*, 14/5/07.

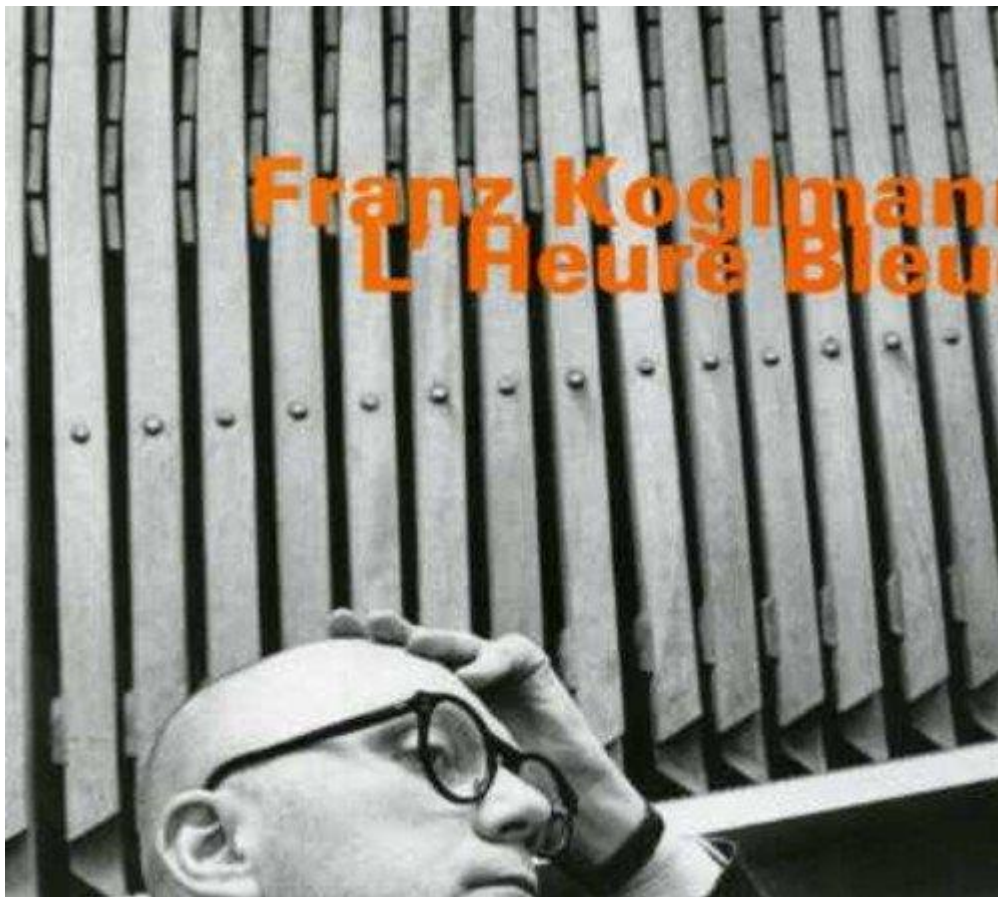


For a modern take on the blues and rhythm, James Carter's *Organ Trio Live From The Newport Jazz Festival* (Blue Note) 2019 is a programme deep in the tradition but as modern as tomorrow. James Carter is on tenor, alto or soprano saxophone; Gerrard Gibbs, Hammond B-3 Organ; and Alex White, drums. All the compositions are by Django Reinhardt except *La Valse Des Nigles* (Auguste Malha). It was recorded live at the Newport Jazz Festival 5/8/2018. Carter announces Gibbs as being on "Vitamin B3" and it's true the organ is like a very swinging orchestra. The organ and drums provide a powerful rhythmic base for Carter's astonishing reed explorations traversing the range of the three instruments in a musically satisfying way whilst building an exciting live performance which the crowd clearly loves. Edward Kennedy Ellington and not just his reed players, but his horn players, would have applauded Carter's ability to bring out such colour, expression, humour, and feeling in his solos. It's great music, great "jazz" and great blues and Carter never overstays his welcome where Paul Gonsalves, in 1956, in my minority view, did.



*James Carter: a programme deep in the tradition but as modern as tomorrow...*  
PHOTO CREDIT ARTHUR ELGORT

Another fine album this time from the European scene is by Franz Koglmann called *L'Heure Bleue* (hatOLOGY) 2003 recorded at Haus Der Begegnung Mariahilf, Vienna on 20&21/8/91. There are 13 works in the programme with three standards, *My Old Flame* (Johnston), *Night and Day* (Porter) and *Black Beauty* (Ellington). In regards to the last, Koglmann did the arrangement. Bob Blumenthal has credited Koglmann with a sensibility to players similar to Ellington in that he very carefully arranges a piece from a deep knowledge of the artists involved in its performance. Three years after the recording of *L'Heure Bleue* he recorded *We Thought About Duke* (hatOLOGY)1994 which includes guest Lee Konitz on alto saxophone. The programme was: *Lament for Javanette*, (Ellington/Billy Strayhorn/Barney Bigard); *Ko Ko*, (Ellington); *Zweet Zurzday*; (Ellington, Strayhorn); *Thoughts About Duke I&II&III*(Koglmann); *Love Is in My Heart*, (Ellington); *Pyramid*, (Juan Tizol); *The Mooche*, (Ellington, Irving Mills) and *Dirge* (Strayhorn).



*L'Heure Bleue* has a pianoless quartet called the Monoblue Quartet with Koglmann, trumpet, flugelhorn; Tony Coe, clarinet, tenor saxophone; Burkhard Stangl, guitar; and Klaus Koch on bass. Four tracks are duos of flugelhorn/trumpet and the piano of Misha Mengelberg. Though Koglmann is usually characterised as an exponent of “free jazz” these works are carefully arranged but emphasise much space for individual extended improvisations, as the elegiac title track makes clear, with a lead role for the clarinet, along with trumpet, guitar and bass solos. *Monoblue* -

dedicated to Yves Klein (Koglmann) as the title suggests gives each member of the quartet solo room. *My Old Flame* (Johnston) is a flugelhorn/piano duo, the former a reserved, lyrical female, the latter an energetic, pushy male. Both *Leopard Lady* - dedicated to Ecke Bonk (Koglmann) and Ellington's *Black Beauty* swing with Coe's clarinet reminiscent of the Ellington sound. As well there is considerable lyricism, for example on *Blue Angel* (Stangl). The overall feel is of restrained emotions with accomplished artistic expression. Free jazz artists, like European Franz Koglmann, never quite let go of the deep origins of the music. In addition it seems that European artists look to Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Sidney Bechet, Miles Davis, Duke Ellington and others in the same way they look at Strauss, Haydn or Stravinsky. The audiences too, generally seem to take these artists much more seriously than those in the country of the music's origins.



*Free jazz artists, like European Franz Koglmann (above), never quite let go of the deep origins of the music...*



But what are the “blues”? Until W C Handy (1873-1958) came along it was hard to know what the blues were in terms of the Western musical tradition. Trying to musically transcribe the human voice and the improvised instruments - bottles, boxes, combs, twine, banjos, - into understandable notation may have proved beyond the skills of most. It was Handy, a professional musician in his teens, a cornet playing band master, who got offered a well-paid job as conductor of a Michigan Municipal band comprised of white musicians and knocked the offer back so he could direct the Clarksdale, Mississippi Knights of Pythias Band of African Americans instead, who changed music forever. Travelling in the Mississippi Delta with the band and a fine ear for the melodies, folk songs and varieties of rhythm coupled with a solid memory, inspired him to write such works as *Memphis Blues* (a political song written for Mayor Crump); *St Louis Blues*; *Yellow Dog Blues*; *Beale St Blues* and *Loveless Love*, all included on Louis Armstrong’s *Plays W C Handy* (Columbia) of 1954.



*W C Handy: he travelled in the Mississippi Delta with his band and a fine ear for the melodies, folk songs and varieties of rhythm he heard... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ FROM NEW ORLEANS TO NEW AGE JAZZ*

Bob Porter explains:

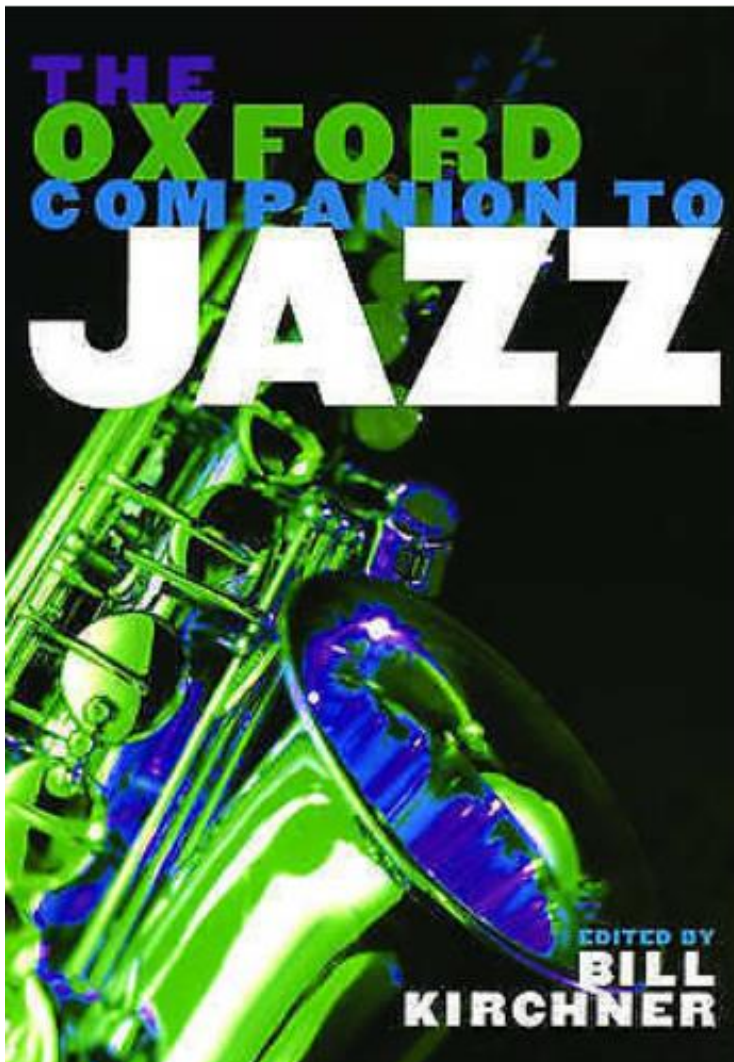
*The blues that Handy developed was twelve bars with the lyric and melody in AAB form, yet the lyric rarely utilised the full four bars. The space at the end of the line left room for fills which allowed commentary on what had just been said or provided a setup for the next line. The fills could be vocal or instrumental. While there are many variations, chiefly eight- or sixteen-bar compositions, the space for fills is a constant. What are known as blue notes are the flatted third, seventh, and*

*(in later years) fifth notes in the scale. The twelve measure blues chorus is, in its most basic form, based on only three chords I7, IV7, and V, though there are seemingly unlimited permutations - many of them quite sophisticated. How a singer or instrumentalist deals with this harmonic pattern, the blues notes, and the fills between phrases determines his or her effectiveness as a blues performer.*

But what do the blues mean to me? We know that the sounds made by the human voice are unique to that individual. When I consider I sound like no else among the seven billion souls on this planet, I am comforted in that knowledge (as others are!) and recognise that at the basis of the origins of jazz, each blues voice is also unique, and the goal of each musician and his instrument of choice is to find his own voice through that instrument. But blues are a communal music unlike Rock and Roll which is usually about a musician's revelation of self or watching a larger-than-life personality - Mick Jagger, Prince, Lou Reed, Freddie Mercury and Elvis Presley seem far larger than the music itself.

---

\*Bob Porter, *"The Blues In Jazz"*, *Oxford Companion To Jazz*, Ed Bill Kirchner, OUP, 2000, p 65.

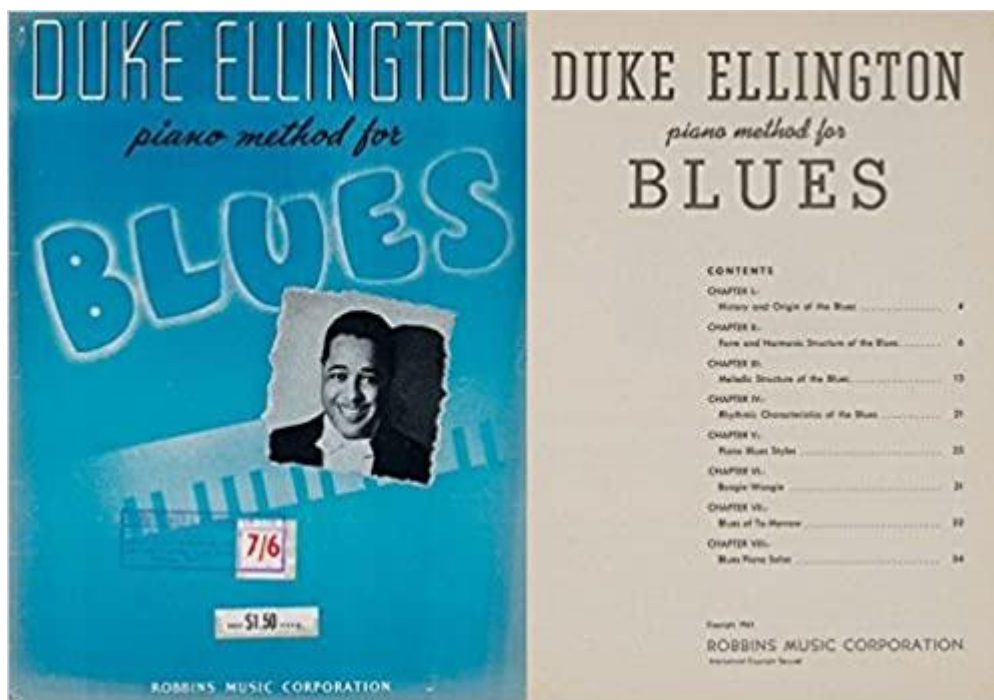




Ellington was well-known but his music looms so much larger than his personality does and he did as much as any other musician to propagate the blues to the widest possible audience.

*C Jam Blues*(Ellington); *Tishomingo Blues* (Williams); *Blues With A Feeling*(Ellington); *Bundle of Blues*(Ellington); *Immigration Blues* (Ellington); *The Blues I Love To Sing*(Ellington/Miley); *I Done Caught You Blues*(Porter Grainger); *Jack The Bear* (Ellington); *Hit Me In The Nose Blues*(Gray); *Mr J.B. Blues*(Blanton/Ellington); *Old Man Blues*(Ellington/Mills); *Limehouse Blues*,(Braham/Furber); *Blue Feeling*(Ellington); *Sepia Panorama* (Ellington); *Blue Goose*(Ellington) and the memorable *Across The Track Blues*(Ellington) used by Willis Conover to open his legendary jazz programme on Voice Of America, are a sample of the blues Ellington committed to record.

In 1943 Ellington collaborated with Billy Strayhorn on a book called *Duke Ellington Piano Method for Blues* (Robbins, London). In 1959 one of the finest instrumental blues records of all was recorded by Ellington at the height of the “new music” revolution and the emergence of the rock and roll phenomenon. What a year that was.



In 1959 Charles Mingus and his *Fables of Faubus* (Mingus) and other black consciousness and black politics music was on the far left, and Johnny Horton and *The Battle of New Orleans* (Driftwood) with its quote from the song *Dixie* (Emmett) in the first 12 notes, was on the far right. The *Battle Of New Orleans* was the bestselling record of all records released in the USA in 1959. *Dixie* is also a nickname for the slave-holding States that seceded to form the Confederate States of America (1861–65).

In 1959 Elvis Presley had four singles in the top 100. *Petite Fleur* (Bechet) by Chris Barber's Jazz Band was no 75. The jazz albums released that year included *Time Out* (Brubeck); *Jazz In Silhouette* (Sun Ra); *The Shape of Jazz to Come* (Coleman); *Giant Steps* (Coltrane); and *Kind Of Blue* (Davis). I can imagine Duke Ellington thinking: "Well, this is all well and good, and I'm in support, but let's not forget the real blues." And so he acted to record the blues with longtime associate Johnny (Rabbit) Hodges. The first records Hodges made on joining Ellington in 1928 were blues numbers, including *Tishomingo Blues* so once again they united to singularly satisfying effect, possibly at the instigation of Norman Granz famous for his musical productions often of disparate musicians, sometimes as a reminder of greatness. Duke Ellington and Johnny Hodges were clearly in that latter camp at a time when Ellington had advanced into longer forms including *The Drum Is A Woman* (brief musical history of jazz), *Such Sweet Thunder* (Shakespeare inspiration) and *The Nutcracker Suite*.

In 1959 Ellington (60) piano and Hodges (52) alto saxophone recorded 10 tracks of music. The seven blues numbers were used to make up one album: *Duke Ellington & Johnny Hodges Play The Blues Back To Back* (Verve). The accompanying musicians were Harry Edison (44) trumpet; Leslie Spann (27) guitar; Al Hall (44); Sam Jones (35) basses; and Jo Jones (48) drums. The programme was: *Wabash Blues* (Meinkin/Ringle); *Basin Street Blues* (Williams); *Beale Street Blues* (Handy); *Weary Blues* (Mathews); *St Louis Blues* (Handy); *Loveless Love* (Handy); and *Royal Garden Blues* (Williams/Williams). In terms of enjoyment and pleasure, the programme is the equal of the albums *Kind Of Blue* and *Giant Steps* and *Time Out*. Especially noteworthy about the music is the large role the Ellington's piano plays in the music with decisive chords, orchestration, and syncopated phrasing.



Overall the music breathes, and comes across as a very relaxed event in the hands of masters completely at ease in their performing. Even at slow tempo, the music swings. It is replete with the personal expression of the horn soloists, Edison and Hodges, in their bending and slurring, and maintains the blues mood throughout. The *Royal Garden Blues* is the only number in the programme based on the traditional 12-bar form. The album is a beautiful reminder of the blues in answer to the “modern” as exemplified in the major albums of that year such as *Time Out*.



*The horn soloists Edison (left) and Hodges (below), in their bending and slurring, maintain the blues mood throughout...HODGES PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST*





But interestingly, the avant garde album *Something Else!!!!* (Coleman) was also a reminder that the blues is central to jazz.



“Coleman restored blues to their ‘classic’ beginnings in African music and unhooked its harmonies. Whether the key was D flat, A, G, whatever, Coleman revisited the 17- and 25-bar blues. There are normal signatures, however, such as *Chippie* (Coleman) in F and in eight-bar form, and *(The Disguise)* is in D, but in a strange 13-bar form where the first and the last change places, altering the talking-like voice inherent in the melodic line.” (Thom Jurek, *AllMusic* review). Coleman was a Texan and his first professional work was playing rhythm and blues.

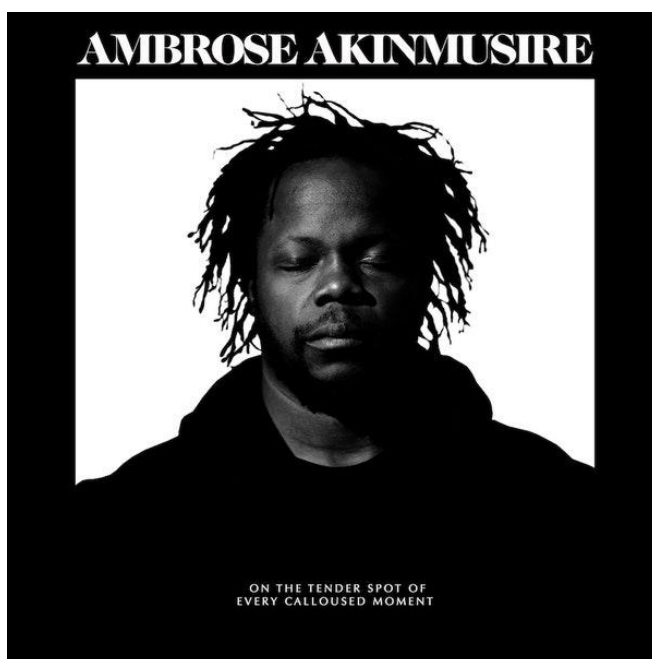
*WWTBL?* has been recorded live a number of times by some of the greats: Copenhagen, 1963, by The New York Contemporary Five; Lugano, Switzerland, 1999; by a trio of Paul Bley, piano; Gary Peacock, bass; and Paul Motian, drums; and San Francisco, 2004, by the SF Jazz Collective. The first has Archie Shepp, tenor; John Tchicai, alto; Don Cherry, trumpet; Don Moore, bass; and J C Moses, drums. The work features strong bass, solos from each of the horns, with Shepp demonstrating quite wide expression and range on his tenor. The second by the piano trio, begins with an up-tempo piano introduction followed by a long bass solo, restatement of the melody by piano, a change in tempo with a deconstruction of the melody by the bass and piano in conversation, an up-tempo unaccompanied piano restatement of the melody, drum solo, melody repeat, then stop. Again, the bass is felt as a power to reckon with. This 2019 ECM release has taken *When Will The Blues Leave* as its title (sans query mark). The SF Jazz Collective in 2004 was Nicholas Payton, trumpet; Bobby Hutcherson, vibraphone,

marimba; Brian Blade, drums; Renee Rosnes, piano; Josh Roseman, piano; Joshua Redman, tenor and soprano saxophones and artistic director; Miguel Zenon, alto saxophone; and Robert Hurst, bass. Their interpretation emphasises the melody in a joyous smooth up-beat tempo and chorus with a single solo by the trumpet player Nicholas Payton.



*Nicholas Payton... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZTIMES*

Ambrose Akinmusire released his esoterically named album *On The Tender Spot Of Every Calloused Moment* in June 2020. It's a quartet with the leader trumpet; Sam Harris, piano; Harish Raghavan, bass; and Justin Brown, drums. Genevieve Artadi and Jesus Diaz are guest vocalists. And the blues are central to the programme of originals.





Akinmusire is a very interesting representative of contemporary musicians reminiscent of those in the 1950s and 1960s - a highly intelligent, accomplished artist thoroughly engaged as a citizen of the world in which he lives - like Max Roach, Charles Mingus, Sonny Rollins for example, but especially John Coltrane in his manifestly serious approach to his art and the spiritual dimension he attached to it. Like Barney McAll, Matt Keegan, Phil Slater, Andrea Keller, Jeremy Rose, Julien Wilson, and Lloyd Swanton, Akinmusire is an artist immersed in his world and creatively responding to it, not simply performing or entertaining for art's sake, or continually looking back to the history of the music. In stylistic terms he claims to have been influenced by Clifford Brown and Booker Little and to my ear I'm reminded of Eugene Ball in his control, range, improvisatory skills, and artistry. His creative focus however is on his own compositions almost exclusively. For an insight into his attitude, a look at his initial offering on Blue Note is worthwhile. Apart from Barney McAll, I know of no Australian artist that would be so open in words about their work and references as McAll is to Jung, blood, Church, earth, sea etc. Most Australians fear appearing po-faced as the likes of John Pochée would take the piss out of them. Akinmusire is like Coltrane but unlike Coltrane is more overtly political in the way he directly references political issues especially those impacting African Americans.



*Ambrose Akinmusire: unlike Coltrane he is more overtly political in the way he directly references political issues especially those impacting African Americans....*  
PHOTO CREDIT JOE KOHEN NY TIMES

Here are the words that accompanied Akinmusire's first Blue Note album *when THE HEART Emerges glistening* (Blue Note) 2011:

*'when the heart emerges glistening' refers to being present, emotionally invested, honest - not exclusively in our art, but in every act of **expression**. It is*

about parting our chests to reveal ourselves to one another and to ourselves, to express/reflect honestly the 'everything' of us - the ugly, the changing, the vulnerable, the fierce, the solid, the safe. The heart glistens because the heart is wet, it is fresh. With every act of expression, it is a newly excavated heart. So that, through LISTENING closely, we are ultimately chronicling every present moment, and constantly re-examining our changing selves. In being ourselves in this way, we connect more deeply with one another. The many sides of this album itself are testament to our complexity and uniqueness as individuals, and the imperative to bare and explore honestly every coexisting side of us.

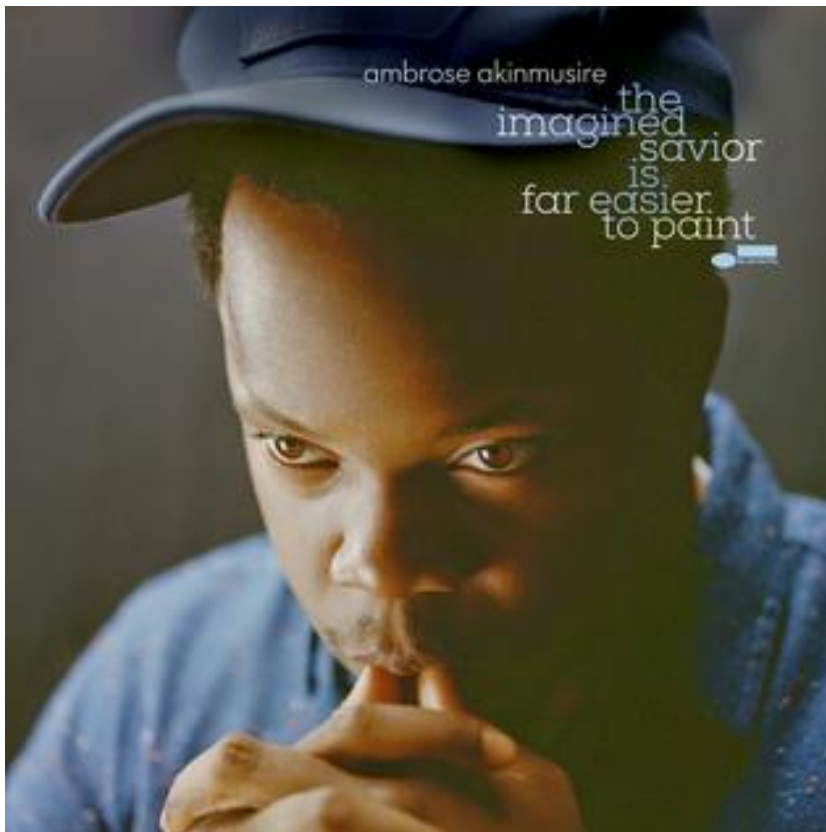


To provide added emphasis to his attitude, the Hayden Miller cover design for the album features Akinmusire in a suit and white formal shirt, tieless, standing with eyes closed as if reflecting or in prayer, with an illustration of his chest exploding. The titles of the original compositions - *Confessions To My Unborn Daughter*, *With Love*, and *Tear Stained Suicide Manifesto* for example - do not suggest a jolly trip down memory lane.

Drenched in sincerity he is lyrical and tender on *Confessions*, which closes with a climactic trumpet shout of joy; he demonstrates dexterity and passion on *Henya*; he shows amazing control on sustaining notes on *With Love*; fine expressive control in a duo with the pianist on *Regret (no more)*; and surprises us with his voice backed just by emotionally powerful and finely timed drumming including great bass drum work on *My Name Is Oscar*. Though not called 'poetry' its voicing, simplicity and presentation make it so. Single words or phrases build considerable power over the presentation of the piece: "My name is Oscar....Human. Apology. 19 days. I am

you. Oakland. We are the same. Don't shoot. My name is Oscar, My name is Oscar, (repeat and fade)". So beyond the spiritual and heartfelt sincerity of connecting with another, Akinmusire also addresses political issues connected to the Black Power Movement which has reemerged since the sixties. The Rodney King shooting happened a year after this album was released.

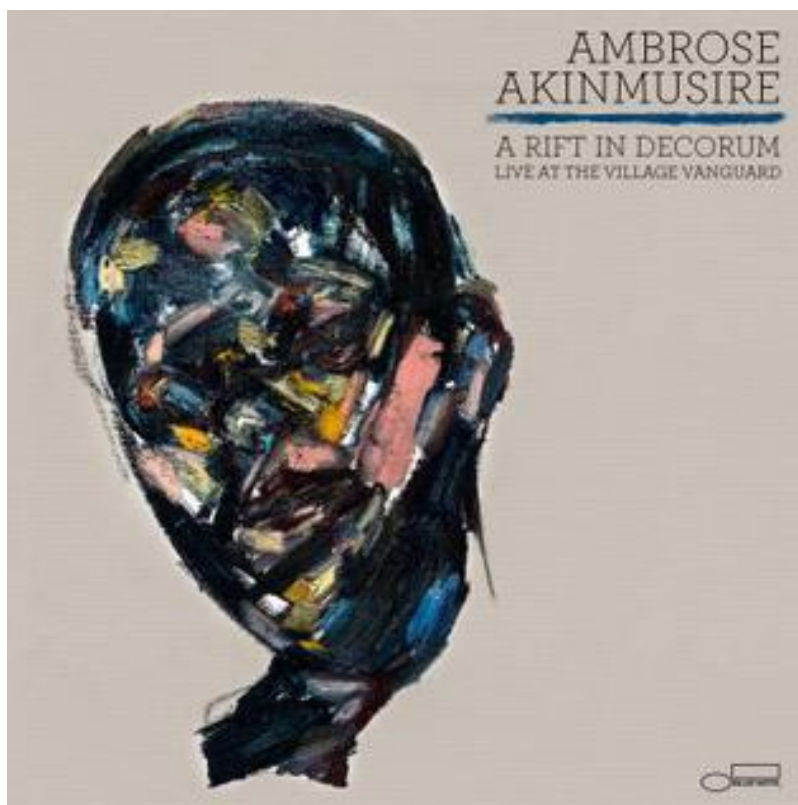
The musicians on *when THE HEART Emerges glistening* are Akinmusire, trumpet, voice; Justin Brown, drums; Gerald Clayton, piano; Harish Raghavan, bass; and Walter Smith III, tenor. There is one standard: *What's New* (Haggart/Burke) which has also been recorded by Billie Holiday, John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, Dexter Gordon, Betty Carter, Woody Shaw and Bennie Wallace.



His second release was *the imagined saviour is far easier to paint* (Blue Note) 2014. It is a programme of 13 originals, including one by vocalist Becca Stevens *Our Basement* (ed) and the remainder by the leader with one *Asiam* (joan) with lyrics and vocal by Theo Bleckmann and another *Ceaseless Inexhaustible Child* (cynthia brown) with lyrics and vocal by Somali-Canadian, Cold Specks. She is known for her "doom soul" music. "The name Cold Specks is taken from a line in James Joyce's *Ulysses* 'Born all in the dark wormy earth, cold specks of fire, evil, lights shining in the darkness.' (Wikipedia). Although there is nothing musically remarkable compared to the impact of the first album, it does continue the broad scope of musical interests that fuels Akinmusire's creative appetite. A string quartet is featured on three compositions. A sextet comprising Akinmusire on trumpet; Walter Smith, tenor; Sam Harris, piano; Charles Altura, guitar; Harish Raghavan,

bass; and Justin Brown, drums is on four tracks. On *Inflatedbyspinning*, which closes the programme, flautist Elena Pinderhughes and violinist Maria Im are supported by a string quartet. There are no liner notes or message from Akinmusire but the photo of him which adorns the album cover is a closeup headshot with him in baseball cap ruminating with clenched hands and the tips of both thumbs between his lips.

The Village Vanguard is for jazz as La Scala is for opera. The Vanguard is also perhaps a rite of passage for jazz artists signalling arrival at the top. Akinmusire produced, led, composed and arranged all works for his album *A Rift In Decorum* recorded live from an engagement at the Vanguard probably over more than one night with the best numbers selected for release on a double CD. The band was his regulars: himself on trumpet; Sam Harris, piano; Harish Raghavan, bass; and Justin Brown, drums, colleagues he's been performing with for nearly a decade. The first thing one is aware of is the tone of the proceedings, which is different to that of the great Louis Armstrong for example, or even Duke Ellington, where both those greats played to the audience and played up to the audience each in their different ways. It's the opposite to most rock and roll which has little to do with music and much to do with theatre, noise, and performance.



Most performances in this hallowed Vanguard would be traditional in the sense that they would open with an attention grabbing piece, usually fast and loud, as the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra would tend to do which is quite normal in most jazz performances wherever they may be. It's also the case, and tends to be the case, that musicians in live performance want to show off their chops or respond to



encouragement with longer solos, higher notes, or louder choruses. Paul Gonsalves at Newport 1956 or James Carter at Newport 2019 are obvious instances. It's quite a natural performer/audience interaction. In concert with his whole approach Ambrose Akinmusire is an artist who eschews any obvious concession to entertaining the audience. Nor does he throw in a "standard" to satisfy the more seasoned jazz *aficionados*. He seems to set the scene for serious, beautiful, deeply felt music and that's what he delivers.

*A RIFT IN DECORUM Live At The Village Vanguard* (Blue Note) 2017 has some arresting artwork on the cover featuring a human head in broad blacks and pinks presumably of Akinmusire. The document was produced by the leader and he composed all the 16 works in the programme. Noteworthy in the page of dedications is Chamber Music America. The band is: Akinmusire, trumpet; Sam Harris, piano; Harish Raghavan, bass; and Justin Brown, drums, all in their 30s.

Most works are played at a *Adagietto* or *Andante* tempo though one of the most beautiful: *Moment in between the rest (to curve an ache)* may even be at *Lento*. This work is perhaps the highlight of the programme. With two continually repeated percussive piano notes akin to the viola C in pitch under the trumpet. The trumpet solo begins in subdued delicacy, in the middle range, and Akinmusire holds some notes so long one wonders if he's circular breathing. I can't recall a more beautiful trumpet solo at such tempo and pitch, built in such a way that gives such restrained power to quietness, to peace. Underneath this the throbbing bass and piano provides the perfect support with Brown providing some dramatic cymbal splashes at critical times. It really is a remarkable ten minutes of music.



*Pianist Sam Harris (above) is a composer and leader in his own right, closest to Andrew Hill in his approach to pianism... PHOTO CREDIT DAVE KAUFMAN*



Pianist Harris is a composer and leader in his own right and has played with Australian Linda May Han Oh, as well as Kurt Elling, Vijay Iyer, Greg Osby, Julian Lage and Gerald Clayton. He has been part of Akinmusire's working group for a number of years and Harris comments that Akinmusire "gives everyone in that group the freedom to be themselves. I never felt like I had to prove anything.... which is a very liberating feeling when you're a sideman." To my ear, Harris seems closest to Andrew Hill in his approach to pianism.



*Harish Raghavan: there is a real darkness to Harish Raghavan's tone, a rich mahogany that is at turns warm and undulatingly forceful...PHOTO CREDIT HOTEL GAGLIARDETTA*

Harish Raghavan began playing the Mridanga but switched to bass at aged 17. He began recording in 2005. He has performed or toured with Kurt Elling, Taylor Eigsti, Vijay Iyer, Eric Harland, Mark Turner, Aaron Parks, Greg Osby, Billy Childs, Benny Green, Geoffry Keezer, Terrell Stafford, Mike Moreno, Marcus Gilmore, Walter Smith III, among others. Ammar Kalia comments on his playing: "there is a real darkness to Harish Raghavan's tone, a rich mahogany that is at turns warm and undulatingly forceful; his precise rhythms and soft melodies emerge from a studied profundity. It's a thoughtful tone, one that reflects the measured patience of its maker..." (*Downbeat*, 6/11/19) He released his first album as leader in 2019 titled *Calls For Action* (Whirlwind).

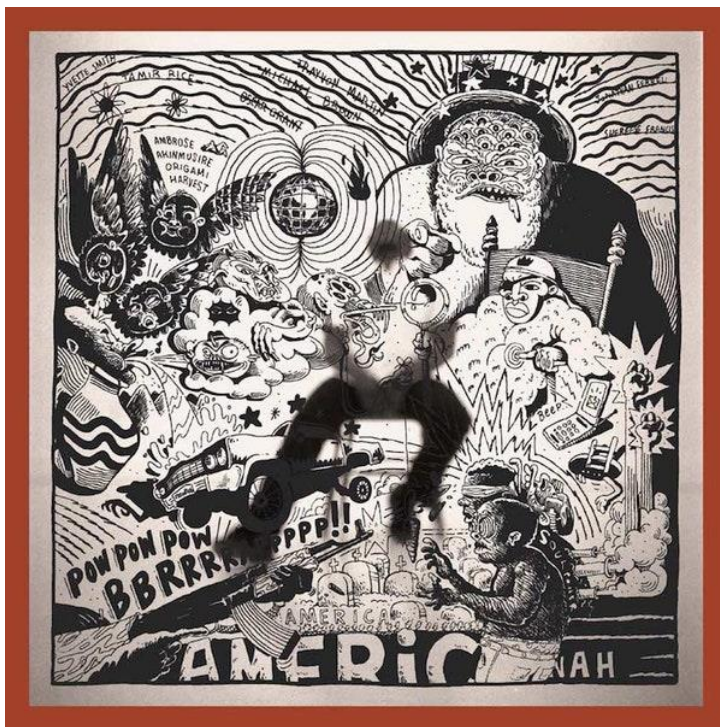


*Justin Brown... PHOTO COURTESY DRUMMERWORLD FORUM*

Drummer Justin Brown was born in Richmond, California. He started playing drums in church when he was two years old. At the age of ten, he went on to study at UC Berkeley's Young Musicians Summer Program and continued his studies there for seven more years. He has played with Vijay Iyer, Flying Lotus, and Thundercat among many others. Giovanni Russonello has said of Brown: "You can ... hear ... a gentle reminder that gospel music lies near the heart of American popular music: The taut, thwacked, polyrhythmic musculature of African-American church drumming offers depth and flexibility across styles" (*New York Times* 27/6/18). In short, these are thoughtful, dedicated, committed modern artists in the full meaning of "this music is as serious as your life".

This working quartet has been together a decade. In overall performance there is no obvious predominance in terms of length of solos, or focus on one instrument to the exclusion of others. It's a marriage of equals. On *Taymoor's World* (Akinmusire), *Response* (Akinmusire) and *Brooklyn* (Akinmusire) the piano is a powerful presence in the arrangement and on *First Page (Shabnam's poem)* (Akinmusire) provides delightful cascading repetitious runs under the trumpet solo to singular effect. On *Song To exhale to (diver song)* (Akinmusire) the arco bass provides a moody base for the work and a thudding cataclysmic and plucked solo on *Withered* (Akinmusire). The percussive chorus of piano, bass and drums is notable on *Trumpet Sketch (milky pete)* (Akinmusire). The percussion of Brown dominates in the closing pieces of the programme. The double CD is a very fine record of one of the finest modern small groups at the height of its powers. His next Blue Note production was a melange of modernity and musical genres.

*Origami Harvest* (Blue Note) 2018 is produced, composed, arranged, and led by Akinmusire. The players are: Akinmusire trumpet, keyboard, whistle, words; Kool A D, vocals; Mivos String Quartet; Sam Harris, piano and keyboards; and guests; Michael Aalberg, keyboards (1); LMBR-JCK T, vocal and lyrics (4); Walter Smith III, tenor sax and EFX (3). Not shown-Marcus Gilmore, drums. It was a work commissioned by Ecstatic Music Festival and Kate Nordstrum of St Paul's Liquid Music Series. *Downbeat* gave it five stars. To me it doesn't work and I don't think rap lovers, classical musical lovers, or jazz lovers could be enthusiastic about it. Having said that, I'm from hicksville (Coffs Harbour) and New York is New York. The illustrations on the cover of the CD by modern illustrator/artist Joonbug probably have a strong appeal to 20 something comic loving hipsters of that sophisticated burg.



Akinmusire wrote that the work is intended as a study in extremes: masculine/feminine, high/low art, passivity/aggression, free improvisation/controlled calculation, American ghettos/American affluence, Hip Hop/classical. In a large sense, the programme is decidedly political and is concerned with the theatre of performance as opposed to the live Vanguard date. It's an ideal presentation for live performance at an arts festival, but as a permanent record for a music lover, it's very much a mixed bag and unlikely to be the source for a regular listen by either classical music enthusiasts, jazz lovers or rap lovers. I imagine, however, it would be hip to own a copy and have it on display in your crib in New York or to be able to talk about it at the next art exhibition opening as it is very much a dip into the contemporary art zeitgeist. Bringing "everything" together is a nice idea but multiculturalism works better than assimilation does. Besides the programme come across as performance rather than the communal experience central to the blues and jazz which Akinmusire so tellingly demonstrated in his Vanguard date.



*On The Tender Spot Of Every Calloused Moment* (Blue Note) 2020 presents 11 new compositions: *Tide of Hyacinth*, *Yessss*, *Cynical Sideliners*, *Mr Roscoe* (consider the simultaneous), *An Interlude* (that get' more intense), *reset* (quiet victories & celebrated defeats), *Moon* (the return amplifies the unity), *4623*, *Roy*, *Blues* (We measure the heart with a fist), and *Hooded procession* (read the names outloud).



*Ambrose Akinmusire: a highly intelligent, accomplished artist thoroughly engaged as a citizen of the world in which he lives... PHOTO CREDIT TIM DICKESON*

The programme's theme is anti-racism, and its means of communication is the blues. The passion is evident. *Reset* is trumpet that is powerful and tender and short. The *Tide of Hyancith* trumpet solo is powerful and longer and intriguing with chanting by the rhythm players. *Yesss* is more evidence of the trumpeter's ability for passionate controlled expression at ballad tempo. The programme comes to a close with a fitting climax of dark piano featured on *Hooded procession* (read the names outloud). *Roy* is a tribute to Roy Hargrove who passed on 2/11/18.



*Roy Hargrove (left) who passed on 2/11/18...*



To ask the question *When Will The Blues Leave?* is to imply a number of things typical of Coleman's ambiguity. Firstly it suggests the speaker has the blues and in that case the blues will leave when he expresses the feeling for them through music. Secondly it suggests the blues are a universal condition of humanity and the answer is they ain't going nowhere. Thirdly, it alludes to their foundation in jazz and the evolution of the music into abstract and European Western musics and, much like a recessive gene, will the blues fade away? On the evidence of the great young artist Ambrose Akinmusire's live Vanguard documents and the document *On The Tender Spot Of Every Calloused Moment* the blues are a lived musical expression of the finest artists of the music.



*Charlie Parker, the great man himself...*

In my case when I'm feeling blue the music of these artists brings me not just succour, but joy. When away from the music and feeling blue I voice the opening to *Parker's Mood* (Parker) as played by the great man himself.

---