

Composers Give New Shape to Ornette Coleman's Jazz

A group of artists are reimagining the 1959 album “The Shape of Jazz to Come” for Bang on a Can’s Long Play festival.

By Seth Colter Walls

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Bang on a Can had big plans for 2020.

Before the pandemic started, this classical music collective was busy planning its most ambitious festival yet in New York City: a three-day event called “Long Play,” with acts stretched across multiple venues in Brooklyn.

In moving beyond their storied, single-day marathons, Bang on a Can was signaling new ambitions, and was going toe-to-toe with other major avant-garde bashes like the Big Ears Festival in Tennessee.

Of course, those designs were plowed under. So Bang on a Can reacted nimbly and quickly by commissioning artists from those scuttled dates to write solo pieces that were premiered online. Those “pandemic solos,” as they have been called, became a tradition of their own. (Some of them showed up as programming last year at the collective’s summer festival.)

Still, there was a sense of something lost.

“We had this gigantic idea of how to expand the marathon into Long Play,” David Lang, the composer and Bang on a Can co-founder, told The New York Times in April 2020. “I’m sure we’ll do that again, should the world ever get back to normal.”

Now, it’s normal — enough — for another go at it. Long Play comes to New York City this weekend at seven venues in Downtown Brooklyn, from Friday afternoon through Sunday evening. There are familiar names on the lineup, but also ones that suggest Bang on a Can has its ears open to the work of younger artists. (Friday night’s sets by Jeff Tobias and the Dither guitar quartet offer some of that generational variety.)

The festival won’t be a retread of the 2020 program. “Mostly, this is new stuff,” Lang said in an interview. And a sparkling highlight comes at the close, on Sunday night: a thorough, multilayered reimagining of the saxophonist and composer Ornette Coleman’s 1959 album “The Shape of Jazz to Come.” The performance will feature a band led by Coleman’s son, Denardo, who held the drum chair in his father’s groups over several decades (including in “Haven’t Been Where I Left,” a piece the elder Coleman, who died in 2015, wrote and sometimes performed with the Bang on a Can All-Stars).



Denardo Coleman, left, and Tacuma during a recent rehearsal. Gabriela Bhaskar/The New York Times

This weekend's take on "Shape" will also include a 20-person ensemble, conducted by Awadagin Pratt and playing new arrangements of all six compositions from the album. These have been written by a dizzyingly varied roster of artists — including the vocalist and electronics virtuoso Pamela Z (who arranged "Lonely Woman") and the orchestral and big band composer David Sanford (who took on the boppish "Chronology").

"There are all these threads that go through the festival," Lang said. "Threads of young composers, and threads of dead composers. And threads of modernist music and threads of free jazz."

The idea is for audiences to be able to follow their own stylistic predilections. "But all of these threads lead to this piece, and to this concert," Lang noted. "We designed some of the concerts to interfere with other concerts; nothing interferes with this concert."

To prepare for this festival climax, Denardo Coleman has been rehearsing his own core group of players on a weekly basis. On a recent afternoon, in a modishly designed living and rehearsal space near Penn Station in Manhattan, he drilled the group, now called Ornette Expressions, through the album's six tunes, twice.



The performers come from different generations: Ulmer, left, played with Ornette Coleman in the 1970s, while Moran didn't get to know him until the 2000s. Gabriela Bhaskar/The New York Times

Although the music comes from "Shape," the musicians come from different generations. The guitarist James Blood Ulmer and the bassist Jamaaladeen Tacuma both played with Coleman's father in the 1970s. In an interview after a rehearsal, Coleman said that the ensemble's pianist, Jason Moran, hadn't made his way to Ornette Coleman's home until the early 2000s; he was already a leading light in the contemporary jazz scene, and quickly built a rapport with one of the great melodists of the field's avant-garde.

Filling out the ensemble are two up-and-coming musicians: the saxophonist Lee Odom and the trumpeter Wallace Roney Jr. The first time they all played one of the compositions, "Peace," they hewed somewhat closely to the original, an emotionally complex work that manages to be at once mournful and finger-snapping.

Peace (Mono)



After a break — and after Moran had to leave — the tune took a turn, with Roney plugging his trumpet into a wah-wah pedal. This time, his electric trumpet lines wove around Odom’s acoustic, prayerful alto sax playing: even more searching and heated.



Roney, on trumpet. Gabriela Bhaskar/The New York Times

“We’re doing our arrangement right now,” Denardo Coleman said after the take was over, though he added that “it may not be that way” at the concert on Sunday. It’s likely to turn out different because the day of that rehearsal, he had only just received the finished arrangement. And much of the balance between his group and the sinfonietta was yet to be hashed out.

In a phone interview, Z said “everybody was asked to write for this sinfonietta.” There was “a little side note,” she added, saying to “also please leave space for Denardo’s ensemble to jump in, here and there.”

When arranging “Lonely Woman” — perhaps Ornette Coleman’s most famous melody — she brought the work in line with her own electronic music. “I played with the music the same way that I play with sampled sound. I really stretched it out, and I compressed it.”



Odom on saxophone. Gabriela Bhaskar/The New York Times





Ulmer on guitar. Gabriela Bhaskar/The New York Times

Still, her contribution is entirely acoustic — unlike many of her solo sets. “It starts out with really high harmonics on the strings and bowed vibes,” Z said. “And the first time you hear the melody, it’s played a quarter of the speed that it’s supposed to go, being played on a tuba. So I just had a lot of fun, playing with time in it.”

That’s exactly what Denardo Coleman was hoping for. “The way my father would have approached it would have been that everybody had equal participation,” he said. “Meaning he wasn’t just the leader and everybody was there to make him sound good. If you had an idea, you could take it.”

Hence, Coleman said, each arranger’s freedom in working with the original tunes.

“It wasn’t as if we said ‘OK, just orchestrate the song the way it is,’” he said. “They may reconstruct, deconstruct, turn it inside out, something else. The tune — the composition — is just a starting point. That just leads you into some other territory. And that other territory is what it’s really about.”

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