

McLean's Scene: Jackie McLean as Improviser, Educator and Activist


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McLean's Scene: Jackie McLean as Improviser, Educator, and Activist

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In a career spanning nearly sixty years, the alto saxophonist and composer Jackie McLean (1931-2006) developed a model of collaborative and socially engaged pedagogy that was to prove enormously fruitful, both for his own career and for those of the younger musicians who came into his sphere of activities.

Based on a rigorous musicianship essential to Afrological¹ forms of improvisation, an uncommon depth and breadth of experience, professional ties to seminal artists like Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, and Ornette Coleman, and a personal self-confidence which allowed for a radical openness, McLean was able to integrate performance, pedagogy, and sociocultural advocacy into a uniquely coherent whole which was much greater than the sum of its parts. His process was opportunistic in the best sense of that word, and it was improvisational.

My research for this paper draws from a wide variety of sources including scholarly literature from the emerging field of jazz studies as well as older and less formal jazz histories and criticism, archival materials such as McLean's commercial recordings and their associated liner notes, formal interviews (which I conducted with McLean in 2000), and many informal conversations that took place from 1996-2000, during which time I audited several of McLean's undergraduate courses at the University of Hartford.² Special mention should be made of Ken Levis's 1976 documentary *Jackie McLean On Mars*, which provided me with particularly valuable insights into the nature of McLean's early work as a community activist and educator. McLean's own comments, whether in response to an interviewer or in the form of liner notes, while not representing a comprehensive picture of his activities and thinking, nevertheless, are especially important for a tightly focused study of this kind which attempts to examine the manifold of an artist's life against the background of the artistic developments and broader cultural currents of his time. In identifying and exploring some of the main themes or "scenes" of McLean's musical practice, encompassing improvisation, education, and activism, I hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of the powerful cultural space delineated by this musician.

Video excerpts from *Jackie McLean on Mars* (Levis 1976)

- [clip one \(0:57 min.\)](#)
- [clip two \(1:13 min.\)](#)
- [clip three \(1:32 min.\)](#)

McLean's Early Career

The astonishing pace of McLean's early professional development can be understood not only in terms of his strong work ethic and his determination to immerse himself in the improvised music of the period, but also as a response to the creative matrix in which he found himself. As a young man growing up in Harlem in the late 1940s and 1950s, during one of the most fertile periods in the history of American music, McLean was soon challenging himself to keep up with the extraordinary musicians by whom he was welcomed and with whom he was invited to play.³ Arguably, the self-awareness and self-confidence that would be invaluable to him throughout his career was rooted in these early Harlem experiences.

In the early stages of his career, from around 1950 to 1962, McLean's linear/harmonic language as an improviser and a composer was most significantly influenced by the music of Charlie Parker and Bud Powell. Of his relationship with Powell, McLean later said:

Bud was the most significant person in terms of my development in my early years [. . .] The time I spent hanging around his house between 15 and 17 were very important, formative years for me. I think my growth and development happened because I was in his presence. (Primack 38)

The kind of learning that took place in Powell's house was not in the form of formal lessons:

A lot of people have the idea he was giving me theory lessons. That wasn't it at all. I heard him practice a lot, play a lot. He also let me take my horn out and play along with him. He taught me some things he was writing, kind of coached me along. (Primack 38)

Years later in his own classes at the University of Hartford, McLean would indeed teach music theory, but his teaching style would remain informed by these early experiences with Bud Powell's hands-on approach.

Powell's pervasive influence, and also that of Charlie Parker, can be heard on *Dig* (1951) and *Miles Davis Vol. 1* (1952), McLean's first recordings as a featured soloist with Miles Davis. Here, McLean demonstrates an internalized understanding of the rhythmic and harmonic concepts put forth by Charlie Parker and his contemporaries, and he often incorporates direct quotations from Parker and Powell's recorded solos into his improvisations. During this period, McLean was also developing the unique sound which would separate him from other alto saxophonists.

The timbre of McLean's alto on the early Miles Davis recordings is marked by a noticeable dryness and incisiveness, accentuated, in part, by an extremely precise sense of rhythm and by phrasing that is uncommonly severe. McLean, who admired the playing of Lester Young, Ben Webster, and Dexter Gordon, attributes this unusual sound to his early determination to make his alto sound like a tenor. (This was his characteristically resourceful response when his mother refused to provide him with a tenor saxophone.)⁴ McLean continued to refine and cultivate his unique sound on the alto saxophone and by the late 1950s had established what is considered one of the most easily recognizable instrumental sounds on any instrument in African-American creative music.

The Avant-Garde Scene

In the early 1960s, McLean began to expand the breadth of his musical interests. While his apprenticeship under the iconoclastic bassist/composer Charles Mingus influenced his music during this period, even more significant was McLean's growing awareness of the work of musicians like Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor. McLean also began to think about his improvisational and compositional output in relation to his cultural and political milieu. In the liner notes for his 1962 album *Let Freedom Ring*, McLean cites Coleman's influence: "Today I am going through a big change compositionwise, and in improvising. Ornette Coleman has made me stop and think. He has stood up under much criticism, yet he never gives up his course, freedom of expression. The search is on."

This was the first instance in which McLean chose to write his own liner notes and it seems clear that he was aware of the power that such self-representation could afford him. During an interview for National Public Radio, he explained to Terry Gross that his album's title, *Let Freedom Ring*, was intended to show the connection between the freedom demonstrated by creative improvisers and that sought by civil rights activists. In articulating his support for the civil rights movement in this manner, McLean aligned himself with musicians like Max Roach, Abbey Lincoln, and Archie Shepp, all of whom used their commercial recordings to advance political agendas.⁵

While McLean did adopt what he perceived to be Coleman's political and philosophical stance, the music on *Let Freedom Ring* is not as close to Ornette Coleman's musical universe as the liner notes would indicate. It is, in fact, much closer to the music of John Coltrane's quartet, which included McCoy Tyner and Elvin Jones. Not until the late 1960s was the influence of Coleman's music evident in McLean's improvisational and compositional style. (See, for example, McLean's *Action*, recorded in 1965, and *New and Old Gospel*, recorded with Ornette Coleman in 1967.) Like Mary Lou Williams in the 1940s, who endorsed the music of Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell long before her music would show their influence, McLean seemed to need time to work out the implications of Coleman's music for his own.⁶

McLean further commented on this evolution in his practice in a 1996 interview for Ken Burns's PBS documentary *Jazz*:

My band made a transition in the 1960s [. . .] John F. Kennedy was blown away in 1963, Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, all of this assassination went on. The cities were burning. The civil rights movement was going on; people were screaming, the Vietnamese

Like many other African-American musicians during the 1960s, McLean responded to such events by using music and his reputation as a musician to support activist organizations.⁷ Throughout the 1960s, he organized and performed in benefit concerts for the Black Panthers up and down the East Coast, and he raised money for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and performed during the Newark riots in 1967.⁸ This participation began a commitment to social action that McLean would maintain throughout his life.

In the end, based, in part, on a shared sense of the political potential of their music, but also on the “radical openness” which was characteristic of McLean, he was able to forge meaningful professional and personal relationships with Coleman and others associated with the 1960s avant-garde in a way that almost no other musician of his generation would. (One important exception is composer/percussionist Max Roach.) Both Ornette Coleman and Rashied Ali, for example, recorded for Blue Note in 1967 as sidemen under McLean’s leadership. McLean points out that while he admires Coleman’s music for its freshness and its contemporaneity, he does not view it as radically divergent: “It’s just good music or bad [. . .] The same way with Ornette. They hung the ‘New Thing’ title on Trane and Ornette but is Ornette any newer than Charlie Parker? I don’t think Ornette thinks so” (Spellman 233).

This ability to conceptualize Ornette’s music as a necessary evolution, as opposed to a break from the concepts put forth by Charlie Parker, may have allowed McLean to expand his musical language much more successfully than most other prominent musicians of his generation. In turn, by integrating members of the avant-garde into his working ensembles, McLean gave these emerging musicians a certain credibility with more traditional stylists, some of whom eventually began to change their own practice.

As author and jazz critic A.B. Spellman points out in his seminal *Four Lives in the Bebop Business*:

[McLean’s] conversion, if it may be called that, gave the avant-garde an enormous boost when most of his contemporaries were screaming “fraud” [. . .] He was looked up to as someone who had paid his dues [. . .] So when he adapted his music to enter the avant-garde, he took with him some of the promising young musicians who had not developed a fixed concept in their own work. (230)

Alto saxophonists Gary Bartz and Eric Person were two younger musicians deeply influenced by McLean’s embrace of the 1960s avant-garde. Here is Bartz: “I always trusted [McLean]. If he said ‘I’m really looking into this new stuff,’ I wanted to look into it too” (Panken 14).

And Person:

[Jackie McLean] had a great impact on me because he showed all that you needed to be great in jazz. McLean stepped from under the wings of Charlie Parker not by discarding the bop or blues language, but by augmenting it with the freer expression of the avant-garde. (56)

In addition to influencing young musicians like Bartz and Person, McLean also integrated into his performing and recording ensembles several up-and-coming improviser/composers, including drummers Tony Williams and Jack DeJohnette, trumpeters Charles Tolliver and Wood Shaw, vibraphonist Bobby Hutcherson, pianists Larry Willis and Hilton Ruiz, and trombonist Grachan Moncur III, bringing them to the attention of the international jazz community.⁹ Even after he began to work as an educator in more formal academic settings, McLean continued throughout his entire career to use his performing ensembles to provide what George Lewis has referred to as “an explicit pedagogical nurturance,” developing a kind of “hybrid pedagogical experience and musical practice” (“Teaching” 91).¹⁰

However, at the same time that McLean was making these significant creative strides and becoming, in many ways, a role model for a younger generation of musicians, he was, like many other musicians at that time, also negotiating the negative effects of an ongoing struggle with heroin addiction. He had begun using the drug around 1948, at the age of seventeen, and by 1957 had been arrested several times and briefly incarcerated for possession of illegal narcotics. As a result, his cabaret card was revoked, making it illegal for him to perform in New York City clubs, even as a sideman, during the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. He continued to record for Blue Note and to perform as both a leader and a sideman outside of New York, but as he explained in the 1976 Ken Levis documentary *Jackie McLean On Mars*, the loss of his

cabaret card put him “on another course.”

In 1959 McLean was asked to act and perform in the Living Theater production of Jack Gelber’s *The Connection*, an experimental play about a group of heroin-addicted drifters, some of them musicians, waiting for the arrival of their dealer. McLean performed in *The Connection* until 1961, traveling outside of the United States for the first time when the play went to London in 1960 and later working with experimental filmmaker/director Shirley Clarke on a film adapted from the play. In addition to introducing him to new communities of experimental artists, McLean’s involvement in *The Connection*, which offered parallels between his own life and the character he depicted, may have led him to think differently about his own experience with substance abuse in a milieu where musicians were often involved with drugs. It may also have helped him to eventually overcome his addiction and to become involved with addiction prevention programs in a variety of settings.

After leaving the Living Theater in 1961, McLean began to work with young people in African-American communities throughout New York City. He worked with incarcerated youth as a bandmaster in a penitentiary and also contributed to programs like Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited-Associated Community Teams (HARYOU-ACT) and Robert Kennedy’s “Mobilization for Youth” initiative, where he remained for almost five years.¹¹ In the documentary film *Jackie McLean on Mars*, McLean observes: “This was the first job that I had in town that I liked a little bit [. . .] [I] worked with kids two or three afternoons a week and I got a salary for it.”

McLean’s decision to work with troubled young people was, in part, a response to his need to find alternative sources of income after the loss of his cabaret card in 1957. However, it must also be understood as another instance of McLean’s ability to respond, constructively and resourcefully, to personal and professional challenges. In this respect, McLean’s ingenuity can be viewed as akin to his improvisational gifts as a musician: a positive response to change, opportunistic/creative solutions to problems that presented themselves, an orientation to social cooperation, and a careful attention to process. In spite of the addiction to heroin, from which he did not fully recover until 1964, and the consequent loss of his cabaret card, McLean was able to avoid a downward spiral. During this period he continued to earn a living, he maintained his commitment to social activism on behalf of the African-American community, and he began to lay the groundwork for a career in teaching that he would later effectively integrate with his work as a composer/performer.

The Academic Scene

In 1968, McLean began his association with the University of Hartford. He first worked as a drug counselor, drawing credibility from his own experiences. Then, after being approached by students who were dissatisfied with the school’s Eurocentric music curriculum, he began teaching classes in music history and improvisation.¹² Like many other African-American creative musicians of his generation, McLean’s move into academia was directly connected to the black student activist movement of the late 1960s. Responding to the demand for Black Studies curricula, many major universities, including the University of Hartford, began to hire African-American artists and scholars in increasing numbers.¹³ It is important to note that, in many cases, the first African-American musicians to make the move into academia in the late 1960s were those who had already demonstrated a deep connection to community activism and the civil rights movement. For example, Horace Tapscott joined the University of California, Riverside music faculty in 1968; Archie Shepp joined the SUNY Buffalo faculty in 1969; and Jackie McLean became part of the Hartt School of music faculty in 1970.

In the WGBH 89.7 radio series *Jazz Portraits*, McLean remembered that in spite of his enormous credibility as a musician, and more than five years of teaching experience in community-based organizations, he at first felt ill-prepared for teaching at the university level:

When I arrived at the Hartt School of Music to teach a history course, I told them, I said “Look, I don’t know anything about anything except what I experienced.” And I talked to other musicians, they said “Well, that’s what they’re hiring you for, man. They don’t expect you to talk about ragtime and all that [. . .] go with what you know. Build a course around your experiences.” So that’s what I did in the beginning.

However, though McLean’s early teaching relied heavily on the authority afforded to him through his close personal and professional ties to many of the seminal figures in the history of African-American creative

music and, in fact, on his own direct experience, he would soon feel the need to possess a more comprehensive understanding of the history of that music. By the early 1970s, he had taken it upon himself to learn about African-American musicians from earlier generations—Fats Waller and Jelly Roll Morton, among others—to be better equipped to teach his classes at the University of Hartford. In *Jazz Portraits*, McLean talks about his decision to have his teaching encompass more than just his personal experience:

[I remember thinking that] it won't be bad if I find out what came before me, and maybe I need to find that out. And I was very happy that I did it because what came before me really made my [musical] style mellow and blossom and it made me more comfortable, and it also pointed to where I should go.

McLean's decision to investigate traditions of music from before 1945 and its subsequent effect on his playing, as well as his teaching, provide one more example of the ways in which he was able to integrate his work as an educator with his work as an improviser/composer.

In the film *Jackie McLean on Mars*, McLean states:

I have been through several levels of the music business. I came out and went through the 50s and made whatever name I have, and in the 60s. And it's just the same thing out there now [. . .] You're just either playing or you're not playing. And when you're not playing then you got to worry about how you're going to pay your bills and a lot of things. And I don't want to go through that anymore [. . .] Personally, I see a little security at the university [. . .] I was interested in getting out of just playing every night. I wanted to go somewhere where I could perpetuate some concepts from another vantage point and not always just on the bandstand.

Here, McLean demonstrates his construction of the move to academia in positive terms, as an opportunity to find the institutional support that can free his creativity from the vagaries and pressures of the jazz marketplace, rather than as a step that is being forced upon him by financial necessity. While making another comment, in *Jackie McLean on Mars*, he is even more explicit about the advantages of his new role:

I feel like an exploited poor musician in 1976 [. . .] And I also feel like a professor of [music] history at the University of Hartford. If I feel good about anything, it's about being able to turn down jobs that are offered to me for scale and below which I was forced to take at other times. That's what I feel good about.

In fact, McLean also felt good about, and increasingly committed to, functioning as Professor McLean. He became increasingly confident and successful in academia, and he soon began to make changes in the institutional setting within which he had created his niche. When he had arrived at the University of Hartford in 1968, African-American music was not accorded the same respect as Western European classical music:

[T]hese were the terms that were thrown at me when I arrived on the academic scene: "legitimate music," "serious music." Making an inference that music that wasn't Western classical music wasn't serious or wasn't legitimate. So I have used that term. What they call "jazz," I call that a classical music. It's an American classical music. (*Jackie McLean on Mars*)

But McLean wanted to do more than just change the labels and categories he encountered at the University of Hartford. Having quickly caught on to the academic game, he saw that his contributions to the University of Hartford would only have continuing meaning and real impact if his efforts were integrated into academic hierarchies at the departmental level, and if he himself became a tenured member of the faculty. By the middle of the 1970s he had established one of the first university departments of African-American Music, bringing in pianist/composer Jaki Byard and saxophonist/composer Paul Jeffries as additional faculty, an achievement that was especially significant within the context of academic politics in the 1970s. Eric Porter describes it in the following manner:

Teaching positions were often temporary or part-time and could be contingent upon uncertain funding sources and academic politics. Some musicians recognized that their inclusion on an academic faculty smacked of tokenism, while others found that their own notions of jazz education could not easily be transposed from informal networks to collegiate settings.¹⁴ (234-35)

McLean's gift for teaching and his reputation beyond academia, no doubt, were crucially important to the success of the new department, which was soon established as a degree granting entity. His teaching style, always rooted in his own experiences, by then also included more theoretical and critical approaches, and he very effectively engaged and inspired his students, but he also perpetuated a traditional apprentice-based model of music teaching and learning. Just as he had spent as much time as possible with Bud Powell and Charlie Parker, so too did many of McLean's students, myself included, make any excuse to spend an additional few moments in his presence.¹⁵ In his book, *Thinking in Jazz*, Paul Berliner cites one unidentified young saxophonist on the value of his personal relationship with McLean:

More than anything specific, it was a matter of Jackie McLean being a model for me [. . .] It had to do with his personality, too, his sense of humor about life. He was always so positive that just to have a word from him was enough to send me home to practice for hours. It was enough to keep me going until the next time I saw him again. (41)

McLean presented information formally through meticulously organized lectures, but it was his personal anecdotes, his overwhelming openness about his own perceived shortcomings as a saxophonist, and his commitment to his students and subject matter that made his classes a kind of educational experience which went beyond what was usually available in a university setting. In drawing from a continuum of teaching devices and ignoring the binary that normally separates institutional and non-institutional traditions of pedagogy, McLean's African-American music program was emblematic of educator/improviser Willie Ruff's "conservatory without walls" ideal.¹⁶ Certainly his own ongoing connections to non-academic communities, both as an active performer and as a community activist, helped McLean in "extending the academic concept to incorporate what's happening outside of its walls" (Lewis, "Teaching" 91).

Just as McLean sought to situate his music in its cultural context with albums like *Let Freedom Ring*, and through his highly visible support for the Black Panthers and SNCC, so, too, did he make a concerted effort to integrate his commitment to the African-American community into his teaching. For him, education was never a one-way process. Always opening up his classes to dialog, he helped his students to ground their study of music in contemporary realities. In *Jackie McLean on Mars*, he remembers coming up against resistance when discussing the ways in which music could be influenced by its wider context:

One night, I made the subject matter [of my class at the University of Hartford] the death of John F. Kennedy and one of my bright students raised his hand [. . .] and he couldn't see where this was relevant to my subject matter. And I explained to him that the government and what it perpetuates is a reflection of what the art form is. And surely in Nazi Germany they didn't have any John Coltranes because they outlawed certain art forms and burned certain books and that was it [. . .] And I saw the death of John F. Kennedy as being very relevant [. . .] to where the art was going in this country.

In choosing to incorporate cultural history into his courses on the history and performance of African-American music, McLean was in the vanguard of what would become a fruitful rapprochement between cultural studies and music education. In fact, McLean's description of his student's resistance to his discussion of John F. Kennedy's death recalls George Lewis's account of the music department at the University of California, San Diego in the 1990s where opposition to critical thinking was heard in the students' frequent question: "why do we have to do all this talking? Why can't we just play music?" (Lewis, "Teaching" 94).

McLean continued his culturally situated teaching of music history, and what is now the Jackie McLean Institute of Jazz at the Hartt School of Music has since produced scores of internationally recognized musicians, including saxophonists Antoine Roney, Thomas Chapin, Sue Terry, Abraham Burton, Jimmy Greene, and Lee Rozie, drummer Eric McPherson, trombonist Steve Davis, guitarist Kevin O'Neil, and bassist Nat Reeves, making its own contribution to music history.

The Collective Scene

In 1970, while teaching full-time at the University of Hartford, McLean, in partnership with his wife Dollie and others, founded the Artists Collective, a cultural center located in one of Hartford's poorest neighborhoods. Here, he would be even freer to create a unique curriculum based on the notion of the arts in relation to pan-African cultural and individual histories. His belief that he could create a significant

cultural and social impact further increased McLean's commitment to the city in which he was now centering his activities:

[I remember thinking] in New York City, there's a thousand Dollie McLeans and a million Jackie McLeans, but in Hartford, perhaps we can do something that we couldn't do so readily in New York and that is, build a cultural center. And try to steer some of these young people away from bad things—narcotics and drinking and early pregnancy. Some place where kids can grow up and have a great time. So that's how the Artists Collective was born. We teach dance, drama, the visual arts, music, and the martial arts. (*Jazz Portraits*)

The McLeans's founding of the Artists Collective in 1970 was part of a broader cultural trend that found African-American musicians creating institutions for community education and activism, usually centered in the country's most economically depressed urban areas. Significant examples include Horace Tapscott's Underground Musicians Association (UGMA) founded in Los Angeles in 1961; The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), founded in Chicago in 1965; The Detroit Creative Musicians Association (DCMA) in 1967; The Black Artist Group (BAG) in St. Louis in 1969; and Collective Black Artists (CBA), founded in New York in 1970.¹⁷ These community organizations provided McLean and other musician-directors with comprehensive institutional structures within which to establish models of cultural learning that focused on the African Diaspora and that provided an alternative to more Eurocentric approaches; they resisted what George Lewis has referred to as "the erasure of cultural memory" ("Teaching" 72-3). Many of the rooms in the Artists Collective's main building are named after prominent African-American artists such as Paul Robeson and Max Roach, and as McLean emphasized in the radio series *Jazz Portraits*, the classes at the Collective are designed to teach children about "the history of Africa. Things that are not taught in the public school."

While Dollie McLean's talents as an administrator soon became evident, McLean's stature as a performer and his ties to prominent African-Americans in the entertainment industry helped draw attention to the Artists Collective. His wide professional network allowed the Collective to sponsor concerts by Max Roach, McCoy Tyner, and Randy Weston, among others, and performances by actor/comedian Bill Cosby, providing important opportunities for Hartford's inner city youth to come into direct contact with seminal African-American artists. McLean also leveraged his position at the University of Hartford in helping to move the Artists Collective forward, encouraging his most advanced student at the Hartt School of Music to give private instrumental lessons at the Collective.¹⁸

In speaking about the success and longevity of the Artists Collective with writer Ben Sidran, McLean cited his and his wife Dollie's unflagging commitment to the organization and explicitly cited their creative opportunism: "[I] find that most of the strides that Dollie and I have made have been shooting from the hip and keeping our dream in front of us and not wavering from it. It's been very helpful improvising" (Sidran 134).

It is important to note that of all the community organizations founded by musicians in the 1960s and 1970s, the Artists Collective and the seminal Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians are the only two that remain active (and thriving) at the present time.

The Later Scene

By the late 1980s, both the Artists Collective and the African-American Music Department at the University of Hartford had moved past the developmental stage and McLean was able to perform throughout the United States, Europe, and Japan with increasing regularity.¹⁹ His main working ensemble in this period included South African pianist Hotep Galeta; bassist Nate Reeves, a former student of McLean's from the University of Hartford; and McLean's son, Rene McLean, a saxophonist and a professor of music at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Influenced by his son's experiences and knowledge of African music, McLean began to connect his musical output and his performance practice to the pan-African musical diaspora. For example, many compositions from the ensemble's repertoire, many of them composed by Rene McLean, incorporated rhythmic devices borrowed from both West African and South African musical traditions, and McLean often asked his entire group to perform in traditional South African clothing. Additionally, McLean dedicated his 1992 album *Rhythm of the Earth* to the Dogon people of Mali, and in 1993 his quintet performed in Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Mozambique, and South Africa as part of a tour sponsored by the United States Information Agency. McLean viewed these evocations of the African musical diaspora, and his tour of Southern Africa, as a means of strengthening his connection to

the origins of his music.²⁰ These evocations are reinforced, and were doubtless reinforced by, the African studies curriculum he had designed for the youngsters at the Artists Collective.

During the 1990s, McLean's evolution as a creative musician continued to reap the benefits of his role at the University of Hartford. By 1993, McLean's main working ensemble included four of his University of Hartford students: drummer Eric McPherson, pianist Alan Palmer, trombonist Steve Davis, and Rene McLean (who also studied under his father privately). As had been his practice since the 1960s, McLean encouraged all of the members of his band to contribute compositions to the group's repertoire. These young musicians, in turn, opened up new musical perspectives to McLean through both their performing and their composing. In the radio series *Jazz Portraits* McLean comments on this aspect of his practice:

It would be much easier for me to get five experienced musicians: Billy Higgins, Cedar Walton [. . .] go out and play. Then I wouldn't have any worries about what might not go right or what could happen. But I like young musicians because they make mistakes and they cause things to happen on the stage. And then we straighten it out and we keep moving forward. And at the same time, little new things slip in here and there through these encounters.

For McLean, the mistakes, like misfortunes, could often be a means of "moving forward," and of finding the unexpected. The influence of younger musicians on McLean's musical style is quite obvious in the evolution in his improvisational syntax that took place throughout the 1990s. McLean's soloistic language in this period moved much farther away from the influence of Charlie Parker and Bud Powell, and even from that of Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane, and drew heavily upon a set of highly personal improvisatory strategies which he referred to as "systems." These systems involved the sounding of pitch constellations, marked by an internal integrity resulting from each pitch being separated by a repeating interval or set of intervals—often a perfect fourth. In this way, McLean was able to produce improvisations that remained rooted in his exquisite sense of timing and phrasing, while demonstrating a new linear syntax that was non-diatonic, fragmented, and highly abstract. Having codified his use of systems by the late 1990s, McLean began sharing this methodology with his advanced students at the University of Hartford. Since that time, several of his former students have continued to adopt and expand McLean's concept of systems in their own work, including trombonist Steve Davis, guitarist Kevin O'Neil, and saxophonists Jimmy Greene, Mike DiRubbo, Wayne Escoffery, Kris Allen, and the author, among many others. McLean, himself, continued to perform and develop new music almost until the time of his death in 2006.

Conclusion

In examining McLean's ability to incorporate new musical ideas into his practice throughout a career whose complementary themes were performance, teaching, and social activism, it is important to keep in mind that the displacements and transitions in his career were not easy ones. McLean never fully resolved the conflict he felt about the compromises he had made in order to maintain a fully integrated professional model. In an interview in the film *Jackie McLean On Mars*, McLean complained about his inability to practice the saxophone on a regular basis while working at the Artists Collective and the University of Hartford:

It is a serious sacrifice. But at this point [. . .] I don't get a chance to practice. I don't have the energy to practice after I get up and do all the things that I have to do in the course of a day, and that's a problem that I'm constantly fighting. And every time I get through playing and get back to a certain place playing I always say, "Well man, I'm not going to let this go. When I get back to Hartford I'm going to get up every day, at least practice an hour so that I can keep myself in shape." But I always get back and always let a day go by and a couple of days and then it's a week and then I don't play.

The creative and artistic sacrifices that a commitment to teaching and community activism entail are too easily overlooked or underestimated. Bassist/educator Reggie Workman's comments on the severe difficulties inherent in integrating community activism, teaching, and performance, echo McLean's own:

And of course the artistic endeavor is compromised when you get involved with all of these things, because you can't practice, study, and create as much when you're divided like this. It took a lot out of my family, took a lot out of my art; but it was important, it was necessary [. . .] it adds something to your being, so that when you pick up your instrument you have more to talk about anyway, more to say. (qtd. in Porter 238-39)

For McLean, by the 1990s, the balance had subtly shifted:

I keep saying “this is it [. . .] when this kid graduates I’m finished.” And I come in September and here’s some little kid [. . .] that can play so great. And I say [. . .] “maybe I can do four more years and get him out of here.” Because when I see them arrive [. . .] I don’t want to leave them [. . .] I want to help them [. . .] and see where they can go. (*Jazz Portraits*)

In a description of his musical evolution in *Downbeat Magazine*, McLean offered the following modest self-appraisal: “I have never been in the forefront of any new style, but I have been able to align myself with [different styles] and maybe add to them” (qtd. in Whitehead). Here, McLean embraces his contribution to African-American creative music, not as an innovator, but as a stylist, while making reference to his ability—rooted, I would argue, in his integrative and improvisational gifts as well as his tremendous stature as a musician—to play new rhythms against familiar ones in a way which has had a profound impact, not only on his music, but on all of the participants in McLean’s several spheres of activity. McLean could not have become what he did without his own ability and strength of character, but his life was uniquely embedded in the historical, political, and cultural forces of his time. The past, present, and future inflections of those forces will, I hope, become a little clearer when seen through the prism of McLean’s lived experience and unique achievements.

Notes

¹ The term Afrological is used in this context to denote understandings of improvisation in which careful preparation, formalism, and intellect are as privileged as spontaneity and real-time decision making. See Lewis’s “Improvised” for his usage of the terms “Afrological” and “Eurological.”

² My transcriptions of McLean’s recorded compositions and improvised solos also provided me with an intimate familiarity with his music. See Lehman, *Music*.

³ In 1950, when he was still only nineteen, McLean was asked to join Miles Davis’s sextet. By the late 1950s, after fruitful apprenticeships in Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers and Charles Mingus’s Jazz Workshop, both important launching pads for up-and-coming musicians, McLean had established himself as one of the major stylists on the alto saxophone.

⁴ In speaking about his decision to model his sound on the alto saxophone after that of tenor saxophonist Lester Young, McLean does not make reference to the specific technical adjustments this entails. On the saxophone, one develops a specific timbre by favoring a specific network of performance practices that if refined and cultivated over time, result in the desired instrumental timbre. Early in my own career as an altoist, I chose a mouthpiece which I felt accentuated the similarities between my own instrumental sound and McLean’s, and made several minor adjustments to my embouchure, my phrasing, and my pitch choice with the same goal in mind. When, after a saxophone class at the University of Hartford in 1998, McLean told me that I needed to change my sound because it was “too harsh and sounded too much like [him] in the early 90s,” I took what was intended to be constructive criticism as an incredible compliment.

⁵ See Carles and Comolli, Jones’s *Blues People*, Radano, Taylor, Willener, and Wilmer for discussions of the response of African-American improvisers to the 1960s civil rights movement.

⁶ See Kernodle for the ways in which Mary Lou Williams supported younger African-American experimental musicians in the 1940s.

⁷ See, for example, Looker, Porter, and Radano, for the connections between African-American improvising musicians and Black activist organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), and the Black Panthers.

⁸ The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), founded in 1960 by a group of African-American college students in North Carolina, played an important role in the American civil rights movement of the 1960s. For a more in-depth overview of SNCC, see Zinn.

The 1967 Newark Riots took place between July 12 and 17 of that year and were triggered, in part, by the response of the local African-American community to the brutal beating of an African-American cab driver

by Newark police.

⁹ In the case of pianist/composer Hilton Ruiz, McLean also used his influence to secure Ruiz's first commercial recording on the Steeplechase label. Ruiz commented on McLean's role in the events leading up to his first recording in a video interview posted on the internet site <www.youtube.com> in 2007. The video has subsequently been removed. No more information on this source is currently available.

¹⁰ Using their performing ensembles to develop the talents of younger musicians—like McLean—Miles Davis, Art Blakey, Betty Carter, Anthony Braxton, and Steve Coleman are African-American improvising musicians who exemplify the “explicit pedagogical nurturance” George Lewis refers to, in “Teaching.” See, also, Lewis's “Teaching,” for an account of the role that pedagogy has played in several performing ensembles of which he has been a member, Jones's “You Know” on Julian “Cannonball” Adderley as an educator of young musicians and Lehman's “Nine Compositions,” on Anthony Braxton's work as a bandleader-educator.

¹¹ Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited (HARYOU) merged with Associated Community Teams (ACT) to form HARYOU-ACT in 1964. Jackie McLean participated in a HARYOU-ACT program in which African-American artists and musicians were placed in Harlem public schools as teachers and after-school activity directors. See Spellman and Porter.

Mobilization for Youth was founded in the early 1960s to create cultural outlets and employment opportunities for African-American and Puerto Rican youth. In addition to McLean, Archie Shepp was also affiliated with the Mobilization for Youth program. See Porter.

¹² In Donaldson, Dollie McLean remembers her husband was asked to teach at the University of Hartford by “several young black students [who] felt that the school needed courses that were relevant to them. They wondered why jazz could not be represented there.” She tells us that, “at that time, African-American music wasn't taught in any of the universities.”

¹³ See Aldridge and Young for a history of the institution of Black Studies and Africana Studies curricula at major American universities.

¹⁴ See Joseph for an examination of the ways in which major universities have ignored the demands of African-American students and scholars for Black Studies and Africana Studies as part of the core curriculum.

¹⁵ I audited several of McLean's classes at the University of Hartford from 1996-2000, while matriculating at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. Jimmy Greene, a saxophonist then studying under McLean, first invited me to attend one of McLean's classes in 1996. After meeting McLean and demonstrating a serious interest in studying under him, I received his permission to audit his courses as often and for as long as I'd like. He was ready to challenge normative admissions policies and fee structures in order to maintain an unusual degree of control over what would go on in his classroom.

¹⁶ See Ruff for a history of his work as a performer and educator at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut.

¹⁷ See Porter for an overview of the overlapping histories of the AACM, BAG, the CBA, and UGMA. See also Looker for a comprehensive history of BAG.

¹⁸ Currently, the programs at the Artists Collective serve twelve hundred children a year from the Greater Hartford area. Since 1974, the Collective has received annual support from the National Endowment for the Arts and several Connecticut state arts organizations and has emerged as one of Hartford's most important institutional presences. More recently, in 1999, the Collective moved into a new six million dollar complex, the construction of which was made possible by a fifteen-year capital campaign spearheaded by Dollie McLean. See Donaldson. See < www.artistscollective.org >.

¹⁹ McLean continued to perform and record for labels like Steeplechase, Inner City, and Blue Note throughout the 1970s and 1980s, but the formation of his quintet/sextet with his son Rene McLean in the mid-1980s and his recording contract with the Triloka label marked a renewed interest in McLean's music in the global jazz marketplace. The albums *Dynasty* (1988) and *Rites of Passage* (1990) appeared, and

there were annual performances at the Village Vanguard in New York City as well as frequent performances in Europe, Japan, and Africa. See Whitehead for a more thorough examination of the renewed interest in McLean's work in the 1990s.

²⁰ McLean is part of an emergent continuum of African-American improvising musicians who have asserted their connection to Africa through composition titles, performance attire, and the use of musical instruments and musical concepts normally associated with African music. For an examination of the ways in which contemporary African-American musicians have sought to evoke Africa through their music see Weinstein.

McLean's Afrocentric performance practices should be understood as continuing the tradition exemplified by the Art Ensemble of Chicago of paying homage to the rich histories of pan-African music. In many cases, these performance practices have been misinterpreted by music critics as reinforcing their own narrow views of African music. See, for example, Lehman's "I Love You," on the response of the French jazz press to the work of African-American experimental musicians in the 1970s.

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