

SIX | The Law of Returns

MUHAL RICHARD ABRAMS AND VIJAY IYER

IN CONVERSATION

Introduction by Vijay Iyer

On June 11, 2017, at the Ojai Music Festival in Southern California, I was one of several hundred witnesses to one of the final performances of pianist-composer Muhal Richard Abrams (1930–2017).¹ Abrams was appearing in trio with two longtime colleagues, multi-instrumentalist Roscoe Mitchell (b. 1940) and trombonist/electronic musician George Lewis (b. 1952); all three were members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, a long-standing aggregate of African American composer-performers formed in 1963 on Chicago's South Side.

In this trio's music-making, as evidenced across numerous performances from 2003 to 2017 as well as on disc, a guiding aesthetic invariably revealed itself: a profoundly committed ethos of rigorous listening, plaintive sonic inquiry, and elemental construction.² That morning in Ojai, as the music proceeded in what initially appeared as irresolvable clumps, the three men carried themselves with an uncanny composure, displaying a faith in some mysterious process. Musical acts were conjured in real time, seemingly from scratch but somehow with great foresight: fragments and shards of sound from Mitchell's soprano saxophone, plangent clusters and raw gestures from Abrams's piano, digitally processed and multiplied drones from Lewis's trombone. The music grew steadily more significant, as each new bit of material revealed new coun-



Figure 6.1. Muhal Richard Abrams (right) and Vijay Iyer reflected in a dusty mirror backstage at the Skopje Jazz Festival, Skopje, Macedonia, October 23, 2011

terpoints and conjunctures, and the gently ebbing episodes stirred up subtle energies. In just under an hour, as this calm, resourceful enactment of musical interdependence drew to a close, the entire Libby Bowl audience solemnly held onto the gravity of the moment, before erupting in an ecstatic ovation. Part of me wanted to preserve and examine this ineffable feeling that brought audience members to our feet, many of us in tears. How had these elemental sonic maneuvers come to *matter*? How had small moments of intention/invention become *events*, and how had those events become form? How, when, and where did an affective register open up in this formal enterprise? What did this music *do*?

In full disclosure, I am very well acquainted with each of this trio's members; Lewis was one of my dissertation advisers in the 1990s, Mitchell employed me as a pianist in his ensembles in the early 2000s, and all three continue to exert a significant influence on my life, music, and thought. But in the years since this performance, I've found myself revisiting various conversations I'd had with Abrams over two decades.

What I remember most is how his language—condensed, poetic, sage-like utterances—could gently dismantle one's standpoint on an issue. In

1996, in one of our earliest encounters, he asked what I was working on, and I fumbled through a synopsis of my graduate studies in music cognition. He responded with a query: “Are you your mind?” I didn’t have an answer (and indeed barely understood the question), so he asked it again, and again: “Are you your mind?” Eventually he answered his own question with an allusion to Buddhist and yogic traditions, which were among the many esoteric topics he had studied in great depth: You are also *the one who observes* your own mind. I was left wondering what this distinction might suggest for music. The implication of the disunity of the self, and the suggestion that “mind” might be but a facet of who and what we are, seemed to run counter to prevailing perspectives on “music cognition” or the then-common phrase, “the musical mind”; and these views might further imply that music cognition is not a straightforward, unified, or complete process either. Soon afterward I found my way into perspectives on embodied cognition that were also influenced by Buddhist perspectives, and eventually, perhaps not fully aware of the impact of Abrams’s intervention on my own line of inquiry, I developed a dissertation’s worth of ideas about embodied music cognition.³

I am reminded almost daily of another potent Abrams utterance from those years. In his description of composer-pianist Thelonious Monk, Abrams stated, with a Monk-like repetition: “Monk was always creating—*always creating*.” I’d considered myself a Monk devotee at the time, but Abrams’s statement here has, over time, brought me multiple significant and ongoing epiphanies on Monk’s music. This phrase dismantles the tiresome composition-improvisation dichotomy, in its assertion that for Monk, even a repetition is not a repetition; rather it is the same idea formed again—created anew. As I listened for this quality in Monk’s music, I started to hear it in others as well: Roy Haynes, Zigaboo Modeliste, Alice Coltrane, Betty Carter, Roy Hargrove, Tyshawn Sorey—and Muhal Richard Abrams.

After graduate school, at the end of 1998, I made a beeline for New York City. Since the early 1980s, Abrams had lived in an apartment in Manhattan Plaza (New York’s famous Midtown West apartment complex with dedicated housing for artists) with his wife Peggy and daughter Richarda. Their family welcomed me into the community of New York musicians, treating me with kindness and generosity.

By fall 1999 I had started to perform regularly in town with my ensembles and collaborators. One such group, the first incarnation of the collaborative trio Fieldwork with Aaron Stewart and Elliot Humberto Kavee, played a set at The AlterKnit, a claustrophobic thirty-five-seat basement

room at the Knitting Factory on Leonard Street. Abrams came with fellow former Chicagoans, the legendary composer-performers Andrew Hill and Henry Threadgill. These three elder masters sat directly in front of the band, on metal folding chairs around a tiny table. I was nervously encouraged by their presence, yet mortified that they had to see us in such undignified surroundings. After the set, Abrams came up to me with some encouraging words. I thanked him and said, “We’re just trying to get out of this room.” Abrams replied, “Well . . . just *play your way out*. That’s all.” And he said it again: *Play your way out*. In that moment I was caught up in my own frustration about the vagaries of an indifferent music business, but Abrams handily dispelled my qualms in one simple, resonant utterance. Hearing it from him, the phrase carried a lifetime of perspective: music, when handled with care, attention, and commitment, contained the ingredients for growth, transformation, even liberation. Music-making itself would, quite literally, carry us somewhere higher.

On September 5, 2012, I had the chance to interview Abrams for a podcast for the occasion of his receipt of an award from the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation. We sat together for an hour in a bare boardroom at the offices of Chamber Music America. In our exchange you hear him caring about words and their impact, contrasting my word choices with his, and always unpacking the resonant, significant *musicalities* of each utterance. He knows what they can do, not just their sounds and their senses but their timing and their formal relationships, their emphases, energetic contours, and patternings. What he seems to aim to do with his words, as he did for a lifetime with his music, is activate more growth, more individuation, more forms of human life.

In beginning with the above anecdotes, I realize that I might appear to the reader as a nonobjective acolyte or devotee of some kind. But I chose to set up this chapter in this manner with the hope of setting it apart from the genre of “jazz oral history.” In a stretch, this chapter *could* be called an interview, if only in the original sense of that term: *entrevoir*, to see each other. More to the point, it might best be understood as a collaborative endeavor of knowledge construction, in the genre of a Socratic dialogue or a Buddhist sutra. This conversation is not particularly about jazz, nor is it a straightforward oral history; instead it is one link in a decades-long chain of interactions between two people, in a tradition of inquiry into music-making, humanity, and to use Abrams’s preferred encapsulation in this period, “individualism.”

This term deserves comment, since it “holds a problematic but central position in jazz narratives,” as Fumi Okiji has noted, and yet

acquires central importance in our conversation.⁴ Similar remarks from Abrams on a separate occasion prove pivotal to Okiji's reconsideration of Adorno's writings on jazz.⁵ As will also become clear in our dialogue, Okiji has observed that

Abrams's "individual" is encoded with heterogeneity and distinction. True individualism cannot occur in isolation. It is not captured by mere tolerance of difference. In fact, it goes beyond a virtuous embrace of the best examples of multiculturalism. It involves an awareness of the individual's dependence on what it is not. An individual cannot reach truth alone, "the information" being distributed across each and every one. . . . Abrams's nuanced, very particular understanding of individualism helps us to see what is lost in short-handed parlance.⁶

In what follows, I offer a glimpse of an ongoing practice of research, speculation, experimenting, assessing, and theorizing that has long pervaded Black creative cultures.⁷ As Wadada Leo Smith writes, "Artists are the best explainers and models of what they do. Their views, reflections, and contemplations are closer to the truth and more authentic than any other view concerning the music-objects they create."⁸ When Abrams asks, "*What did the music do?*" he is also posing a fundamental question about how we hear across difference, and his clear-minded insights about a phenomenon of *mutual resonance* ("a bell within them that was already there") come from decades of practice, study, and observation. Our conversation, while reflecting our own differences (forty-one years separated us in age, and equally substantial distance in culture and history), exemplifies this reciprocal process of bell-ringing. I have kept the dialogue largely intact, with its repetitions, fragments, and rapid interchanges, in hopes of evoking the temporal flow of Abrams's presence: his way of hearing and relating to others, his vivid thought process, and his gentle, resolute intellectual guidance.

MUHAL RICHARD ABRAMS: Hello, I'm Muhal Richard Abrams.

VIJAY IYER: Hi, this is Vijay Iyer. We're speaking to you from New York City. I'm honored to converse with this major figure in American music: someone I've admired for decades, since as long as I knew anything about Creative Music and the whole Creative Music movement. Mr. Abrams, you come from Chicago, and you are one of the founders for the Association for

the Advancement of Creative Musicians, and you are a composer and pianist of international stature and have had a huge impact on the world of music over the last five decades. So I don't want to spend too much time on biographical stuff because I think anybody who wants to know can find that. I mean, that's well documented. But I was wondering if you might talk a little bit from a personal perspective about what were the beginnings of this path for you, in terms of *choosing* a life in the arts, a life in music, and what were the steps that led you to that decision?

MRA: Well, first let me thank you for the compliments. . . . I think it *chose me*. And I think that's the case with most continuous musicians, people that come into the world of the arts and they stay. It becomes part of their life. But I think, to answer your question, I think it just chose me. There came a time when I felt I should just do it. And I guess it had chosen me long before, and then it came to a point where I *heard it*, I mean [chuckles], and that's really, in terms of any sort of path—

VI: Yeah, how old were you, would you say, when that realization struck?

MRA: Oh, I don't know, sixteen or seventeen.

VI: But music was in your life before that?

MRA: Uhh, no: sports. Now, let me say this: The answer is yes, in terms of my being attracted to music, in terms of listening to it, you know? And I would always, it would always stop me. If I heard some music I would just *stop*. I would just notice it. There was a curiosity. But not a curiosity in the earlier times that gave me the feeling I wanted to act in any certain way in terms of pursuing it. And, at some point, it just, it *called*. That's about it—I stepped in.

VI: And it was the piano first?

MRA: Yeah.

VI: Because you've played a number of instruments in your life.

MRA: The clarinet.

VI: Yes.

MRA: Definitely clarinet, violin, cello, stuff like that.

VI: Now, Chicago has such a rich musical legacy, a history that must have been all around you at that time.

MRA: Oh, long before I stepped in it was *there* [chuckles], that's right, yeah.

VI: So what were your first opportunities that you remember, playing piano?

MRA: Oh, I don't know. It would be hard to pin something like that down. I mean, I just started to participate in things, you know? And study. And learn. Any specific *event*, in terms of playing the piano, right now I couldn't really give you; there were so *many*, you know.

VI: Right, I'm sure. It's been reported that you were self-taught on the piano.

MRA: I am self-taught, sure.

VI: And so, what did that mean for you?

MRA: [Taken aback, with humor] What do you mean?

VI: How does one teach oneself?

MRA: [Shifting gears, more earnest] One teaches oneself because that's a natural phenomenon, in terms of your individuality.⁹ You can teach yourself anything if you respect the fact that you have to study, *seriously*, in terms of gathering the proper kind of information. It's a process that, of course, had a lot of trial and error in it.

VI: Yes, of course.

MRA: But you know, the fact that you *stick with* a situation: you soon learn from your mistakes and your accomplishments together.

VI: Yeah. I mean, as you know, I ask that question from a perspective of sympathy [laughter] or mutual understanding. So I can attest to what you've said in the sense that it's a process, and it's sort of a *lifelong* process. In particular, you know, often it's said that people pass through a kind of imitative phase before getting to a point of true creativity, or—

MRA: Well, I would have said it a little differently. But I don't disagree with you.

VI: Though I've always had the sense from your work and your perspective that you were never not a creative musician, in the sense that creativity was always part of the process for you. And so, I guess what that says to me is that there are creative forms of imitation. In the way that you might digest the work of another artist, you can do that in a way that's empowering.

MRA: Yes, you could say it in the way that you're saying. I would say it differently, but you could certainly say it.

VI: How would—please, how would—?

MRA: No, it's OK, it's OK, it's OK. Because, you know, I can take

that because we all have different concepts. That's how we learn from each other, because there are many approaches to the same thing, and then ways of saying the same thing, you know, so it's OK. But back to when you say it's like "imitation"—well, we all pass through imitative stages, because that is wise and healthy, if you are imitating what you consider to be masters at what you want to do, like Art Tatum, master at playing the piano, you know what I mean?

VI: Right.

MRA: Well, like Bud Powell. Or *Horowitz*, you know? Then that's healthy. But the thing is, I've always felt that I wanted to do things, I wanted to create music—*original* things—you know, I've *always* felt that way, when I first started. That's all I wanted to do, was to do it *my way*. But first I had to learn *how* to do it. So this [followed], the imitation, the studying of literature or music, studying individuals who appeared to me to know what they were doing, *listening* to them, you know what I mean? And then I came in contact, of course, on the scene, with musicians who were accomplished. And I had to equip myself to perform with them. So all of that was a part of a learning experience, you know.

VI: On-the-job training [laughs].

MRA: Yes, because, you know, you didn't get to the stage with certain people until you developed your abilities to where you could hold your own, you know, and so all of that. And *Chicago*, I mean, you know, *that* school [laughs] was quite demanding, but fair!

VI: [Laughter] That's good to know!

MRA: No,¹⁰ it's *fair*, but it's *demanding*! Because you know, after all, if you work hard to do something, put a lot of hours in and things like that, then you want to be performing with people who respect that, because they've done a similar type thing. So you're among your peers in that sense. Yeah, so it's fair.

VI: Yes. Now, if we look at the beginnings of the AACM, the organization that you were one of the founding members of, and if I understand right you convened the first meeting, is that fair to say?

MRA: Oh yeah.¹¹

VI: So, you know, this was a collective of African American musicians from the South¹²—

MRA: An *association*.

VI: [Pauses] An association—

MRA: *Not* a collective.

VI: Oh, OK.

MRA: An *association*.

VI: Well, what's the distinction there?

MRA: [Dryly] Well, the two words are different. You can analyze those words and there's a distinction there. [A pause, then with more warmth] But, to give you what I mean, an *association* is, like, *respect for the other individual*. It's not a collective in the sense of what a collective would be.

VI: Is there an implication with the word "collective" that individual identity is maybe downplayed or suppressed?

MRA: Well, I don't want to belabor that, but it was an *association*. That says, you know, because it's not—I mean, when people call a grouping a "collective," they have a certain thing in mind when they say "collective." And some people just like to apply the word "collective," rather than any other word. But, we said the *Association* for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. And that's what it is and that's what it was then when we started: we *associated* with each other.

VI: So, you moved freely in the world as individuals—

MRA: That's right.

VI:—and yet there's an affiliation that you cultivated amongst yourselves at the same time.

MRA: Well, we were already performing and associating with each other as Chicago musicians. And so, the AACM was developed to create a forum for these musicians, who were associating with each other, to express their individualism through original work.

VI: Right.

MRA: Follow me?

VI: Yes.

MRA: And that was the whole key.

VI: That's what I wanted to ask you about.

MRA: The whole purpose.

VI: Yeah. That was in the original—

MRA: Purpose!

VI: Yeah, that was something that you laid out in the beginning: that original music was the utmost priority.

MRA: It *was* the priority. That was *it*. That was it.

VI: Did that pose a challenge for some people who felt that maybe that wasn't their own orientation?

MRA: No. When you're dealing with individualism, individuals have a right to do what they feel they should do. If they didn't agree, if any musician didn't agree with what we set out to do, they were free to go do what they wanted to do, you know, because the respect for one's individualism was primary to what we were doing—respect for the individual. All individuals, whether they were a part of the association, the AACM, or not, they were still individuals who pursued their own path. So we *respected* that, and we respected the fact that we wanted to create original music through composition and improvisation and theater and, you know, other related type of activity. But the main point is the respect for the individual. It's *much bigger*, the idea is *much bigger* than the AACM. Respect for the individual because we were expressing that in terms of *life itself*, you see? You respect the ditchdigger, you respect the great musician, you respect the hairdresser, you respect the swami. You respect people, you know what I mean? You respect the rabbi. You respect *people*, whoever they are. You respect the fact that they *have a right to choose*. That is what went into the AACM, as you know yourself, in the first wave of AACM musicians, and it still goes on now, but I'm speaking of the first wave because I was closely associated in that grouping. All of those people are distinct individuals—what they do. Now, how did that happen?

VI: Yeah [laughs], that's a good question!

MRA: It happened because of what I'm telling you. It was there, not to *interfere* with anyone, but to *assist*—in this association—to *assist* each of us. We *assisted* each other in developing the individual pursuit, in terms of, in our case, producing and improvising music.

VI: And, as I understand, teaching was a major part of the work that AACM was doing.

MRA: Oh yeah.

VI: It seemed that there was a desire to broaden everyone's and deepen everyone's perspectives on music. Did everybody participate as teachers? Or—

MRA: Everybody.

VI: Yeah.

MRA: Well, let me say something. You just said something that I would put it a little differently.

VI: Yes.

MRA: The individuals broaden their *own* horizons. There was no *process* that broadened their horizons. The association and each person—each individual—had many opportunities to produce, for instance, a concert of theirs. So therefore they broadened their horizons through *that*: the opportunity to express and learn from their trial and error with whatever they wanted to do.

VI: Yes.

MRA: *That's* how they broadened their horizons. I mean, at *no point* was there anything that interfered with the individual. You gotta understand that.

VI: So then, what teaching did was just put people in contact with *information*, is that what you're saying, without a kind of—

MRA: No, no, no, no. No no, no no. The teaching was mostly done by young aspiring musicians who we would take in to teach.

VI: I see. So then the students, the participants, were younger people from your community—

MRA: Community.

VI:—from the community, yes.

MRA: Yeah, now, when you associate with other musicians, you automatically learn from their individualism.

VI: Right.

MRA: That took place automatically. You follow me?

VI: Yeah.

MRA: Because the thing about individualism, primary to humans, is the sense that we're all different. Each one of us are individuals. Whether we function like that or not, that's another question, but we're individuals. We're individuals. Now, why is it that humanity is constructed like that?

VI: Uh, well—

MRA: Why is that?

VI: The answer I would give is that what we carry are memories of our experiences in the world—basically our record of the paths we take through life. So, you know, what makes us different are our experiences. And of course, what makes those experiences different is many, many forces.

MRA: Well the first thing that makes your experience different is

choice: your choice. You decide to do something. That's why it's different. You made a choice. Now, why don't we make the same choice? We can make the same choice by imitating; I don't mean that. You come in and you have a particular way that you want to do things—each one of us. Why is that? That's what I'm asking. Because, let's say it this way: *All of the information was not put in one place.*

VI: Right.

MRA: You understand?

VI: Yeah.

MRA: You could explain it this way. There's many ways of expressing or explaining individualism, you know, and it doesn't have to all be from the same perspective. One thing I've learned about individualism is that all of the information that humans need to know is not in one place. It's not in one country. It's, you know, you can just expand it. It's like raising things to powers, you know what I mean? And the reason for that is because: *we can learn* from each other. You understand? There's a *reason* for that, it gets much *deeper* even, why humanity is constructed like that. You know, I didn't really expect an answer from you when I asked you to tell me about individualism!

VI: [Laughter]

MRA: 'course, I mean, it's really too complex—

VI: Yes.

MRA: —*but*, the thing is, I've noticed we actually learn from each other. Your way of doing something is quite different from mine. And so, when you act, I can say, "Oh, it can be done *that* way." Or if I act, you say, "Hmm, it could be done *that* way." *That's why. That's why.* Now, that's not the reason, but that certainly is a very noticeable aspect of the reason. And so, when we talk about the AACM: *that's what happened.* When you talk about the teaching: *that's* what happened.

VI: It's about choices?

MRA: Well, you can take any of them musicians—and you know most of them—

VI: Yeah, we were talking about Henry Threadgill and Anthony Braxton—

MRA: —they're all distinct individuals.

VI: Yes.

MRA: There's *no similarity* or *nothing*—

VI: It's true! [Laughs] It's *alarming*, actually.

MRA: —between *any* of us.

VI: Considering how many of you grew up together.

MRA: But we collaborated and associated with each other every day for years.

VI: Yeah.

MRA: *Every day*—

VI: Yeah.

MRA: —*for years!* You see? But that process was a human process.

VI: Right.

MRA: It was a human process, you know, *but*, with the emphasis on respect for the individual and the individual's right to *pursue* his or her direction, and in our case, again, in terms of composing and performing music.

VI: This music, then, proceeded, in the years that followed, to be heard around the world—in many ways *changed* the world, if you ask me. It had such a profound influence across so many communities. And that, to me, is—in a way it's perhaps easier to assess in retrospect. This is a strange question, but what did that feel like?

MRA: [Smiling] What did *what* feel like?!

VI: [Laughs] The realization—I mean, in a way, perhaps, what you're saying is that you knew all along because you were basically on to some very *human* questions. You know, at some level, it was through music, you were doing these things that were ultimately *not just* about music.

MRA: Right.

VI: So as that work then traveled and propagated—you know, for example, as you found yourself leaving Chicago and performing internationally and seeing this music *work* in different contexts. It was born in such a focused context; and yet, it then resonated outward. And so *that's* what I'm asking: What did you notice as, say, for example, performing in Europe in a cultural context that was very different from the circumstances in which a lot of the work was born? What did that *feel like*, interacting with those communities and those audiences and also other artists from that space?

MRA: Well, the fact that they, in Europe, the fact that they were like, they *welcomed* it, you know what I mean, then, it *expanded* the information that one would have about humanity itself.

Because, *what is it in them* that they could understand about what we were doing? [Whispering intensely] *The individual part of it. That's what I'm telling you, you understand?* [Normal voice] *It's much bigger* than this phenomenon we're talking about, "music." It's much bigger than that. You see? Individualism is a very *elusive* phenomenon. But yet we could go to Europe and pique someone's interest who knew nothing about the environment that we functioned in before we expanded, in terms of travel and whatnot like that. *And the reason is because on a human level, we rung a bell within them that was already there.*

VI: Yeah.

MRA: You see?

VI: I do.

MRA: Not that we set out to do that. But that's what happened. But then it was vice versa now. Wait a minute—see? They also rung a bell for *us*. It also enlightened *us*. You follow me?

VI: Yeah, I do.

MRA: Now we're getting closer to more information, in terms of individualism, you understand? And humanity.

VI: I mean, it's something I've learned—especially in the last few years, because I've had opportunities that I'd never had before—in fact, as you know, we ran into each other—

MRA: Oh, yeah, yeah. Nice concert.¹³

VI: —more than once, out there. We got to do a wonderful double bill in Macedonia.

MRA: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

VI: And it's like [Henry] Threadgill said to me once—that you learn things out there that you won't learn anywhere else, in terms of, in the course of performance, in particular, because it's—especially performance of this sort that we're talking about where choices are being made every step of the way.

MRA: Right.

VI: Every moment is a choice—

MRA: Exactly.

VI: —and so, those decisions, like you say, those choices, those are, on some level, that's you. Right?

MRA: Oh, it's you!

VI: Yeah.

MRA: It's you. You know—well, I don't mean to cut you off. You through?

VI: Well, I guess what I was just going to say is that what I find is that I'm listening to the audience. You know, they come to listen to us, but I'm there to listen to them.

MRA: It's an exchange, of course.

VI: So it sort of just amplifies what you were just saying, in the sense that, yes, "They rang a bell in me."

MRA: Of course—it's an exchange. Anyway, there seems to be a consistent—I'll call it a *law*—consistent law that pervades human activity. . . . It can be characterized in many ways, but I'll just say it's *the law of returns*, you know what I mean? You breathe out and you breathe in. In fact, breathing is a very great example of that law. Inhale and exhale? Well that's the whole thing: it's pulsating. Push the wind that way and then it comes back this way. That law is *consistent* throughout all humanity. There's no other law that's consistent like that throughout humanity. No other law. Some people say: reap what you sow. The boomerang. Know what I mean? So—

VI: Or karma.

MRA: Karma. *Of course*.¹⁴ When we do this music, know what I mean, we have a responsibility. The first move is a selfish move: here's what I want to do—I want to do this, I want to do that, I want to play this now—it's a selfish move, you know what I mean?

VI: Yes.

MRA: But the consequences of that move, or the effect of that move, we don't think about. So we come to these audiences; *then*, we get what the effect was. What did it do? This exchange, you know, what did it do? *What did it do?* We've had conversations with people—if five people walk up here, they all say different things about what they heard you do on the stage!

VI: They do, they really do.

MRA: But what they say is pretty, you know, *serious*. That individualism, I think, is a direct—and there's different types of individualism, of course: a guy could be playing bebop and playing it real good. You understand what I'm talking about? *He's a messenger, too*. You understand?

VI: Of course.

MRA: His individual way of expressing bebop, his individualism comes through *that*. Instead of a completely composed work that would be of his making, you know what I mean? But the thing in his individualism, his very strong individualism is

going to come through, especially if he's accomplished from hard work and study, know what I mean? A respect for what it is that he's doing, of course.

VI: Yeah, you can always hear traces of that kind of discipline—

MRA: *Sure.*

VI: —no matter what they're doing.

MRA: Right, right. You hear it because if they really respected that, they usually can do it pretty well.

VI: [Laughs]

MRA: Of course they respected it! You know what I mean? And so, they spent a lot of hours, you know, developing. But that individualism comes through like that because when you hear the person, you say, "Oh, that's so-and-so." How can you say that? You *know* it's so-and-so.

VI: Right.

MRA: Because you know so-and-so's individualism: the way so-and-so approaches what he or she does. Now, it's not always as easy to discern, especially in new music, or people doing just straight-out original music, it's not as easy to discern because, well, it's changeable.

VI: Well, the choices—

MRA: It may never come up the same way because there's no formula. So, you know, you can't pin it down like that. Although you get used to hearing some individual, you say, "Oh, it sounds like so-and-so" because you could hear it.

VI: I guess to me what makes it challenging is when you don't really know what the parameters of expression, like, where are the choices being made, essentially. And what you're hearing is the person's individual nature—

MRA: Right.

VI: —*resounding.*

MRA: *Right.*

VI: Right.

MRA: And there, we hear, well, we hear possibilities in any area. But certainly, we hear the possibilities that do not have formula as we know it—formulae, or however you want to say it, as we know it. So therefore, enlightened *or repelled*, in a different way, this process is *constantly going on*—constantly going on. Why the AACM people were chosen, *and we were chosen*, to do what it is that we've done and continue to do—*who knows?* Who

knows? But, if it helped or enlightened someone as it further enlightened us at the same time, then that's great.

VI: It is [laughs].

MRA: That's great. [Chuckles] You know what I mean? Because, for me, just to continue doing what I do—I'm already rewarded. I'm already rewarded. The fact that I can do what I want to do—that's my reward itself.

VI: It really is.

MRA: I don't need any other reward. I don't need praise. I don't need anything. That's it right there. It's all in the one package, you know what I mean? Because, if I can continue to do it and continue to visualize and *imagine* further growth and whatnot like that, you know what I mean, then *that's the reward itself*.

VI: It is [laughs].

MRA: Yeah. You know, *that's it*.

VI: I mean, this conversation is in the context of you being *presented* with an award. And you've been—

MRA: Well now, now, of course—

VI: [Laughs]

MRA: —now, here, let me say, let me say, with due respect to that: if someone feels they want to show an appreciation for something I've done, I'm grateful. I'm very grateful. Of course, it has nothing to do with *my continuum*, know what I mean? But I'm grateful, because I made contact with someone.

VI: Right.

MRA: That's gratifying. I mean, you know, it encourages me to keep going.

VI: It means that you've been heard, basically.

MRA: Well, well, well the thing is, I *made human contact*. Know what I mean?

VI: Yeah. It's more than being heard.

MRA: *It's more than the music*. There's human contact, because, you know, people, you know, when they really say what it is that caused the attraction, you usually end up talking about something other than music [laughs].

VI: I hear you. So let me ask you this. I mean this is the kind of, in a way, an absurd, or I guess the word is *preposterous*—it's a preposterous question. But I feel you can answer it [laughs] because when you speak this way, it leads me to ask—and many other things have led me to ask this: *why do we have music?* Because

you're talking about questions that, as you say, are beyond music, and truths that are beyond music. So then: *what is music?* And *why do we have it?*

MRA: Well, music is harnessed sound. Like you harness something?
VI: Yes.

MRA: Sound comes first. Sound is the raw material. Music is, you say, "Let me take some of this raw material and put it in a glass." It's harnessed. Now there it is. But sound is everywhere—it's still there.

VI: It is.

MRA: You just took a little sound, and you're treating it with this shape, here, you know what I mean? So you say, "Hmm, uh, let me pour it into this vessel." Now it's taking this shape. Because sound takes the shape that you can successfully put it in. That's not always easy to treat sound in that way; but sound is—well, sound can be—well, sound is sound, I mean, it can take whatever your imagination can accomplish. Sound can give you that. You're stopping it. So that's what music is: you've stopped this sound, you know, or you've *ordered* it—put it in a certain order. And that's all of the music: placed in a certain order, whether it's improvised or written. So you've harnessed some sound. So we call it music because we can hear it, and, well, you could say, oh that's, you say, "*de de de de de de, de de de de de*"—it's *harnessed*. That, for me, is the real focus—you're asking about the beginnings, you know—the focus on sound. Even when I didn't realize, that was the focus: on *sound*. *Sound*. And the fact that you can harness and organize sound *over and over*, repeatedly, over and over, in different ways, from your own individual perspective, of course. But you can do it over and over, and never get the same thing, except your own habits [laughs]. That's what you—you're gonna get that!

VI: Yeah.

MRA: But other than that—

VI: So that music is then something that we do. It's not something that we discover or find, but it's something that we *make*.

MRA: [Agreeing] You *make* it.

VI: Yeah.

MRA: You make it. But you make it *out of sound*.

VI: Yes.

MRA: You make it out of sound. You take that recorder. You hear

that sound? We could take that recorder, go out there and get five minutes of it, take it back, put it in a piece. Well, now it's not the same as that anymore. Of course, you're going to run it—you've got five minutes. And you could repeat that over and over: [imitating sound of loop] *mmmmmm ti mmmmmm ti . . .*

VI: [Laughs]

MRA: And you could do that over and over because you got five minutes of that; but you don't have *that*.

VI: Yeah, yeah.

MRA: And that's what it is.

VI: So it's something about intention? The fact that when someone hears it, they hear the vestige of intention that was put into it—that, somehow, somebody made this.

MRA: Yeah, they hear the individual's choice—what makes them individual.

VI: And so somehow we also as individual listeners are kind of recognizing that part of ourselves that might have done that too perhaps.

MRA: That's a possibility. It depends on how the person takes it, you know? Certainly the listener's imagination is *piqued*, and the listener could imagine something completely different from what the individual intended when the individual harnessed the sound to make music. You know, usually that's the case, you know what I mean? But then, it brings us to the fact that *the purpose of it is to excite all these different perspectives*. Because when the person comes and tells you, "*Oh*, when I heard your concert, it made me think about so-and-so and so-and-so," and you say, "What?" Because—you know what I mean?

VI: Yeah, yeah.

MRA: But there's a perspective that you wouldn't have even thought about, know what I mean? The act of doing it caused a reaction of that sort.

VI: Yes. Now you mentioned earlier theater, and I know also that you worked in visual art as well.

MRA: Still do.

VI: And still do. And is it all related for you?

MRA: Oh yeah.

VI: As you move across—

MRA: Yeah.

VI: —what are traditionally called disciplines, do you find that

you're bringing the same sensibility to these investigations? Like, are you the composer also you the painter? Or do you find that—

MRA: *Yes.*

VI: —painting reveals something new?

MRA: It's all sort of one thing, because, you know, as you know, you can associate color and rhythm to music and painting. You know what I mean? If you want to imagine it that way you could just do that. That's what I do. Because, from looking at painters and listening to musicians, I find, to analyze it for my own purposes so I remember, I say, "Well, that's what they're doing."

VI: *Yes.*

MRA: *So—*

VI: *It is.*

MRA: —you know, I say, "That's what they're doing."

VI: Do you find that there's something analogous to composition and improvisation in painting, in the construction of visual art?

MRA: It could be, in the sense that improvisation has two processes going. It has improvisation *and composition* going at the same time. It's all at the same time—I'm composing and I'm performing at the same time. *I'm composing and I'm performing at the same time.* It's all the same! So with the painting it's the same thing. It's the same thing, you know. I think one time you asked me—[smiling] *you asked me* when I went on the stage—you asked me, you asked me, you said, "What do you do? Do you have a theme or something or do you have something?"—didn't you, you asked me that one time when we were in Italy.

VI: [Remembering] Uh-huh! When you played solo.¹⁵

MRA: Yeah, you asked me. And I think I told you—I *did* tell you: I said no.

VI: [Laughs]

MRA: I said, "I go up and I drop my hand down and when I hit a note, that's it." *I'm composing and performing at the same time.*

VI: Basically, the process has begun.

MRA: *Right.*

VI: And then, from there, it's all choices.

MRA: *Yes.*

VI: So why are these terms useful then—composition and improvisation?

MRA: Well . . .

VI: Or are they? [Laughs]

MRA: That's an interesting question, *Are they useful?* [Laughs]

VI: [Laughing] I mean, they get hung on lots of things, but . . .

MRA: Well, the thing is, I think it depends on who's using them, because how can you talk about something like that, because, one thing . . . going back to the individualism idea again: each of us has a *right* to *connotate*, you know what I mean, what a thing is, or what a word is, you know—

VI: Yeah.

MRA: —semantically, or whether it's necessary to apply to certain things, like you're suggesting here. When you say “composition,” what does it mean to you? What does it mean to me? What does it mean to him? I can only say what it means to me. If I'm composing, I'm harnessing sound in a certain way, perhaps with a pencil, you know what I mean? I'm harnessing this sound with this pencil. So like, the pencil is useful for *architectural* purposes, know what I mean, in terms of the shaping, uh, graphic. But now, I call that composing. And I also call it improvisation because I'm improvising also. I'm improvising also.

VI: But, at the same time, to me, and this is actually something you said once, and in fact you said it at Columbia that time, in that symposium.¹⁶ You said that “improvisation is a human response to necessity.”

MRA: *Right.*

VI: Which gives a sense of there's something irreversible about that.

MRA: Well, just take a look at humans. Not just musicians.

VI: Yes, of course.

MRA: *Any* human.

VI: In fact, when you said that, you weren't specifically talking about music.

MRA: I wasn't. I was talking about *people*.

VI: Right.

MRA: Because *everybody* here: the lady that's cooking in the kitchen, she's cooking food, so she needs three eggs, she only has two, you understand? So she says, “Hmm, only got two eggs, gotta make this thing, so, OK, it calls for three eggs, tell you what I'll do, uh, eggs now, uh . . .” She might imagine, she says, “Well, if I take this milk and this cheese . . .” [Laughs]

VI: Right, yeah.

MRA: You know . . . [Laughs loudly]

VI: [Laughs] The color might be right, anyway.

MRA: Right, “I take the milk and this cheese, and I’ll just *put it in there*. Hmm, that might be *nice*.”

VI: Yeah.

MRA: So she improvises. You know, it doesn’t have to be that extreme, but she *improvises*. So people improvise all the time.

VI: Yeah, of course.

MRA: You know what I mean? They improvise *all the time*, because it becomes *necessary* to improvise in order to do what it is that they want to do. That’s why I made that statement, because it’s been my experience, in observing humans and myself, that that’s pretty consistent: everybody improvises.

VI: Yeah, of course.

MRA: *Everybody improvises*.

VI: There’s nobody who doesn’t.

MRA: Right! You know.

VI: [Laughs]

MRA: You improvise because you just . . . it will become necessary. Sometimes during the day it will become necessary for you to improvise, in some way.

VI: Well, to me it’s like we’re born doing that.

MRA: Right. Exactly.

VI: I mean, that’s what we are.

MRA: That’s right. You have the capacity to go *beyond* what your base state is. If it becomes necessary to go beyond that, you go beyond. Now what is that phenomenon? You follow? You just say, “Oh, OK, well uh, so-and-so and so-and-so-and-so, tell you what, this thing, just let me turn this table upside down, and I think we can address this stuff a little bit better.” Just like that, you just turn it upside down. So, you know . . .

VI: Yeah [laughing].

MRA: It’s very consistent. Music, in terms of improvisers, might be an area that *specializes* in a certain form of improvisation. But it is not the only area; it doesn’t start in music. It starts in human life, you know what I mean? Music gives one a chance to be more *extreme* [laughs].

VI: Yes [laughs].

MRA: Or painting, you know, it depends.

VI: Whether it's presence or absence, I suppose—the extreme in either way.

MRA: Yeah. But, the thing is, it's very difficult to talk about this thing that we're talking about!

VI: [Laughs]

MRA: Because it's, well, you know . . .

VI: [Uncertain] Well, I guess, the only reason I—

MRA: No, you OK!

VI: Yeah, I mean, not even to make an excuse. But when you spoke of using a pencil, I mean, you can erase what you write with a pencil, right?

MRA: *Yes, you can.*

VI: So what I meant is that composing seems, in the sense it is used in the West, which is basically where the term was invented, there is a sense that it's something that is being prepared to be executed.

MRA: Well, OK. You're talking about a certain concept of composing.

VI: Right, I mean look, I suppose we could go all day, talking about stuff like this! [Laughs]

MRA: Well, you see!

VI: I'm down, but I know that—

MRA: *But* the plotting of a continuum is done all over the world, in all cultures, the plotting of a continuum, *which is composing*. It's composing. Now, I think the fact that one area does not want to use the language that another area uses does not change the fact that they're doing the same thing. Don't use the language. *Don't use that language*. I mean, use the language of your area. But, on a human level, when the plotting of this continuum goes, *there's a calculation going on* of some sort, because humans must *finally have order* even if it's very abstract. The system must have order, in the sense that it is, it *could be* doing that, but it's doing *that*, you understand? It has its order—it's *doing that*.

VI: Right, right.

MRA: Use any word, "chaotic," whatever—*it has its order*. You follow me? It's deliberately doing this. So it gets random stuff, and this, that, and the other, you know what I mean—but it's deliberately doing that. It's consistent in that. For instance, in your country: raga. Raga. You know what I mean? There's a *system* to

the raga. It *means* something. *It means something.* It *means* something. You know. It means something.

VI: It does.

MRA: There's certain emphasis and things that occur, and it occurs there all the time. Follow what I'm talking about?

VI: Yup.

MRA: Even though the whole situation is being improvised in a way also. So it's the combination of so-called composition or whatever—we don't have to use those terms, though, when we're talking about that, though, because those terms don't fit, you follow me, because there's another focus, see?

VI: It's a set of priorities or principles.

MRA: *Right.* You follow me? And you take . . . you go to China—[laughs, abandoning that idea]. But the thing is, this harnessing of sound—and that's the great part about the individualism, you understand? Why do we all have all these different languages? And these different so-called musical systems? Why?

VI: Well, I suppose, I would say that they emerge in mutual isolation over many years, centuries, millennia, based on the choices of individuals in a community, And customs that develop over time, and norms, and I guess you end up having a certain kind of continuity. But then there may also be ruptures or, say, hybridizations or invasions or different things that happen.

MRA: Well, you're telling me about development, but you didn't answer my question. And I don't expect you to answer it.

VI: [Laughs]

MRA: I wouldn't put that on you. But you're telling me—

VI: *Is there an answer?*

MRA: Right, so you're telling me about development, but what I'm talking about is *humankind*, you follow me? There's this phenomenon that pervades humankind that allows you to say "bread" in your language, the way you would say it in an Indian language, and it allows me to say it as a Black person in America. It allows him to say it, you know, from his base. You follow what I'm talking about?

VI: Yeah.

MRA: We say the same thing, but, the tongue organizes the situation quite differently, you follow what I'm talking about? But the fact that we're talking about the same thing and can say

it in different tongues—that's worth investigating as to why. *What's the purpose of that? What's the purpose of it?* Well, I'll tell you one thing: the rhythmic difference is fascinating. What produces that phenomenon? Why would it produce a phenomenon like that? You know what I mean? So my investigation, or my interest, not investigation but my interest—I suppose it is an investigation, too—but my interest or my focus is like that. I'm curious about why is this great phenomenon so basic. It's so *basic* but yet *so elusive*. My quest to, like, create in this area where we are, *music* and whatnot like that, you know what I mean, it's, like, all one thing. Back to what we were talking about: the improvisation and the composition are the same. And I believe it's the same in *every* community. See, because improvisation and composition, being the *one* process, came *before the pencil*.

VI: Right.

MRA: [Laughs]

VI: Sure did.

MRA: [Laughs] It came before the pencil!

VI: Before, yes, before any writing instrument.

MRA: It came before *any* recording of the situation. It came *long before it*. Right?

VI: Yeah.

MRA: *Long* before it. The whole idea of it having significant *spiritual* meaning came *long* before the *secular* display that we engage in [laughs].

VI: [Laughs] Right.

MRA: But it's all great because it's never beyond humanity. It's never beyond humanity. Some people like rap music. Some people like—

VI: A lot of people do! [Laughs]

MRA: It's OK!

VI: [Laughs]

MRA: Some people like hard rock, you know what I mean? Some people like rhythm and blues. Some people like bebop. Some people like, you know, the so-called new approaches to music, you know what I mean? So you have people at every turn, regardless to what it is, you have people at every turn. Why? Because the way it seems to me is that each one of us gets our message from different perspectives, see, so, and it all just

comes out of the very thing that we're talking about [slyly] and *not* talking about, because obviously we don't know what we're talking about! [Laughs]

VI: [Laughs] Well!

MRA: In the sense of, you know, how it applies to the phenomenon of *humanity itself*.

VI: Yeah. I've always just been so inspired by your—I mean it's not this is only your approach—but your way of treating music as a line of inquiry into these basic human questions. I know that you identify with a community and at the same time you also—in a way this is one of the gifts of the AACM, is to assert a certain kind of global relevance of something that seems so specific at the same time. And I guess I just want to thank you, for that has been [MRA laughs] such a profound inspiration to me and to many, many of my peers and comrades, and many people across many generations, many communities around the world. And, you know, this is the kind of work that can only inspire. And you've dedicated to this pursuit, and it's been of utmost impact in the world.

MRA: Well, I thank you for that. But I'll have to pass it on to the real receiver. I'm a *vessel*, you know what I mean? And I accept what you've said. But I'm receiving as a representative, in the sense that the power that saw fit to release us all into this individual firmament and yet leave us basic to the human principle of—what should I say, it's very difficult to talk about these things—well, to the human principle of just *being a part of that law of return that I spoke about*, you know what I mean? Being a part of that law of return, that force, you know what I mean. I think, I'll have to pass the appreciation to that force and yet accept it myself on a human level. And I must compliment you for being *consistent* in what *you* do.

VI: Well, thank you.

MRA: You know because I appreciate that. I appreciate that. You've been quite consistent, and I appreciate that.

VI: Well, it's come from, as I said, being inspired by the examples that you and your peers have set forth. I'm just glad to get to participate in the same conversation.

MRA: Well, I'm delighted and happy to speak with you, you know, because I don't do much talking [laughs].

VI: [Laughs] You don't do this?

MRA: I mean, I'm *capable* of doing a lot of talking, but I just don't *do* a lot of talking.

VI: Well, I guess, I feel like what's been evident even in this—however long we've spoken is—it's a phrase that you used once years ago when you were talking to me about [Thelonious] Monk.

MRA: Mmmhmm.

VI: I think it was about fifteen years ago.

MRA: Mmmhmm.

VI: You said that *Monk was always creating*.

MRA: [Whispering] *That's right*.

VI: And that phrase has really stuck with me. I think about it all the time. And I think *you* are always creating. I mean, I think it's a perfect encapsulation of the kind of work you do. Because, you know, when we talk about all those distinctions and parsing words and what's composition and isn't and so on—none of that matters because it all is essentially *that*, you know. And it's all that ongoing and endless process.

MRA: Right. I think it all should be respected, though, because *individuals* are doing it. If a guy likes to do mainstream things—great. Do it well. You know, that's all that matters. Just do it well. Do it with respect. You know what I mean? I'll be cheering for you [laughs].

VI: [Laughs]

MRA: Whatever it is—just do it well. If a cat can rap real good, I mean, really do it *real* good, you know what I mean—do it well—I *like it*. You know what I mean?

VI: Yeah.

MRA: I like it because you *respect* it, you know what I mean? You do it well, you know what I mean? I think that's great.

VI: Yes.

MRA: Because people can trust that. A guy that works hard to really perfect it. The audience can come and they can *trust* that person. You know? And that's important because, after all, they're, like, *wide open*, and they can be harmed.

VI: Right. That's how vulnerable they are . . . So, it's a half-century, basically, of activity from the AACM.

MRA: Oh yeah, it's been quite a while. But, here in New York since '83.

VI: Yeah.

MRA: 'bout '83.

VI: Congratulations on a profound—I mean, again, this isn't just to praise you for its own sake or anything—but, *seriously*, I commend you for this amazing legacy and for continuing to push boundaries and create and inspire us all.

MRA: Well, thank you, and I'm also inspired by your activities. You know, you can believe that. I mean, we *really learn* from each other, you know. That's the great part. So I appreciate that and I appreciate your comments.

VI: Thank you.

Afterword

Abrams's law of return(s) consists of the understanding that the vaunted "individual" exists only in relation, that for this reason we respect the ditchdigger, the musician, the hairdresser, the swami. Any individual's actions resonate, as clearly as a bell, within others, provoking a wide, endless, unpredictable range of individual responses; the special purpose of music-making is "to excite all these different perspectives" in their polyphonic resonance, through which, reciprocally, music-makers also hear a bell clearly being "rung . . . for us." We might call it a sonorous ethics, but we can also detect within it a personal practice of freedom: "For me, just to continue doing what I do—I'm already rewarded."

Such Abrams utterances—"Are you your mind?" or "Play your way out" or "the law of return(s)"—often do more than narrate or teach. On impact, as delivered in Abrams's signature echoic fashion, such phrases become new and permanent fixtures of your person; they lodge themselves in the ear and the mind, remaining alive to you, like a new and useful part of the body, or like benevolent earworms, calling from within. Such language can reactivate in key moments, mantra-like, and recondition an experience in the present. Because of them, you are able to do more, see and hear further, imagine more vividly and to greater effect. These words inspire and animate: they propel the spirit and motivate action. They are phrases of change.

This resonant, antiphonal musicality with language exemplifies gospel music scholar Braxton Shelley's theorization of sacred words. Invoking the "new materialism" of Jane Bennett and others, Shelley writes, "Yes, gospel is a discursive tradition, but its primary discourse is believed to have 'thing-power.' The thing-power of sacred words

moves mountains, soothes sickness, and grants blessings. If one listens to gospel songs and sermons, it becomes apparent words are believed to act on the material world.”¹⁷ While Abrams did not situate himself directly in the communities of belief whose medium is gospel music, he did state in our interview, “The whole idea of [music] having significant *spiritual* meaning came *long* before the *secular* display that we engage in.” Moreover, he did make consistent use of this Black esoteric tradition of crafting new musicalities with words, so that they might continue to act on the material world well beyond their moment of utterance.¹⁸ Might we suppose something similar about music-making—that for a community of believers, musical acts might live on in the world, like the long resonant tail of a rung bell? Might we therefore accept that belief becomes the socially cohesive force that facilitates and organizes this process? Perhaps belief is the hinge on which hangs our very notions of musicality: how we call to others, and how we are called; how we decide who or what has the power to speak or sing, to us or for us; how we ring bells within others, and how bells within us are rung in return.

In March 2018, five months after Abrams’s passing, fellow composer-pianist Craig Taborn and I recorded a duo concert of spontaneous two-piano creations in Budapest.¹⁹ On the ensuing live album, we dedicated the most substantial piece to Abrams, a towering influence on us both. We titled it “Clear Monolith,” to invoke Abrams’s favorite bell-like parting salutation: *Stay clear!*

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Joshua Kohn, the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation, and Phillip Golub for help with the transcription, and an inexpressible gratitude to my collaborator, the late Muhal Richard Abrams.

Notes

The definitive source on Abrams’s life is the substantial work of historical musicology by one of his former pupils: trombonist, composer, electronic musician, and scholar George Lewis’s comprehensive history of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Abrams’s presence permeates nearly every page of this landmark book. The reader is also directed to Abrams’s own website, <https://www.muhalrichardabrams.com/>. Later interviews with Abrams include “Steve Smith Interviews Muhal Richard

Abrams and Roscoe Mitchell,” Ojai Music Festival, June 10, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRWEgK6J6b0>; Ted Panken, “For the 84th Birthday of Muhal Richard Abrams, Two Downbeat Articles (2006, 2010), one Jazziz Article (2011), and a Profile for All about Jazz (2007),” in the blog *Today Is the Question: Ted Panken on Music, Politics and the Arts*, September 19, 2014, <https://tedpanken.wordpress.com/2014/09/19/for-the-84th-birthday-of-muhal-richard-abrams-two-downbeat-articles-2009-2010-and-one-jazziz-article-2011/>. Due to their availability elsewhere, I won’t rehearse further biographical details here except as they emerge in our discussion.

1. I served as music director for this iteration of the festival and curated this performance. The concert was captured on video and can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bp9MoWVWkjo>

2. Muhal Richard Abrams with Roscoe Mitchell and George Lewis, *Streaming*, sound recording, New York: Pi Recordings, 2006.

3. See, for example, Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (1991; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016); Vijay Iyer, “Microstructures of Feel, Macrostructures of Sound: Embodied Cognition in West African and African American Musics” (PhD diss., University of California at Berkeley, 1998).

4. Fumi Okiji, *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 5.

5. “AACM Panel Discussion,” Stanford University, May 12, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuT8r8D0w3Q>

6. Okiji, *Jazz as Critique*, 6.

7. See, for instance, Eric Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Arthur Taylor, *Notes and Tones: Musician-to-Musician Interviews* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1977).

8. From Smith’s back-cover blurb for William Parker, *Conversations* (Paris: RogueArt, 2011).

9. Here is the first of many instances of this idea: *individuality*, *individualism*, or *the individual*.

10. This is an instance of something that Abrams and others of his region and generation employed often in speech: a “no” that is intended as an *affirmative* interjection.

11. This meeting was recorded, and a transcript appears in its entirety in Lewis, *Power Stronger Than Itself*, 2007.

12. I intended to say, “South Side of Chicago.”

13. We are referring to a festival in October 2011 in Skopje, Macedonia, where my working trio performed on a double bill with his aforementioned trio with Mitchell and Lewis.

14. The “of course” was evidently intended as a nod to my Indian heritage.

15. He is referring to our backstage encounter before his 2005 solo performance at Ai Confini tra Sardegna e Jazz, in Sant’Anna Arresi, Sardinia.

16. “The Conversations Series: Improvisation in Everyday Life,” September 25, 2007, Columbia University. “The guiding premise of the series, co-sponsored by the Center for Jazz Studies at Columbia University, is that the study of impro-

visation can present a new animating paradigm for scholarly inquiry in the humanities, arts and the social, political and natural sciences.” The dialogue included Abrams, George Lewis, Yusef Komunyakaa, Patricia Williams, and Margo Jefferson. <https://worldleaders.columbia.edu/events/conversations-series-improvisation-everyday-life>

17. Braxton Shelley, *Healing for the Soul: Richard Smallwood, the Vamp, and the Gospel Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). The phrase “thing-power” cites Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 2–3. To my knowledge Shelley is one of the only scholars as of this writing to apply the influential idea of thing-power back onto language, in a way that complements notions of performativity, signifying, call-and-response, and other common framings of Black discourse.

18. His album titles reflect this creative, poetically layered approach, including esoteric phrases (*Levels and Degrees of Light*, 1967, *Young at Heart / Wise in Time*, 1969, *Things to Come from Those Now Gone*, 1972, *Vision towards Essence*, 2007) and neologistic portmanteaus (*Afrisong*, 1975, *Sightsong*, 1975, *LifeA BlineC*, 1978, *Spiumonesty*, 1978).

19. Vijay Iyer and Craig Taborn, *The Transitory Poems* (Munich: ECM Records, 2019).