

The Deft, Quiet Shout of Her Hands: Geri Allen's Speculative Musicalities

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In early 2019, I co-led a graduate research seminar titled “Musicality” with my Harvard colleague, music theorist Christopher Hasty. For a full semester, our group roved across disciplines in pursuit of this elusive titular quality. It’s a peculiar term that gets used in antithetical ways. On the one hand, for scientists, musicality names the evolved capacity for music,¹ something the entire human species is presumed to possess; on the other hand, to the general English speaker, musicality denotes an aesthetic judgment of exceptionality – a special quality conferred on selected performances, or on a small handful of exemplary individuals. We praise a person’s particular performance of a given piece of music by describing it as particularly *musical*; by extension, then, most performances of music presumably fall short of this exceptional, “musical” status. If most music fails to exhibit musicality, a capacity that nonetheless all human beings are said to possess, musicality therefore becomes a paradoxical concept, one that both precedes and exceeds music itself. That very instability, we found, makes the term particularly ripe as a potentially productive critical concept.

One of our aims with the seminar was to unthink the presumed objecthood of music, and correspondingly, the presumed ontology/being-ness/having-ness of people. If musicality is a quality that a person may possess, then that attribution is subject to notions of what music is, and what a person is. We get waylaid by the “stickiness”² of nouns like “music” and “(the hu)man”—words that, almost by virtue of their generality, become freighted with intention, desire, and power. If instead we adopt “musicking,” Christopher Small’s now-quite-familiar verb that critiques the noun,³ we might similarly consider the Jamaican theorist Sylvia Wynter’s critique of

the category of the “human” as a Western project that overrepresents the human as white and male; in its stead she develops a framework of “being human as praxis.”⁴ Then qualities of musicality and/or humanness can be ascribed to actions, behaviors, practices, and relations, rather than to objects and beings; we can consider what constitutes a musical action. Actions are markers of animacy;⁵ they signal the capacity to move, and are therefore ascribed to something that moves, to an actor in a network, a quasi-subject. As musical actions are considered in context, their musicalities necessarily become relational, and we shift the focus away from making *music*, *being* musical, or *having* the gift of musicality, instead toward *doing something musical(ly)*.

Musicality might then name a special “sticky” quality *within* musicking, some aspect of a musical act that captures an observer’s attention. One waits/attends/listens because one is somehow captured or drawn in by a musical action. Our capacities to *hear* and be affected/caught by the musical actions of another, or to *produce* musical actions that affect/capture a listening other, suggest an understanding of musicality as sociality up close: an aural empathy, attraction, or intimacy. This framework does not simply depend on the presence, absence, or ontological status of music or beings, but instead emphasizes musicality as an affective relation across networks of beings, objects, and systems.

A participant in our 2019 seminar, music theorist Anna Yu Wang, once described her experience of musicality in witnessing a performance of traditional Chinese choreography. In her description, she spontaneously uttered a phrase that has stuck with me ever since: “you feel guided.” To borrow and twist Spivak’s phrase “intending subjects,”⁶ the “you” in “you feel guided” is the *attending subject*, that is, you, observer, who deign to deem an observed other as a fellow human being worthy of your attention; the word “feel” locates this response in the realm of affect, or experiential intensity; and the word “guided” suggests the recognition of an action as a “made”/“done”/“considered”/“intended” thing—the trace of the hand, body, ear, and aesthetic of an Other, of someone who has taken action to mark, activate, and enliven their world for “you.” *You feel guided*. A subject is caught by this new, intensely forged intersubjective link. Musicality becomes a directed sociality: a way of sensing and feeling *held* via the trace of another being who acts toward and for you. “You” “feel” their hand guiding your senses, and that feeling is arresting. Musicality names how “we” perceive and are held by the sounds of another: how we hail or call to each other.

The word “guided” therefore suggests a submission to the order imposed by this Other. It’s what we in the West are trained to expect from the so-called “great” composers, performers, authors, playwrights, choreographers: what Michel Foucault called the Author-function,⁷ the paternal phantom presence that marks literary discourse,

the delimiting fantasy that frames our possible responses. The word “guided” is about enclosure, which is to say, power and subjection. The utterance “you feel guided” really means “*I feel guided*,” but dares to extrapolate further from the self to enforce a notion of “us,” a fraught plurality that invariably excludes as much as it includes. Wang’s felicitous phrase “you feel guided” thus reveals *the entanglement of subjectivity, affect, and power* at the heart of musicality.

Developing musicality as a critical concept in this way helps dislodge our listening from hierarchies of musical objects, and instead allows us to attend to *possible ways of listening and sounding*, potential processes by which actions might become musical: contingent, relational, emergent musicalities. We need not rely on Wang’s singular “guide” figure: for example, an ensemble might present a distributed subjectivity through collective listening and nonhierarchical action; listeners might participate through creative bodily engagement of their own. Indeed, we need not presume a singular, prevailing notion of musicality, but might instead imagine many musicalities for many lifeworlds: many praxes of being human.



The constellation of practices referred to as Black music confers sonic life on such fugitive, relational qualities: embodied listening, heterarchical interaction, call and response, moving-together-in-time, and ecstatic transcendence. Moten writes,

The animative materiality—the aesthetic, political, sexual, and racial force—of the ensemble of objects that we might call black performances, black history, blackness, is a real problem and a real chance for the philosophy of the human being (which would necessarily bear and be irreducible to what is called, or what somebody might hope to someday call, subjectivity).⁸

Let us therefore hear Black musicking as a ritual space for *Black speculative musicalities*: sonically disruptive practices that posit new ways of becoming musical, otherwise possibilities⁹ for Black life and Black subjectivities, and radical futurities for the “philosophy of the human being.”

In deciding which facets of Geri Allen’s speculative musicalities to share in this space, I considered what about her first grabbed *my* attention. Thirty years ago, her hands first showed up to my young ears as spiders, scampering through multidimensional cracks in the rhythm. Those hands produced spare, spindly melodies, weaving and twisting around the harmonies, and leaving gauzy trails that accumulated into something majestic: an odd, enchanted web spun into the corner of a song, strange and delicate.

Those ephemeral lines, first appearing as spontaneous drops into the abyss, turned out to be structural moves, executed with care, determination, and foresight. I had the ongoing sense that the owner of these hands not only possessed perspicacious

insight into whatever piece of music she was playing, but that she managed also to hear whatever that song *wasn't yet saying*—and that was the exact space where she would begin her work, in the time-honored Black radical tradition of exceeding any and all frames. Such was our impression of Geri Allen, the pianist, as documented on other people's recordings: a constant source of sly, wry conjurings and disruptions, chromatic dislocations and interventions, she seemed to glide, unbothered, from mastery to transgression and back.

Her improvisations were full of space, thought, listening, and a liberatory quality; her groove was deep, her two-hand independence often shocking; her lines and voicings were fresh and unique; she would seem at times to play with great reserves of calm, but when she chose to step up, she would dazzle with fearless virtuosity. She could make a piano sigh, whisper, chortle, shriek, and roar.

Below, I present a transcription of Allen's piano playing on "The Short End of the Stick," recorded by the Ralph Peterson Quintet, from their 1989 album *V* (see figure 1).¹⁰ The band also includes bassist Phil Bowler, trumpeter Terence Blanchard, and saxophonist Steve Wilson.

The experience of transcribing this solo felt odd, because the musicalities referred to above, the qualities that caught my ear, seem unremarkable on the page, and the standard tactics of analysis serve to deflate what is exceptional about the creativities and musicalities at work here. What captured and fascinated me was not how she plays the changes (which I didn't even know until I transcribed them), nor how she "builds" her solo—it was how she expresses time, fearlessly unbothered by Peterson's fusillades; how she on occasion emanates out of the ensemble texture, in what Arthur Jafa (after Fred Moten) likened to a solar flare,¹¹ seeming to swerve away from the form, only to then miraculously land with Peterson's drums, proving that she was with him the whole time; how she seems to be always both *wholly with* and strikingly *other than* the band. I remain mystified by the surprising absence of chords; there are rarely more than two notes sounding at once. Somehow she constructs dancing arcs of affective intensity without resorting to sonic saturation, rhythmic density, or excessive sustain: let's call them *quiet shouts*. For example, as played, the sequence of dyads around measures 72–77 might be notated as *mp*, and yet they feel momentous, even climactic. The sparse yet pervasive left-hand stabs hold a clue, as they are never *not* in rhythm; often landing on eighth-note upbeats that lock tightly with the drums and bass, they convey a subtle rhythmic grounding, a quiet self-assurance that she is rhythmically not alone, and need not force the music. The resulting spaces in her solo express a generosity to her bandmates; she is not looking to dominate the conversation, but rather to motivate, propel, and stretch *with* the ensemble. The silences in her playing, in the tradition of soloists like Ahmad Jamal, Shirley Horn, and Wadada Leo Smith, signify key moments of *listening and interdependence*. Most of all, what captivated me in the late 1980s was

Gerri Allen's solo on "The Short End of the Stick"
from Ralph Peterson Quintet, *Volition* (1989)

♩ = 220 bright swing
1st chorus

transcribed by Vijay Iyer

Pno.

A. Bass

5

8

Figure 1: Gerri Allen solo from "The Short End of the Stick," from V by the Ralph Peterson Quintet.

2

11 Bb C7alt. Eb/Db Gb7 3

11 Bb C7alt. Eb/Db Gb7 3

16 Eb7 Db C/Bb

16 Eb7 Db C/Bb

20 B/C Eb/Db 3 3

20 B/C Eb/Db 3 3

23 $G\flat^7$ $E\flat^7$ 3 3

23 $G\flat^7$ $E\flat^7$ 3 3

25 D^{maj7} 5

25 D^{maj7} 5

30 3 3 3 B C 3 3 3

30 3 3 3 B C 3 3 3

4

33 D $\flat$ $^{\circ}$

nebulous

37

gliss. #

41

B $\flat$ maj7

gliss. #

44 **2nd chorus** $D\flat^o$ 5

48 3

52 2

6

56

B $\flat$

C 7 alt.

3

60

E $\flat$ /D $\flat$

G $\flat$ 7

3

63

E $\flat$ 7

D $\flat$

B $\flat$

3

67 C^7_{alt} $E\flat/D\flat$ $G\flat^7$ 7

67 C^7_{alt} $E\flat/D\flat$ $G\flat^7$ 7

71 $E\flat^7$ D^{maj7}

71 $E\flat^7$ D^{maj7}

75 (B)

75 (B)

8

79 (C) $D^b\circ$

83

83

alternating hands

87

87

91

how her hands would dance: how the embodied structures and rhythms of her hands generated a contrasting, productive musical form of their own. The solo's closing six bars—a two-handed triplet salvo, followed by a signature one-handed tumble, arriving impeccably on the last chord—showcase the speculative work of the hands, their power to imagine new musicalities that intervene on and push against song form and metrical form.



Yet if this was all you knew about Allen—her way of transforming someone else's band by calmly inhabiting, dancing in, and shouting from its margins—you might be a fan, but you would also be wholly unprepared for her own music. Imagine a sturdy, splendid palace built entirely from the peculiar details found in those spiderwebs: the splayed intervals proliferating and surrounding you as ostinati; the jagged, errant lines somehow doubled, orchestrated, even sung; the asymmetric rhythms stacked in contrapuntal towers; all the mercurial tendencies in her piano playing suddenly solidified and given full force. It was that same aesthetic from the margins, now made thrillingly central. This was the musical language of Geri Allen: clear, ebullient, and resoundingly complete.

The fragment in figure 2 of Allen's nearly contemporaneous composition, "Drummer's Song," from her own 1987 album *Open on All Sides . . . in the Middle*, features a midrange ostinato and a bassline in intricate, punctuated rhythmic counterpoint, producing a bright yet persistently ambiguous tonal implication. The contours in the middle line seem generated by the hand: grabbable pentatonic and inverted triadic shapes, altered on the repeat from a perfect-fourth-plus-major-third to a perfect-fourth-plus-tritone. The latter shape (GbCbF and AbDbG), fingered 1–2–5 (right hand) or 5–3–1 (left hand), became one of Allen's favorite and most identifiable sonorities, similarly to how stacked perfect fourths (often fingered 5–2–1 in the left hand) became associated with McCoy Tyner. The upper melodic figure caps off this contrapuntal cycle with a peculiar gestural filigree (the sixteenth-note sextuplet in the phrase's final measure), which strikes the ear as similar to the signature gesture that ends her solo on Peterson's recording. (Similar figures also appear in measures 7–8 and 9–10 of the same solo.) These clustered sequences of semitones and fourths or tritones seem to trace out the periphery of the right hand's unextended span; the listener experiences these liminal musicalities of the hand as it creeps like a spider, or perhaps a crab, wobbling back and forth as it moves stepwise down the keyboard. The above attributes demonstrate how the speculative work of the hands, the sonic traces¹² of their embodied imagination, became formal raw material for Allen the composer. Allen's compositions could be heard as careful distillations of her hands' roving, experiential musicalities.

Drummer's Song

GERI ALLEN
(transc. by v. iyer)

♩ = 95 open 8va

mf

5 (8)

8 (8) 6

10 A

Figure 2: Excerpt from "Drummer's Song" by Geri Allen, from *Open on All Sides . . . in the Middle*.

2

13

16

18

open -- drum solo on cue

21 **B** §

23

f

25 *f* *8va* 3

27 (8)

29 (8)

31 (8) 6

4

33

35

C

37 Dm⁷ D^b7 C(sus4) G B^bm E^b7 C C⁷(sus4)

45 Am B^bm E^b7(sus4) E^b7 E^bm Dm Gm C⁷

OPEN FOR SOLOS
D.S. TO [B]
FOR HEAD OUT

53

56

1. 2.



Geri Allen was much more than a powerful innovator in modern music. She was also a scholar and historian of African American music, a community organizer, an institution builder, a feminist, a deeply committed and big-hearted educator, a dedicated mother, and a quietly determined leader. As a musician she was a conduit for spiritual truths and healing energies. She was at home with experimentalism and tradition, embracing new technologies and old; she let her creative voice shine, but would leave no one behind. She was a bright light among us: a friend, teacher, and nurturer to many, myself included. And every facet of her majestic life, Geri Allen's entire praxis of being human, is bracingly audible in the mercurial, unshakeable, guiding musicality of her hands.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Henkjan Honing, ed., *The Origins of Musicality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).
2. Sara Ahmed describes objects as becoming "sticky" with emotional or affective charge. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 2, 11.
3. Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).
4. Wynter used the phrase as part of a talk given at Wesleyan University in 2008, a version of which was later circulated online as an unpublished manuscript titled "Human Being as Noun? Or Being Human as Praxis? Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overturn: A Manifesto." It later became the title of a book of essays engaging with Wynter's work, published in 2014. See Katherine McKittrick, ed., *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
5. See Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
6. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1.
7. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" In *Textual Strategies: Perspectives on Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josue Harari (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 141–60.
8. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 7–8.
9. Ashon Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).
10. Ralph Peterson Quintet, *V*, recorded April 19–20, 1988, Blue Note B4–91730 (1989), CD.
11. Rail: So, music becomes a model of art where a group of people are listening and a group of people are making. Moten: It's the ensemble. And it's the recognition that the solo is an emanation of the ensemble. From Jarrett Ernst, "Close Encounters: Fred Moten," *Brooklyn Rail*, November 2017, <https://brooklynrail.org/2017/11/art/FRED-MOTEN-with-Jarrett-Earnest>.
Jafa: "One of the many things Fred Moten said that had an impact on me is that we normally think of jazz as a tension between a group and an individual: when the individual begins a solo, the group fades into the background. He argued that a better way to understand the individual is as an emanation of the group. Whenever there's a sun in my work,

I'm thinking about that: you see the sun blazing; then, all of a sudden, a flare reaches out and you recognize it as a single entity. Afterwards, it's just absorbed back into the body of the sun; it's an emanation." From Jace Clayton, "As Brilliant as the Sun," *Frieze* 193 (March 2018), <https://frieze.com/article/brilliant-sun>.

12. For a discussion of a similar tactile/gestural quality in Monk's piano playing and composing, and more generally on music as a sonic trace of embodiment, see Vijay Iyer, "Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation," in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. R. O'Meally, B. Edwards, & F. Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 397–98.

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