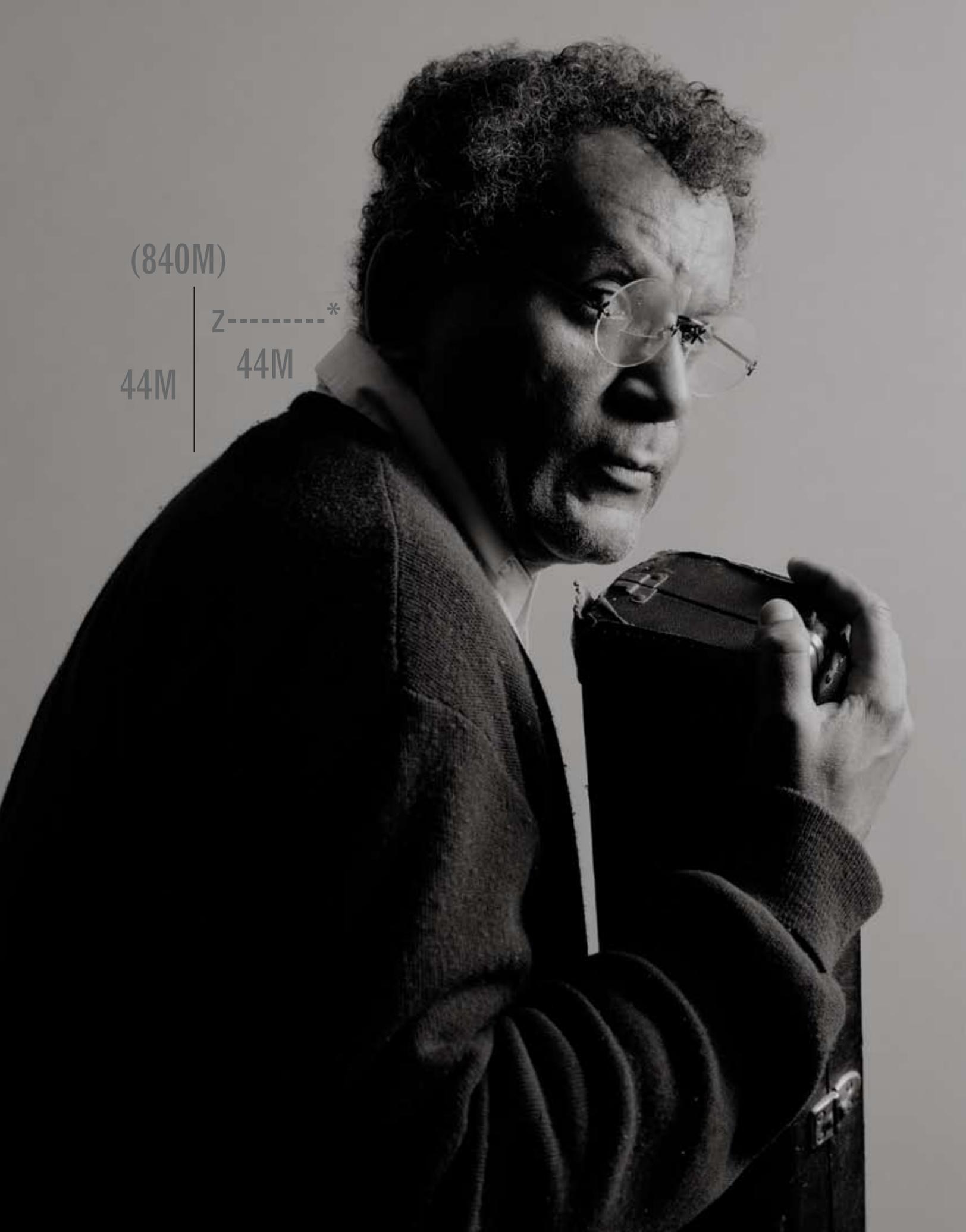


Improvisation and composition, high art and pop culture, jazz and classical, black and white: To veteran avant-gardist Anthony Braxton, it's all worth connecting.

TRUE MATHEMATICS

Ellen's Stardust Diner, at the corner of 51st and Broadway in Manhattan, has a wait staff that sings karaoke hits for a tourist clientele. Two doors down at the Winter Garden Theatre, the ABBA-inspired musical *Mamma Mia!* draws capacity crowds. Sandwiched in between is the Iridium jazz club, which occupies a most peculiar place in New York's live music culture. Allan Holdsworth and Bill Bruford, the gods of British fusion, have played there more than once. Les Paul holds court on Monday nights. Pat Martino, Jacky Terrasson and Wallace Roney all find themselves welcome; so do the Yellowjackets and pop-jazz chanteuse Regina Belle.

By David R. Adler Photo by Jimmy Katz



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Anthony Braxton 12+1tet, Iridium, March 2006

But Iridium has also gone where few others dare. It has booked some of the most esteemed and historic figures of the avant-garde, including Henry Threadgill, Cecil Taylor (in both big band and trio settings) and the Art Ensemble of Chicago (as heard on the Pi release *Non-Cognitive Aspects of the City: Live at Iridium*). Anthony Braxton, quite possibly the most prolific musician of our age but not at all a regular presence in New York jazz clubs, completed his second Iridium stint in early April of this year. For the pioneering but still-marginalized reedman and composer, it's an ironic close encounter not only with the jazz mainstream, but with the American entertainment complex.

FINDING SUITABLE PERFORMANCE VENUES IS SOMETHING Braxton has wrestled with since his 1966 entrée into the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), the still-extant black artists collective. According to a scholarly study by trombonist, composer and former Braxton sideman George Lewis (forthcoming in book form as *AACM: Power Stronger Than Itself*), the AACM's goal from the outset was "to provide an atmosphere that is conducive to serious music." Iridium, like most dinner rooms, can be a mixed bag in that regard. With Braxton in the house, diehard improvised music fans jostle for space with "passersby most likely anticipating a mellow evening of post-theater swing to accompany their conversations," to quote the critic Steve Smith. It's not hard to understand why Muhal Richard Abrams, master pianist and AACM co-founder, declared in 1965 at one of the very first AACM meetings: "No, no, we're not working for club owners. ... This is strictly concerts."

It's also easy to see why Braxton would set aside that counsel under the right circumstances. An extended run at Iridium, despite potential pitfalls, is an ideal laboratory experience for an ensemble like the Anthony Braxton 12+1tet. "I was totally shocked," Braxton says, recalling his first reaction to the booking. "I have no idea what encouraged them to consider my work. Our music in many ways is invisible in America." Ron Sturm, the owner of Iridium, sees it as a pragmatic balancing of art and commerce: "I can't present artists like this on a regular basis, because they have a limited appeal. But they are very important people."

Far from questioning the club's logic, Braxton seized the opportunity to showcase his latest music and record the entire affair. The resulting *9 Compositions (Iridium) 2006*, a 10-disc box (including a DVD), is the first release from the Firehouse 12 label, an initiative of the recording studio and performance venue of the same name in New Haven, Conn. In Braxton's huge discography there is no lack of box sets, but this is the heftiest by far.

"The Iridium material is important to me on many different levels," Braxton says. "One reason is the musicians themselves—I have been blessed to run into men and women of the highest vibrational caliber." Some 12+1tet members, such as saxophonist James Fei and cornetist Taylor Ho Bynum, have been working with Braxton for a number of years. Others, like flutist and AACM member Nicole Mitchell, are new arrivals. A number of them are Braxton's former students at Wesleyan University, where he holds a tenured professorship. The instrumentation

is nothing if not rich and unorthodox, with Sara Schoenbeck on bassoon, Jay Rozen on tuba, Reut Regev on trombone, Jessica Pavone on violin and viola, Mary Halvorson on guitar, Carl Testa on bass, Aaron Siegel on percussion and vibes, and Steve Lehman and Andrew Raffo Dewar joining Fei and Braxton on reeds.

This cast of characters enjoyed a rare privilege in March of '06: playing the final nine compositions in Braxton's Ghost Trance Music (GTM) series (Nos. 350-358 in the voluminous Braxton catalog). GTM was initially inspired by the Ghost Dance rituals of various Native American tribes. For over 10 years, Braxton has evolved this music through different "species" of gradually increasing complexity. Following the first-, second- and third-species GTM was the polyrhythmic "accelerator class," then the even more difficult "accelerator whip" music heard on the new box set. "Each species establishes a particular logic," says Braxton, "whether it's metric continuity, repetitive continuity with imbalances, or fast-pulse imbalance phrase-structure musics. For our purposes it can be thought of as local train stops (first species), express train stops (second species), crosstown train stops (third species). But I still needed a prototype that could move quicker to different points in the system."

Jonathan Piper's booklet essay clarifies the evolution further. In sum, first-species GTM is based on an unvarying—indeed, trance-inducing—quarter-note pulse. The later species inject "imbalances," or rhythmic interruptions, into the pulse. Rhythmic subgroups—triplets, quintuplets and so forth—begin to ornament the foundational line, ultimately obscuring it altogether. "The move from third species to accelerator class was intense," says Taylor Ho Bynum. "All of a sudden the most complex rhythmic manifestations of the line had completely taken over." And Braxton wasn't finished. Open an "accelerator whip" score and you'll see strings of 16th and 32nd notes grouped in patterns of 9 over 1, 13 over 2, 17 over 2, 20 over 2, stretching for page after page without bar lines. "Accelerator whip is more extreme in terms of material mass," Braxton explains. "There are much larger groupings—as extreme as it was possible to notate and have some fun with."

All nine Iridium compositions begin with the full band playing a forceful thematic statement; a ragged dissonance of bottomless complexity. What begins as a teetering mass of information soon moves into improvisational flux. Over the ensuing hour, the players interface with the written score, and each other, in any number of ways. This, in a sense, has always been Braxton's approach: blurring the notation/improvisation boundary, using notation not simply as a "recall" device but also a "generating" device. There are antecedents, to be sure, in 20th-century classical music. But Braxton's marriage of what he calls "trans-African" and "trans-European" aesthetics, or "mutable" and "stable" logics, is unique.

In these final GTM works, Braxton pursues a "multi-hierarchical" model in which the players can break into subgroups to play any of several "secondary" compositions appended at the rear of a given score, or even bring in "tertiary material"—segments of older Braxton compositions to be interpolated at will. The note heads in the polyrhythmic rows appear

SCOTT FRIEDLANDER

in pink, green, orange, blue and other colors—code for various timbres, inflections and other information. At times the players will land on “freeze frames”: spaces boxed off in black marker where the ledger lines suddenly disappear and the notation becomes more ethereal. As Bynum puts it, GTM “turns the traditional hierarchical orchestra model on its head. You improvise in a compositional manner; you apply composed materials in an improvisational manner; at all times one’s creativity is fully engaged.” Braxton refers to the music as “trans-temporal”: He turns over an hourglass to start the set; the music ends when the last grains have filtered through. The entire process is something like a game.

A game, it should be noted, that requires no small amount of endurance—Jessica Pavone had her elbow in a brace after the Iridium gig and jokingly dubbed her ailment “Braxtonitis.” Trans-temporal music can also be demanding for the listener, or to use Braxton’s preferred term, “the friendly experiencer.” Best to give oneself over to “a sense of meditative timelessness,” to borrow Jonathan Piper’s phrase. Dave Douglas, in his booklet entry, describes a “feeling of permanence” that came over him during the Iridium sets. There certainly are moments of great luminosity and power, but also times when the methodology seems to eclipse the music. If the Iridium collection lacks anything, it is the sheer variety heard on other recent Braxton boxes, particularly *Six Compositions (GTM) 2001* (Rastacan) or *4 Compositions (Ulrichsberg) 2005 Phonomanie VII* (Leo). The latter includes the first documented performance of Braxton’s Diamond Curtain Wall music, a new prototype involving the SuperCollider computer language.

“The Ghost Trance Musics are totally finished,” Braxton declares, although he will continue to draw on the GTM archive in its entirety for live performances. In 2007 he returned to Iridium with a smaller, seven-piece group, a decision driven in part by logistics—he needed room onstage this time for his contrabass and bass saxophones.

“It’s been hard to recognize the fact that there are continuities all over the place. We just have to come to the table with a positive disposition. And begin to put things back together again.”

A 10-DISC BOX FROM BRAXTON MAY BE UNPRECEDENTED, but it is true to form. This is someone who doesn’t just write for orchestra, but for four orchestras. He writes not an opera, but an “opera complex.” He has conceived of music to be performed simultaneously in different cities, on different planets and even in different galaxies. “I hope and pray that we will find a way to keep financing our space program,” he says, “so our young people have a chance to think about the unknown, and the importance of explorative propositions.”

Braxton’s prose, collected in the three-volume *Tri-Axium Writings* and the five-volume *Composition Notes*, adds up to some 3,000 pages. Journalists and scholars have responded in kind. Books devoted to Braxton include Graham Lock’s *Forces in Motion: The Music and Thoughts of Anthony Braxton*, largely a tour diary and interview compendium; Ronald M. Radano’s academic treatise *New Musical Figurations: Anthony Braxton’s Cultural Critique*; and Mike Heffley’s exhaustive 1996 tome *The Music of Anthony Braxton*. Heffley’s “Third Millennial Interview” with Braxton exceeds 100 pages; an excerpt in the Winter 2002 issue of *Signal to Noise* remains one of the best available primers on Braxton’s arcane terminology.

“For a lot of people who encountered him later, Anthony was a singular figure,” says trombonist-composer George Lewis. “For me he was part of an environment, and remains that.” This certainly applies to Braxton’s situation at Wesleyan (“the house of music,” he calls it), where his fellow teachers include the mavericks Alvin Lucier, Ronald Kuivila, Neely Bruce and Abraham Adzenyah. But Braxton does have a way of willing his own incomparable world into existence. He has a reputation for being entirely inscrutable, but compared to figures like Ornette

Coleman and Andrew Hill, he is an open book, an enthusiastic explainer. He told Lock that after reading Stockhausen’s analyses, he was inspired “to systematize and calibrate every aspect of my music.” Certain elements of that system, like the pictographs and equations that accompany most of his works, are opaque to say the least. However, as Lewis notes, “Anthony is able to generate complex hierarchical forms, but he can synthesize them into something very logical. He taught me to drive a stick shift, for example, in about 20 minutes. He could give you these instant instructions—‘Clutch! Brake! Accelerator!’ I realized I could just follow him and pretty soon I’d learn. And I never looked back.”

For three hours on Wednesday mornings at Wesleyan, Braxton holds a graduate seminar called “Special Studies in Contemporary Music.” His topic for the day in late January was “area-space models from a tri-centric perspective.” Braxton characterizes his entire system as a “tri-centric thought unit,” which, it turns out, can be sketched onto a single 8 1/2 x 11 sheet. In the simplest terms it involves improvisation (the house of the circle), structure (i.e., composition, the house of the rectangle), and syntheses of the two, or “correspondence logics” (the house of the triangle). The term “area-space” is fairly intuitive and falls under the rectangle. To illustrate it, Braxton cues up scenes from the 1961 film version of *West Side Story*. “Watch how they’re using the environment,” he calls out as the Jets and Sharks cavort onscreen. During the prelude to the fight scene, the perspectives of Tony and Maria, Anita and the rival gangs merge into one conflictual crescendo, not unlike the multi-tiered exchanges that took place on the Iridium bandstand.

What intrigues Braxton is not just the interplay of cinematography, choreography and sound, but instances of “restructural” breakthrough—the result of humanity “kicking it about” and finding new ways to advance creativity. He locates examples everywhere, regardless of genre or highbrow/lowbrow distinction. After *West Side Story* he shows the

love scene from the prologue to Wagner’s *Die Götterdämmerung* as an example of “polarity logics.” “Check it out—this is outrageous!” he implores as Siegfried and Brünnhilde belt their respective lines. He also recommends the current hit movie *Dreamgirls* as a manifestation of Broadway “sequential logics.” And he’s particularly excited about the film *Drumline*, “one the great successes of the last eight years,” about young African-Americans in a competitive college drum corps. “The American marching band tradition is incredibly creative,” he insists.

Braxton also presents recordings of his own music: works for solo alto and solo piano, along with Composition No. 19, the piece for 100 tubas discussed by Nate Chinen in *JT* in Sept. 2006. The recent world premiere, in Lower Manhattan, featured teams of tuba players walking in formation near Ground Zero—one of the clearest examples of “area-space” logic to be found in Braxton’s output. Altoist Jackson Moore, a Braxton protégé and former band member, describes certain Braxton performances as “the auditory equivalent of satellite photographs.” He continues: “If the invention of the jazz solo allowed us to hear the sound of a person, Braxton’s spatial large ensemble music—what he nowadays refers to as his Genome Project—approaches the sound of society.”

Indeed, Braxton sees his entire oeuvre as a kind of social system, with all locales intricately connected. The idea of music as physical space is everywhere to be found in his self-analysis. He speaks of his compositions as “city-states,” villages or towns, depending on their scale. His 1992 recording *Composition No. 165 (for 18 Instruments)* (New Albion), a marvelous but all-too-rare specimen of his orchestral music, includes a short action-adventure tale in the liner notes. Written by Braxton himself, it follows two youngsters as they cross the forbidding terrain of the

composition itself, steering clear of lightning, burning trees, collapsing mountains, earthquakes and other natural perils. One is reminded of a vignette from Akira Kurosawa's 1990 film *Dreams*, in which a character is transported inside a van Gogh landscape.

Braxton's afternoon ensemble class—a concentrated workout with a bassoonist and violinist, two saxophonists and two guitars—hints at how these dreamlike concepts translate into practice. The professor conducts and plays a bit of soprano sax. He starts with a warm-up improvisation using his 12 “language music” components as well as several “Falling River” scores: full-color drawings with symbolic notation, mounted on cardboard with plastic laminate. Then the group turns to exceedingly difficult notated manuscripts, including parts of Compositions 324d, 135 and even the monumental 96, written for orchestra and four slide projectors (“It's a toughy-tough,” Braxton admits).

Far from free-jazz muddle, Braxton's class is one of the most formidable reading challenges a player can face. The students do well, but their slip-ups underscore the sheer difficulty of preparing Braxton's music—nine “accelerator whip” compositions, let's say—for the public. “Good, people!” Braxton enthuses. “I'm hearing transparency. Nice centers of gravity.” The mood grows lighter as he rehearses individual sections. “Let's take it from letter B, for Babe Ruth, the great man. ... Alright, now from letter K, like Captain Kangaroo.” He pauses and reflects: “What was his name again, Bob Keeshan? Man, Captain Kangaroo was a restructuralist.”

IN HIS BOOK *BLOWIN' HOT AND COOL: JAZZ AND ITS CRITICS*, John Gennari lauds Braxton's “ravenously Omni-American concept of black culture.” It is true, as Ronald Radano argues, that Braxton played a major role in “defining a black vanguard aesthetic” in the '60s and '70s, but he is palpably at odds with all stylistic gatekeepers. He loves the music of Johnny Mathis. He lambastes those who “draw a circle around the African-American experience.” His embrace of European art music has always been a sticking point for black nationalists and jazz traditionalists alike. At the same time, the white-dominated classical world has never accepted Braxton as a legitimate heir to his heroes Schoenberg, Webern, Cage, Stockhausen and Xenakis. “My music, like my life,” Braxton muses, “has been in between the black community and the white community, the jazz people and the classical people, the left and the right. It's been hard to recognize the fact that there are continuities all over the place. We just have to come to the table with a positive disposition. And begin to put things back together again.”

A case could be made that Braxton is flourishing as never before. He turned 60 in 2005, and Wesleyan marked the occasion with a series of over a dozen concerts. Thanks in part to a new booking agent, he is optimistic about future prospects. “Max Roach, the great restructural master, once told me that if I could survive until 60, there might be a period of re-evaluation and with that might come more opportunities to work. Now that I'm 61, I'm noticing that something is slowly changing. There seems to be some work coming, and at a time when I can really appreciate it. My hope is to exercise and get as strong as I can be, because the challenges of the next time cycle are real, and to do the kind of things I want you have to be in good shape.”

High on Braxton's agenda is the realization of large-scale projects, such as his “Trillium R” opera series. He also stresses the importance of unheard work by cherished colleagues like Wadada Leo Smith. George Lewis is right—Braxton is no lone wolf, but a man in an environment, strong in the belief that art can impact society and the health of the planet. “We need to re-energize America,” he declares, and minutes later the lights in his office go out. Two loud and determined handclaps and they're back on. “We need to bring creativity back to the forefront,” he continues, rendering music as an avenue of personal and political ethics. “We need to find a new civility; we need to be *nice* to one another. And we can learn from one another—as we always have.” **JT**

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