





By David R. Adler

IN THE MIDST OF PROFOUND FAMILY TRAGEDY,  
DRUMMER **GERALD CLEAVER** REFLECTS ON HIS PAST  
IN DETROIT, HIS PRESENT IN NEW YORK CITY, AND  
THE SHARED MUSICAL SPACE IN BETWEEN

# HOME & AWAY



## KNOW IT'S WACKED TO SAY THIS ABOUT

someone playing now, someone of your own generation, but I think Gerald Cleaver is one of the greatest drummers in jazz history." This is the view of Matthew Shipp, a fine pianist not known for a great caution with words. If other colleagues don't state it so boldly, their admiration for Cleaver is just as deep and genuine. They know, as many listeners do, that the story of jazz and improvised music in the last 15 years would not be the same without the artistry of this 50-year-old Detroit native.

"[Guitarist] Joe Morris and I like to joke that you could have a band playing and you could take Gerald and drop him through the roof and he would come right in [playing the right thing], even if he didn't know the people or the band," Shipp remarks. "I've seen him be himself in so many different situations. He never ceases to amaze me with the beauty of his sound."

Cleaver's drumming is subtle, rarely flashy. His demeanor is warm but serious, contemplative, not attention-seeking. Yet consider the attention he has earned. In the early '00s he helped define the sound of Thirsty Ear's Blue Series, playing on essential discs by Shipp (the series curator), Craig Taborn, Mat Maneri and others. He's also worked with Roscoe Mitchell, Wadada Leo Smith, Charles Gayle, William Parker, Miroslav Vitous, Michael Formanek, Tomasz Stanko, Ellery Eskelin, Joe Morris, Peter Madsen, Lotte Anker, Chris Potter, Chris Lightcap, John Hébert and many more. His leader discography, going back to 2001, also showcases a balance of versatility and mastery.

What accounts for Cleaver's flexibility and unerring instincts? "Detroit was so wide open," the drummer recalls. "You weren't constrained by cliques and such. You could play free, you could be swinging, you could do wedding gigs. I had a lot of different interests and I was able to enjoy all of them without interference. The way I play now is basically the way I played then, only I'm 30 years older."

Cleaver has thoroughly blurred the distinction between avant-garde and straightahead playing. He's versatile, but not in the sense of merely getting the job done. Rather, he views these streams as a common language that informs his own outlook as a leader—from

the elegant and seasoned swing of his Violet Hour quintet to the wailing, electric, rock-infused attack of Black Host, his latest project.

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## SADLY, CLEAVER HAD TO RUSH BACK TO DETROIT AND

postpone our first scheduled interview: He had just found out that his sister died of a heart attack. His brother, shockingly, had died of complications related to a stroke just one month earlier. (Cleaver is the youngest of seven siblings, from two marriages.)

Family is a recurring theme on Cleaver's albums, making these losses all the more palpable and wrenching. *Gerald Cleaver's Detroit*, his 2008 release with Violet Hour, is inspired by his hometown and the seasoned elder drummers ("extended uncles") who guided him. His gripping *Be It As I See It* (2011), with the band Uncle June, is an appreciation of his parents and loved ones. It includes a poetry recitation by his wife, vocalist Jean Carla Rodea, and his father, the noted Detroit drummer John ("Johnny") Cleaver Jr.

Plunged into mourning, Cleaver would nonetheless push forward, leaving for Europe in the coming week. "Working through life's difficulties and issues," he says, "music has definitely served a very therapeutic use and allowed me to give thanks to people." He explains that "May Be Home," the closing track on Black Host's debut, *Life in the Sugar Candle Mines* (Northern Spy), is "meant to express the experience of life's nadir. 'Charles Street Quotidian' from *Be It As I See It* is dealing with the exact opposite. I'm very interested in connecting myself to the full range, onstage and off."

Gerald Cleaver was born on May 4, 1963. He lives in Brooklyn with Rodea; they married in 2008, inspiring Cleaver's song "22 Minutes (The Wedding Song)." "My dad is from Springfield, Ohio," Cleaver says, on the phone at his parents' house in Detroit. "His people are from Kentucky. My mom was born in Greenwood, Mississippi. Her family migrated to Memphis and then on to Detroit by the time she was 11." The theme of the Great Migration, the African-American exodus from the South, runs deep throughout *Gerald Cleaver's Detroit*.

Cleaver's father "got excited about playing when he was in the Army. He was lucky to hit the Army right between World War II and the Korean War. And somewhere in there, of course, bebop

▼ Simply *Simpático*: Lynch and Eddie Palmieri in 2007



FROM TOP: MYLES REGAN/ANGEL CITY JAZZ FESTIVAL; JOHN ROGERS

had started spreading. He saw Roy Haynes with Lester Young in Seattle in 1948. It thrilled him and it took off from there. He made his way in Detroit, which was then in the golden age. All these people were super encouraging to him. He was never a full-time musician, always had a job working for the city. But I considered him a full-time musician because he took it as seriously as I do.”

Bassist and educator Rodney Whitaker, several years younger than Gerald and a chief early associate, states bluntly: “I used to play with Gerald’s father all the time and didn’t even know his son played drums.”

John Cleaver is in fact the mysterious Uncle June, the namesake of Cleaver’s band. “In the South they call Juniors ‘June’ or ‘Junebug,’ so that’s what his nephews and nieces called him,” Cleaver explains. “It’s not used anymore. The name was another way for me to connect with the South, and to what it must have felt like growing up in that environment.”

Though inspired by a household full of music and drums, Cleaver didn’t commit to being a musician until his teens. “I played violin in elementary school and trumpet in junior high and high school,” he recalls. “At some point I got real serious about the drums, but the thing that excited me the most, even though I was hearing Charlie Parker from the womb, was rock ‘n’ roll. My dad found out I liked the Beatles so much he went and got me every used Beatles record he could find. Some other jazz-playing dad might say, ‘the Beatles?’ But whatever I wanted to know, he’d show it to me. I still send him everything I do and he listens to it. He’s got a great take on it; he actually understands that crazy music. He hears it all.”

Cleaver graduated from the top-rated Cass Technical High School, alma mater of Ron Carter and many Detroit greats. “I wanted to go off to New England Conservatory,” he says, “but it was too expensive. There was a lot more happening in Detroit then, but compared to the ‘50s and ‘60s it seemed like hardly anything. So me coming into the scene in the early ‘80s, and this is pre-Wynton, I didn’t think it could happen. New York was such a distant, impossible goal; to be *that* good—it wasn’t feasible.”

Attending the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Cleaver encountered a freshman pianist from Minneapolis by the name of Craig Taborn. During a jazz combo class in 1988, the two were thrown together for a trio audition and they played “Nica’s Dream” by Horace Silver. “We got lost immediately,” Taborn recalls. “It wasn’t a perfect scenario. Gerald gave me a ride back to my dorm after that. I’d only been at Michigan for about a week. It was all new.”

Taborn and Cleaver now share one of the closest, most intriguing bonds in music, documented like never before on bassist Mario Pavone’s *Arc Trio* and Taborn’s ECM trio disc *Chants*. “So much of how I play comes from things I’ve done with Gerald for over 25 years,” Taborn says. “So I kind of rely on it. My own musical language is so wrapped up in how Gerald plays that it’s actually hard for me to disentangle.”

Detroit was half an hour from campus, and “Gerald was my ticket in,” Taborn recalls. “He had a car and knew his way around. He knew the musicians there, told them about me and I started getting called.” From roughly 1989 to ‘91, the two played together regularly in the Octsemble, an adventurous unit co-founded by Rodney Whitaker and alto saxophonist and composer Cassius Richmond. The band featured rising-star saxophonist James Carter, soon to be Taborn’s employer. There was also a 15-year-old tenor player named JD Allen.

Allen, who likens the Octsemble to Sun Ra, stresses the impact that Cleaver and Taborn had on him: “I can’t even call them Batman and Robin. One is the left brain, one is the right brain. Meet-

## MOTOR CITY MASTER

FIVE OF GERALD CLEAVER’S BEST RECORDINGS

BY SHAUN BRADY

### MATTHEW SHIPP

*Matthew Shipp’s New Orbit* (Thirsty Ear, 2001)



Arriving near the outset of the Shipp-curated Blue Series, which explored the overlap between the pianist’s forward-thinking jazz and the more experimental side of electronic music, this quartet disc features Cleaver, trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith and frequent Shipp partner William Parker on bass. The result is spare and focused, with Cleaver at his most coloristic.

### GERALD CLEAVER

*Gerald Cleaver’s Detroit* (Fresh Sound New Talent, 2008)



Cleaver revisits his roots in a session that delves into his native city’s broad-shouldered postbop heritage. Joined by saxophonists JD Allen and Andrew Bishop, trumpeter Jeremy Pelt, pianist Ben Waltzer and bassist Chris Lightcap, Cleaver deftly displays his integration of deep-pocket swing and avant-garde invention, evoking the mean streets and rich history of the Motor City through lean, rough-hewn grooves.

### GERALD CLEAVER/WILLIAM PARKER/ CRAIG TABORN

*Farmers by Nature* (AUM Fidelity, 2009)



Recorded at the Stone in the summer of 2008, this collective trio outing evolves gradually over the course of an hour-long free improvisation. The East Village venue’s intimacy comes through in the band’s close-knit communication, which never deteriorates into mindless blowing. Instead, each moment unfolds logically and intuitively from the last.

### GERALD CLEAVER/UNCLE JUNE

*Be It As I See It* (Fresh Sound New Talent, 2011)



Performed by a band named for Cleaver’s father, this ambitious work was inspired by the Great Migration of African-Americans from south to north. Equal parts AACM-inspired “ancient to the future” jazz and musique-concrète collage, the album is a deeply personal, panoptic take on musical and cultural history featuring pianist Craig Taborn, saxophonist Tony Malaby and violist Mat Maneri, among others.

### CRAIG TABORN TRIO

*Chants* (ECM, 2013)



The debut release by Taborn’s current trio is a prismatic stunner, building on the vocabulary that Taborn and Cleaver have been developing since they met at the University of Michigan in the late 1980s. The trio, also featuring bassist Thomas Morgan, crafts elusive forms from an almost hidden architecture, expansive and recursive, delicate yet powerful.

ing those guys when you’re 15, and they let you hang out with them? They used to take me around, listen to crazy music. I wanted to be better. I wanted to deserve to be in their company.”

Now one of the world’s leading tenor saxophonists, Allen underwent the trial-by-fire in the band that one would expect. But



Cleaver gave him pivotal support. “Gerald invited me over to his house, cooked me dinner,” Allen says. “I was 15, I was wild, and he was trying to help me out—you know, just being a big brother, which is why I love him to this day. He believed in me, man. It meant a lot for someone to put down the tough facade and say, ‘Hey, get comfortable and you’re gonna be alright.’” The two would later reunite in Violet Hour and in trumpeter Jeremy Pelt’s quintet.

Cleaver gained experience and deepened his roots in Detroit before attempting the move to New York. Through pianist and mentor Earl Van Riper he got to play the Detroit Jazz Festival with Kenny “Pancho” Hagood of *Birth of the Cool* fame. Cleaver and Whitaker also played trio for three nights with the great Tommy Flanagan, to reopen the famed Blue Bird Inn. “That was pretty life-changing,” Cleaver says. “Tommy was very accepting and a real funny dude. I could tell he was enjoying being in Detroit. It felt like he was escaping from New York a little bit. He seemed a little mischievous.”

While teaching at both the University of Michigan and Michigan State University, Cleaver held positions flexible enough to allow frequent travel to New York. In 1999 he joined Jacky Terrason’s band and moved to New York full-time, but trouble hit when the gig ended a year or so later. “I spent months starving, essentially,” he says, “and then I decided I had to move back to Detroit. I moved back in 2000 and I spent another year and a half regrouping. I moved back to New York for good in 2002, and I’ve been able to sustain work up until today.”

On *Be It As I See It* there is a five-part suite titled “Fence & Post (For Mom & Dad)” that stems from this difficult period. The move back to Detroit, Cleaver says, left him “devastated, disappointed, embarrassed, all of the above. I was at a pretty low point, but I had very encouraging parents. They allowed me to come back home after 13 or 14 years. I left almost as a boy, I’m coming back as a man, and there was no judgment, only acceptance. I needed their shelter as much then as when I was just a baby.”

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#### ON JULY 18, 2013, DETROIT FILED FOR BANKRUPTCY.

Cleaver’s return to grieve for his sister came about a month later, but despite grim circumstances he managed some optimism. “Here I am sitting in Detroit,” he mused, “and I don’t get home as often

as I’d like, but what I see on the ground is a whole lot of good development. Housing is super cheap. People are as creative as they’ve always been here. A lot needs to happen in order for it to be a viable city again. But there’s that peacefulness and that feeling of opportunity actually still here. In 10 or 15 years Detroit will be a completely different place.”

“Detroit musicians were really proactive,” says Whitaker. “I think that affected all of us, everyone we’ve talked about and certainly Gerald—they make things happen. And Gerald always composed music—every band I played in with him, we played his music. I recorded one of his tunes [“Pilgrim Progress” on *Hidden Kingdom*, 1998]. Gerald showed up and said, ‘Hey, I got this tune,’ and we tried it and it was killing. He embodied that spirit of Detroiters that you don’t wait, you have to make it happen.”

As Taborn says, Detroit is a historic jazz center but also a hub for music across the board: “[W]hether you’re dealing with techno, or hip-hop, or Motown, or jazz, or rock people like Iggy Pop, all that stuff—people in Detroit don’t really have the same hang-up about [style]. . . . People do have their predilections, [but] they’ve explored different kinds of playing. You’d find a number of guys, not only did they play with Joe Henderson but they also played with Sun Ra. A lot of the elders had a broad vocabulary and palette. They might be real bebop guys, but if you threw them into another context they were sort of used to it.”

Cleaver absorbed that skill and openness from his extended uncles: the drummers Roy Brooks, George Goldsmith, Richard “Pistol” Allen (of the Funk Brothers) and Lawrence Williams, all thanked on the sleeve of *Gerald Cleaver’s Detroit*. Ali Muhammad, father of Ali Jackson, was another crucial mentor. According to Whitaker, Lawrence Williams “would write lyrics to every song he wrote. The older guys were so quick-witted and they had an understanding of everything. Ali Muhammad, [bassist] Ray McKinney, these cats would quote sonnets—they would recite Shakespeare to each other. I remember seeing these guys at a gig and they were doing excerpts from *Hamlet*, acting out the parts. They knew it, man.”

As for Cleaver’s strong avant-garde leanings, they came later. “When I met Gerald he was totally not into free playing,” Taborn says. “We did it because I was into it. Gerald is really coming from a bebop and straight-ahead place, in a way that not that many people were at that time. People would get into jazz by playing funk or

other things. Gerald grew up with it, so you can hear it—he's really rooted in the touch and sound and approach of the Detroit tradition, bebop drumming.”

When Cleaver does play funky, Taborn notes, “It's completely pre-fusion. It has nothing in it that is informed by any of that '70s stuff. It's not as heavy hitting a sound as an Eric Gravatt or an Alphonse Mouzon or Billy Cobham—it's a different touch, it's got that '60s thing in it. His thing feels authentically 'country.' That's really hard to find now, because everybody's in this post-Steve Gadd or Harvey Mason world where people arrive at their technique doing it that way.”

“Gerald reminds me in a way of Joe Chambers,” says Jeremy Pelt, a Violet Hour member whose recent quintet sessions highlight some of Cleaver's most straightahead playing on record. “He's not very heavy on the cymbals when it comes to swinging,” Pelt adds, “but he's got that finesse that Joe Chambers has.”

Ben Waltzer, Violet Hour's pianist, uses Cleaver whenever possible in his own trio (hear the remarkable *One Hundred Dreams Ago* from 2004). “Gerald gets overlooked as a straightahead drummer, and to me he's one of the best,” Waltzer remarks. “He has a totally distinctive ride cymbal pattern. It has elements of Tony Williams but he's often more in the middle of the beat. Sometimes like Billy Higgins. His relationship between the bottom of the kit and the cymbals—it's very much his own. He's not the easiest drummer to play with, actually. There are other

drummers who'll tee things up and then the payoff is there and it's really satisfying. With Gerald it's more a challenge. He doesn't throw me these softballs. And every time I go back and listen I hear subtleties within the subtleties. His language is in the tradition but it's made up of entirely different materials. That's real innovation as opposed to just iconoclastic innovation.”

What were these different materials? It helped that Cleaver had curious and wide-ranging ears, as Whitaker notes: “Gerald was one of the first young guys who was listening to Masada, and stuff with Joey Baron, checking out Matt Wilson, all young cats at the time. He was already into where the music was headed.”

For Cleaver it all comes back to that elusive Detroit sound. “My dad yesterday was playing *Barry Harris at the Jazz Workshop*, and, man, it sounds so modern to me,” he explains. “It took me by surprise. I hear a certain kind of ease. Even Elvin [Jones], who is often misunderstood, he's huffing and puffing and sweating, but his thing is so supple and light at the same time. That's how I'd describe the Detroit sound. It had a certain hipness and knowingness, a forward-thinking openness. That's what lends itself to my generation. I could go in the direction I wanted yet still have that Detroit sound. I could build freer aspects on it. Otherwise it couldn't have happened—I would have had to totally break away from it. But I didn't feel like I had to do that. That's why I feel I have a certain kind of depth in the music, because I didn't have to leave.” **JT**