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A CULTURAL EXPLORATION VIA THE MEDIUMS OF MUSIC AND POETRY

by

Colin S. Kolmar

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(International Affairs)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2012

Advisory Committee:

Laura Artesani, D.M.A., Associate Professor of Music, Advisor

Amy Fried, Ph.D., Professor of Political Science

James Artesani, Ed.D., Associate Professor of Special Education

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Mr. Daniel Williams, M.A., University of Maine Foundation Planned Giving
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Abstract

In order to prove the effectiveness of educational explorations conducted in extra-institutional settings, this thesis focuses on information collected in unconventional learning environments. The information gathered during these experiences was subsequently synthesized and conveyed via non-traditional scholastic mediums. This particular extra-institutional learning experience involved the investigation into jazz and hip hop music styles through cultural immersion. In order to achieve the desired result, I traveled to New York City to witness jazz and hip hop performances in venues situated in the city of origin for both styles. My New York research experience also included visiting museums and libraries dedicated to the performing arts.

In an effort to emphasize the specific benefits presented by educational reporting through creative mediums, this thesis project involved composing original music and poetry that reflects the knowledge I acquired during my travels. Although the songs and poems are accompanied by explanatory materials which employ a scholarly level of discourse, the core of the thesis project is the creative works themselves. This thesis is, in its entirety, comprised of a small collection of original poetry about the various places I encountered on my educational journey, recordings of an original jazz song and an original hip hop song, an artist's statement clarifying the connection between my educational experience and the musical compositions, and the musical and lyrical frameworks of my pieces.

Foreword

As a full-time student and future educator, I have been exposed to many different methods of teaching and learning. Many styles of learning allow the pupil to interpret his educational findings in a way that resonates with him personally. This requires of the student that he considers employing unconventional reporting strategies in order to synthesize his message into a language that adequately conveys his understanding of learned material. This also requires a certain amount of leeway from the teacher, who must accept her student's unique method of interpretation. Unfortunately, opportunities to construe data and cognitive knowledge via unconventional projects are few and far between in institutionalized education. I propose that a great reformation in this long-standing pattern should take place, and that students should be allowed to set free their vibrant creative sides.

One way to allow students to command their own educational destinies is to allow them to embark on extra-institutional explorations. Although these forays into the unknown should be guided and set within certain parameters, they should also require a large amount of student self-direction. If a student can muster the intrinsic motivation to perform a more in-depth, contextually based analysis of a particular subject, then he should be accommodated by his mentors. He should be encouraged and not stifled in his efforts.

Although I have been fortunate enough to attain a well-rounded and personally enriching educational experience while I have attended the University of Maine, I must acknowledge some of the geographical and cultural disadvantages to residing in Central

Maine. Maine is racially monochromatic and isolated from areas in which cultural diversity provides a learner with a broad array of perspectives and traditions. Therefore, for my own journey outside of the realm of my ordinary educational habitat, I traveled to New York City to learn about the Jazz and Hip-Hop music genres in a hub of cultural diversity.

In the following pages, I share the conclusions to which I came during my own extra-institutional learning endeavor. Hopefully my findings will prove the effectiveness of my theories regarding educational pedagogy. I have also added elements of data interpretation via the mediums of recorded song and written poetry. This inclusion will hopefully highlight the unique advantages of cognitive reporting through non-traditional interpretations. I hope you will enjoy my work.

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“Orono-thology”

*Written by Colin Kolmar
Recorded by Benjamin Lithgow
Mastered by Ryan Pottle*

Performed by:

*Benjamin Lithgow, Saxophone
Garrett Artman, Piano
Connor Oyster, Bass
Blake Ford, Guitar
Colin Kolmar, Drums*

Score

Oronothology

[Subtitle]

Colin Kolmar

[Arranger]

Tenor Sax

Piano

Double Bass

T. Sx.

Pno.

D.B.

9

T. Sx.

Pno.

D.B.

13

T. Sx.

Pno.

D.B.

17

T. Sax. 

Pno. 

D.B. 

21

T. Sax. 

Pno. 

D.B. 

Contextual Information and Imagery:

After witnessing a performance by the Enrico Rava Tribe at Birdland in New York City, I became inspired to write a song that reflected my experience as an audience member. Birdland is a club that is rich with jazz history, and hasn't changed much since the days when legends from jazz's formative years took to the stage to wow fanatics. When listeners hear the different sounds within “Orono-thology”, I hope that images of a dimly lit, smoke-filled club come to mind. I hope that listeners will imagine that they are hearing the tune played onstage at the Birdland of yesteryear.

Instrumentation:

In order to pay homage to Birdland's namesake Charlie Parker, I decided to select the saxophone as my primary solo instrument. Beyond that, I chose to employ the stereotypical trappings of a jazz rhythm section. Originally, I had recruited only a bass player and pianist to record the song, but a guitar player offered to join us for the recording process. I welcome any re-interpretations and transpositions of my piece so that it can be used in different ensemble formats. The instruments I chose were largely dictated by the resources that were available to me as a composer and as a musician, so I would love to see how “Orono-thology” could be transformed through simple changes in instrumentation.

Stylistic Interpretation:

Instead of indicating that I wanted the bass player to create a walking line based on written chord changes, I notated a bass line without a straight rhythmic pulse. The repetitive nature of the bass riff serves as the building block for the rest of the

instruments. I also placed the piano's chords on an offbeat, which coincides with the syncopation created by the bass line. The forward momentum created by the saxophone melody is derived largely from a chromatically descending phrase during the “A” section. There was no written part for the guitar player, who served exclusively as a soloist on the recording.

The drum set part also was not transcribed. Instead of utilizing a swung pattern on the cymbals, I decided to end each measure with a straight couplet of eighth notes, accompanied by hits on the hook tom. This choice on my part borrowed a lick from an Enrico Rava Tribe arrangement, though their piece was in a meter of 6/4. However, the Enrico Rava Tribe also played some tunes at Birdland that featured unconventional time signatures. I decided to compose my piece in 5/4 in an effort to experiment with the sound that Enrico Rava has perfected over his many years of performing.

Composer's Note:

The title “Orono-thology” acts as a further tribute to Charlie Parker, who was known as “Bird”. The title is a playful spin on Parker's tune “Ornithology”. Although my primary inspiration for “Orono-thology” was found in a New York City club, I must acknowledge that many important, personally resonant jazz-related events have taken place in Orono, Maine. This piece's title signifies duality of my overall jazz experience, and the sentimentality I have for the places and people who have inspired me.

“Ray of Light”

Music and lyrics by Colin Kolmar

Performed by:

Colin Kolmar: Vocals, guitar, bass guitar, drums.

Mixed and mastered by Ryan Pottle.

Ray of Light

There's a system of oppression and inequality
that designates you to a level of the socio-economy
without sympathy or remorse.

Isn't it time for some honest discourse
about a topic that escapes mass attention,
and in the media receives a mere honorable mention?

Dissension should be on the lips of the youth
but nobody desires to know the whole truth.

They let their elders be their compass
while society's mechanisms continue to stump us.

When you commit your life to inaction
you turn a new addition to an old subtraction,
a distraction from the forward momentum.

You give credence to the rules and the man who sent them.

So strike up a conversation
and together we can change this nation.

There's a fire in my mind tonight,
'cause I know that I can make things right
if I can find the power to incite
a change that's a ray of light.

You stand by like an American idle,
but you should fear the flood because this wave is tidal,
it's the current that will pull you under,
it's the calm before the storm shakes your brain with thunder.
But people need to get shaken up
until the cases of the common people get taken up.
You don't have to make a deal with the devil
to be playing on a field that your voice made level.
So let's see some radical activity,
doesn't matter if it's not part of your natural proclivity.
It's your soul that makes this fight worth fighting,
to keep the sharp teeth of injustice from biting
the people who you love and you care for,
and love is all around us, so therefore
take a stand for the good of everyone
before all the damage is done.

Contextual Information and Imagery:

“Ray of Light” was composed largely in response to a text called Rap Music and Street Consciousness. In this book, author Cheryl L. Keyes affirms that the immortal nature of rap music's legacy is contingent on two primary factors; Keyes states that rap that focuses on so-called street consciousness and proactive rebelliousness is universally translatable. Street consciousness refers to the dependence of downtrodden people on their own cunning and internal driving mechanisms in order to survive. Rap is an art form that has crossed every imaginable boundary on Earth, and the messages of rebellion embedded in rap have been interpreted into countless languages. I decided to adopt these messages of self-reliance and constructive defiance for “Ray of Light” in hopes that my piece may join the others that serve as figurative rays of light for disenfranchised individuals worldwide.

Instrumentation:

When I saw the Legacy hip-hop group perform in New York, their ensemble consisted of two vocalists, a bass player and a percussionist. One vocalist sang melodic vocal lines and also rapped, while one vocalist rapped exclusively. In my opinion, this format limited the melodies that could be produced by the accompanying instruments. The Legacy hip-hop ensemble employed mostly rhythmic pulses to form the basis for the spoken words of the lyricists. I chose to integrate a largely rhythmic guitar line with repetitious, simple chords to add an extra dimension to “Ray of Light”. I also added an infrequently occurring, echo-laden guitar pulse in order to section off the piece by using a conspicuous and familiar pattern to differentiate the song's chorus from its verse. I chose

to maintain the partially rap, partially melodic vocal style utilized by the Legacy hip-hop group.

Lyrical Content:

By maintaining an air of ambiguity surrounding the social ills addressed in “Ray of Light”, the song's subject matter remains open to the interpretation of the listener. “Ray of Light” serves as a universal anthem to set the backdrop for a mass mobilization against injustice. The message embedded in “Ray of Light” can be construed to rally support for any radical movement that is geared toward combating unfair practices and outdated cultural norms. As a lyricist, I also decided to employ a level of discourse that didn't attempt to mimic Ebonics or a form of street language. I believe that such a practice would have been disingenuous, and would have sounded more like a parody of hip-hop rather than an attempt to lend my own perspective to the genre.

Composer's Note:

Although my own interpretation of hip-hop may be atypical among the more popular efforts released by hip-hop artists, I believe that “Ray of Light” effectively conveys the universality of the genre's core message. Radical action can be incited by an inspiring song with a positive message. The power to determine one's destiny can be derived from the immortal power of music. I hope that “Ray of Light” may someday serve to inspire a person to better his or her circumstances or the world at large.

Born to be Here

*A Short Collection of Poems about
the Quintessential Jazz Landmarks of New York City*

By Colin Kolmar

Club Coca Cola at Lincoln Center

Mecca of jazz
afloat atop a sea of
designer brand tags.
Hotspot for the newly retired.
The 2:30 free concert is the
early-bird special of performance art.
I hear the octogenarian sitting near me ask,
“What is hip-hop?”
Oh boy.

A handful of young professionals
speckle the room.
It's their day off
and they are trying to hard
to try so little.

Beautiful motherly black woman
and her family
secured a front row table.
Somehow she looks the least
out of place
among these sunken-flesh sporting
social security suckers.
The air smells of pension
and cries for attention.

Here I am.
\$100 suit. Tie.
Women's shirt I mistakenly purchased.
Obviously I'm not trying at all.

I was born to be here.

Lincoln Center Jazz Library

When shooting stars have fallen
and returned to the earth from which they came,
they have not been lost forever.
While jazzers were shooting up,
or falling fast, bound for unforgiving Terra Firma,
they could not have known that their legacy
was safe from the clutches of
envious Fate.

I sit at a desk at the Lincoln Center Library,
overwhelmed by the number
forty-thousand.
Forty-thousand recordings call this building
home.

When considering the number forty-thousand,
one can't help but to contemplate his
place in the world.
There must be a man whose legacy
exists solely in the form of
a single recording,
shuffled in within this vast sea of
Thirty-nine thousand, nine hundred ninety-nine others.

Among the recordings at the Lincoln Center Library
you will find no contributions from
me.
In this majestic world,
inhabited by seven billion humans,
who will preserve my legacy?

Smalls Jazz Club

Hole in the wall,
spackled with a broad array of characters.
Some of the Nouveau Riche,
drawn by the village's folkloric allure,
trickle in for coffee and reflection.
The nearest Starbucks is a whole block away.
That kind of journey could cause a person
to break under the weight of her own
solitude.

The other clientele are of the old school,
hangovers from the several decades-long
night before.
This basement dungeon keeps the caustic sunlight
from disrupting the long comedown before sundown.
There is more than one French beret present.

A microphone is offered up.
The regulars are first to lend their melodies,
singing warbly renditions of jazz standards
with no reservations.
The gravel of cigarette rust is palpable
in the voices and demeanors of the older folk.
There's an even balance of dank and warmth
in this Sunday afternoon molehole.

A regular customer asks beautiful Leslie,
the barkeep,
if the Love is starting to leave the place.
Are the Nebbishes and ignorant hipsters
leaving a foul stench in the air?
Are they fumigating the atmosphere of Love?
I didn't hesitate to tell the man, "Not a chance".
"I can feel the love."

I can feel the love.

The Blue Note

This room is as synesthetic as its name suggests.
But here, you will not only hear notes of blue.
You will see every conceivable hue in its musical form.
You will see colors that your mind cannot assign to a
terrestrial equivalent.

The mirrored walls seem to serve a profound purpose,
as if sound could be preserved in their reflection,
ping-ponging off of the four walls for an eternity.
In these mirrors, you can see yourself becoming
more whole.

Here I bore witness to playful Hiromi
as she fired pure vibrance and youth
at a bewildered keyboard
through her nimble fingers.

Here I shook the hands of
Stanley Clarke and Lenny White
as they passed my table.

Here I was starstruck
for the first time in my life.

I will return to this place
to be stuck by stars
until all the stars,
or I,
turn cold.

Birdland

Hello friend,
did you know that there was once
a famous lullaby written for you?
It's such a sweet song
dedicated to a swarthy place.

At Birdland, I can't help but bask in
memories that I've never made.
I've heard the legends and
the tall tales about this
hallowed ground for souls
tangled up in thorny jazz.

There are squeals and crashes
that continue to hang in the stale air.
They were squeezed out through the bells
of tarnished horns
and washed down a gentle river
aboard a slow steamboat,
the sizzle ride.

This is me,
“Live at Birdland.”
The suffix has been tagged onto the titles
of countless great jazz recordings.
Birdland is where true happenings
happen.

I belly up to the bar and ask the bartender
for a Johnnie Walker Red.
The drink's name could have very well been
the bartender's nickname.
He studies my wide-eyed wonderment
and smiles.
He sees in me the dreams and hopes
that drew him to Birdland in the first place.
He banters with some of the obvious regulars
and offers up a joke and a hearty laugh.
His world is Birdland.
The world beyond is inconsequential.

I can imagine falling in love with a place

with such history and character.
When you give your love to a place you never leave,
you can never be lonely.

National Jazz Museum in Harlem

On my way to visit the museum,
I was a spectacle.
I wore a suit
and carried with me
all of the accumulated memorabilia
of a successful New York visit.

The other man I met in a suit
was a man about town,
or so he thought.
He was probably a pimp.
Immediately after that thought crossed my mind
I realized he was wearing a similar outfit
to mine.
A white man in a suit is probably engaging in
legitimate business.
An old boisterous black man in a suit must be
a pimp.
Oh my God,
I'm racist!

I had never felt racist before in my life
until I was the minority.
It seems strange,
but it was true.

I finally arrived at the museum
and was convinced that the location
was some sort of joke
that wasn't funny.
It was in a multi-story building
next to a railroad bridge.
The alleyway next-door was
separated from the rest of the neighborhood
by a sturdy chain-link fence,
adorned with a crown of
barbed wire thorns.
It looked like a cinematic depiction
of a ghetto tenement.
There was no special sign
heralding the presence of a jazz wonderland.
There was only a sign on the door that read,

“National Jazz Museum, Suite 4D”.

The man who greeted me
looked like the token African-American character
on a children's television program.
His demeanor was apologetic,
as if I had somehow wasted a trip
by visiting the museum.
“Museum” might be too generous a term
for this particular tribute to jazz.
Suite 4D was a room
about the size of an upscale
studio apartment.
It was a single room,
that somehow was supposed to
encompass the vibrant, expansive
history of jazz music.

I in no way mean to belittle
the quality of the artifacts
collected by the curators of
The National Jazz Museum.
There were so many recordings
and displays that were informative
and interesting...

...but there was also
an abundance of conspicuous omissions.

It's sad that a century
of rich, glorious history
has been condensed, out of necessity
into a mere room-full of artifacts and memories...

...but I suppose that's the legacy of jazz.

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Biography

Colin Kolmar was born in Brooklyn, New York on April 8th, 1990. He was raised in Glen Cove, New York until he moved to Saco, Maine at the age of twelve. He graduated from Thornton Academy in 2008 and received a Bachelor's Degree at the University of Maine in International Affairs in 2012. He was an active member in many student organizations related to his passions for music and global politics. Colin served as the president of the International Affairs Association, contributed as a weekly style columnist for the Maine Campus newspaper, and acted as the business manager of the Maine Steiners all-male a capella group. Colin was the primary or sole percussionist for the University of Maine Jazz Ensemble for three years. He is a member of the Pi Sigma Alpha political science honor society.

Colin will enroll in the University of Maine's Masters of Art in Teaching program in June of 2012, in hopes of becoming a high school social studies teacher. Colin is presently polishing his capstone paper on the rebellious nature of the 1990s rap and grunge movements so that it can be submitted for publication in an academic journal.