SONG OF HIMSELF

By David R. Adler
Photograph by
Peter Gannushkin

As his 50th birthday approaches, Matthew Shipp upholds the avant-garde ideal with a new solo piano album and a creative temperament as restless as ever

Matthew Shipp is playing piano, and the floor is shaking. Big cluster chords ring through the modest interior of The Stone, in Manhattan's East Village, where the great British improviser Evan Parker is playing a two-week residency in October 2009. Parker speaks gruffly on tenor sax, worrying the main motif of Thelonious Monk's "Shuffle Boil." His trio mates are Shipp and bassist William Parker, who react to the bluesy line but never play anything resembling the tune itself. The exchanges that follow gain much of their strength from Shipp and William Parker's countless hours of shared experience, most notably as a duo and as one-half of the acclaimed (now disbanded) David S. Ware Quartet.

To be seated less than three feet behind Shipp's back was to feel that shaking floor, to absorb the physical impact of his repeating *fortissimo* rhythms, flowing cyclical melodies and sudden ascents into sonic abstraction, coaxed from the piano's interior. This was turbulent music from a turbulent, perplexing soul, one of the most imaginative and influential figures in free jazz today.

Along with his stature as a pianist, Shipp has gained notoriety as a rhetorical bomb-thrower—venomous toward his critics, dismissive of icons as prominent as Herbie Hancock, grandiloquent in his view of himself. In a review of Shipp's 2002 album *Nu Bop*, former *JazzTimes* editor Christopher Porter made reference to the pianist's "hand-scrawled notes to music editors proclaiming his own greatness." Shipp hasn't lost his flair for such things. In an as-told-to spiel published by Chris Rich on his blog *Brilliant Corners* in July 2009, Shipp declared: "I hear no one in the world with as developed and distinct voice [*sic*] as I have on my instrument for this period in the music." Can he be serious? Put it this way: When he heard the statement read back to him, he began laughing exuberantly before it was even through.

In a word, Shipp likes to wind people up. Part of it may be over-compensation for perceived slights or simply a gambit for attention, but there are deeper issues involved. As he heads toward a milestone—he turns 50 in December 2010—he's taking stock of his achievements and plowing forward under career conditions that are unvaryingly tough. It's the lot of any artist whose chief ideal is self-assertion at all costs. Shipp just manifests it more acutely.

To a degree, the Evan Parker gig recalled the drumless chamber jazz that Shipp documented so richly on the Hat Hut label starting in the mid-'90s. But Shipp has expanded his role over the past decade, facilitating new aesthetic models as curator of Thirsty Ear's Blue Series. By now the series boasts a sprawling catalog of music ranging from pure acoustic to pure electronic and many points between—from trumpeter Roy Campbell Jr. to "mutantrumpeter" Ben Neill, from the microtonal viola of Mat Maneri to the futurist turntable collage of DJ Spooky. Shipp's earlier encounters with Evan Parker, heard on Spring Heel Jack's Blue Series efforts *Amassed* (2002) and *Live* (2003), involved improvisers and sound designers in a unique and compelling transaction.

It was the Blue Series that landed Shipp on the March 2003 cover of *JazzTimes*, as the poster child for "jazztronica." The practice of blurring and melding musical worldviews has only continued to flower and refine itself in the ensuing years. "It was nothing new, jazz musicians doing electronic or electric music," Shipp observes. "But I guess in my sense I was keeping my 'avant-garde' pedigree intact while doing it, which might have been a slightly new angle."

Shipp's Blue Series albums have varied widely: acoustic quartets on Pastoral Composure and *New Orbit*, electro-acoustic hybrids with programmer/engineer FLAM on *Nu Bop*, *Equilibrium* and *Harmony and Abyss*, solo piano on *One* and the new *4D*. "Well, I see everything merging," Shipp remarks. "I'm not trying to prove any points. I'm just doing whatever needs to be done in the moment. With that in mind, it allows you to integrate everything you've ever experienced. I can even do a solo recording like *4D* and use things I learned doing electronic stuff." Examples? "Not that I could overtly say. It's something very subtle that goes on in my own psyche. Ideas about spacing, resonance."

Apart from a forthcoming sequel to *Antipop Consortium vs. Matthew Shipp* (2003), Shipp says he's more or less done with electronica. His most recent Blue Series discs, *Piano Vortex* and *Harmonic Disorder*, showcased his trio with Joe Morris on bass and Whit Dickey on drums, but this unit too has fallen by the wayside. Of his decision to return to solo piano, he explains: "I felt that the trio had built to an apotheosis, and coming off of that, I didn't want to do anything with other people right now. I felt I could depend on myself to get to the next step."

Another factor pushing Shipp toward independence was life after the David S. Ware Quartet. Shipp takes justifiable pride in the group, to the point of proclaiming its work "infinitely superior" to Wayne Shorter's current quartet—a remark that stirred much controversy when it appeared in the *Village Voice* in 2007. (More on that later.) Whatever the case, Ware remains a tremendous saxophone force, still working through the aftermath of a kidney transplant in May 2009. It's fitting that *Live in the World*, a three-disc retrospective, arguably the quartet's definitive document, found a home on the Blue Series imprint. "I wish I could have kept [the quartet] together forever," Ware comments. "But things are not like that, man. The world is relative."

"It took me a long time to get out of the band," says Shipp. "David didn't want me to leave, and I kept trying to figure out a way. After 16 years, I felt I did whatever I could do in that setting, and there was nowhere else for me to go."

Poet Steve Dalachinsky, a longtime friend and collaborator of Shipp's, implies that 16 years was longer than anyone could have expected. "[At first] Matt wasn't sure about whether he should play with folks like Ware or Roscoe Mitchell," Dalachinsky recalls. "He always wanted to be a leader, not a follower." William Parker calls Shipp "a homebody, in the sense that he's comfortable being at home in his own world. His own world was calling him to spend a little bit more time at home. [*Laughs.*] He had a few more things to investigate."

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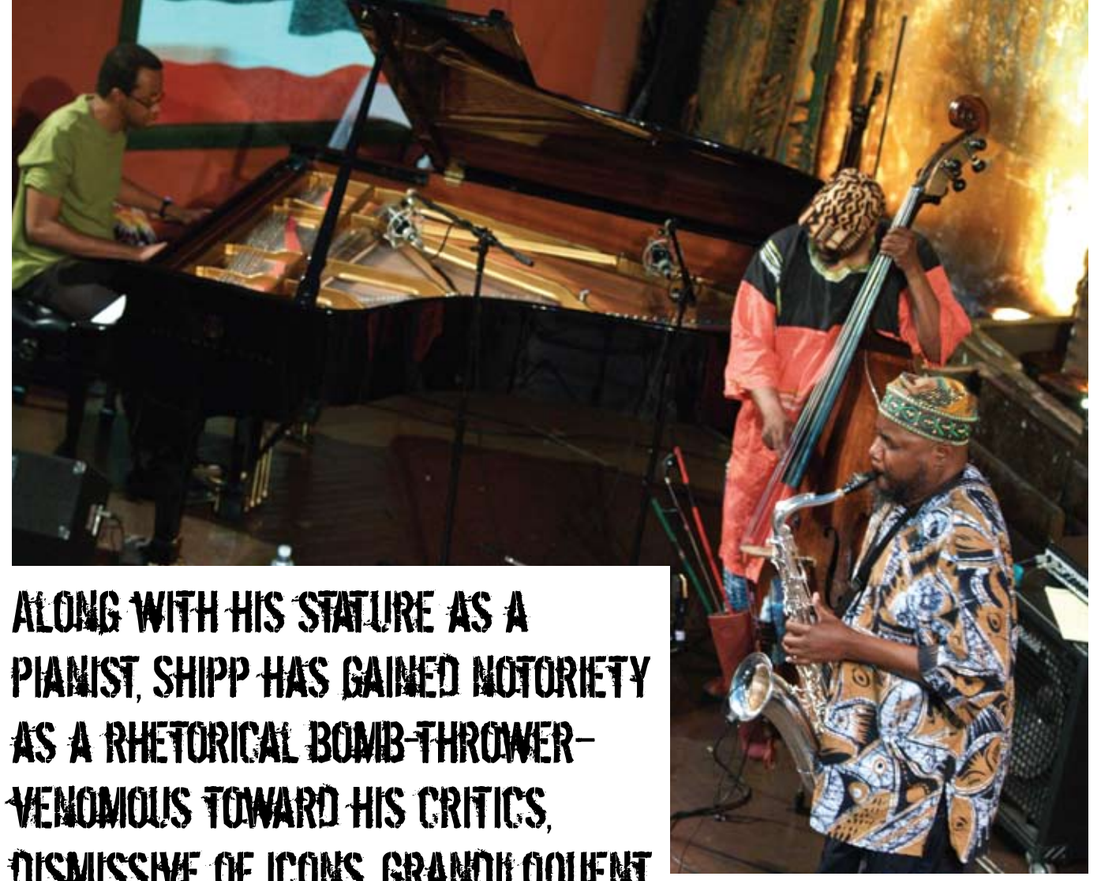
Like Clifford Brown, Shipp hails from Wilmington, Del.—in fact, he was born just four years after the trumpeter's tragic death. He studied with Dennis Sandole in Philadelphia and acknowledges a certain "regional thing" in his approach to the piano. "Coming from where I do, seeing as Sun Ra lived in Philly, and being that I'm a mystic, there's a whole kind of post-Sun Ra mystical element to what I do. Which also relates to Coltrane and McCoy Tyner coming out of Philly, and a whole other regional quasi-mystic element that enters my playing from there."

Shipp categorically denies being influenced by Cecil Taylor, and he's always distanced himself from the "post-Miles" triumvirate of Keith Jarrett, Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock. "It's not my mentality," says Shipp. "In some ways I think I'm more old-school, actually. First of all, in my mind I have no influences. But I love Bud Powell—to me he's the essence of purity, an angel. To a lesser degree I really connect with the figure of Thelonious Monk. I also really relate to Duke Ellington as a pianist. There's a hardness in Duke's sound, and a whole extended blues tonality. … Also, the group of pianists who come out of that Ellington branch: Elmo Hope, Hassan Ibn Ali of Philadelphia, Mal Waldron, Randy Weston. Now, with all of that said, I actually still claim to have no influences. I'm a complete, 100-percent original in my own distorted imagination."

Most of Shipp's previous solo-piano music—on *Symbol Systems*, *Before the World*, *One* and *Un Piano*—is exclusively his own. The 2002 solo disc Songs, all standards, is highly atypical. *4D* bridges the gap, placing "Autumn Leaves" and "What Is This Thing Called Love?" alongside "Teleportation," "Primal Harmonic" and other remote abstractions. "The goal was to have a universe that's tied together," says



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Shipp, "where the pieces equal one vast organic whole. I feel like I was able to get to the fourth dimension of the piano, hence the title. I really feel that I've grown."

Recorded at Roulette in downtown New York before a small group of invitees, 4D is neither a studio album nor a live album in the strict sense. Some of the repertoire hints at Shipp's past: "Frère Jacques" as a swift, disintegrating pedal-point romp, "Prelude to a Kiss" in a calmer melodic vein, both heard back in 2000 on *Pastoral Composure*. Shipp also revisits the spidery arpeggiated theme of "Equilibrium," which vibraphonist Khan Jamal endowed with a silken transparency on the 2003 album of the same name. Shipp's *4D* version is more cutting and severe. "I'm trying to draw together my Blue Series recordings," he remarks, "and convey that where I am now is a culmination, that I've grown from all of them."

Clearly one doesn't go to Shipp for a definitive reading of "Autumn Leaves." His approach to standards is so witheringly deconstructionist that it can verge on slapdash. It's the original music that reveals Shipp's gift in its fullness, his way of combining harmonic opacity and hypnotic beauty. In such pieces as "Virgin Complex" from *Critical Mass* (and *Harmony and Abyss*), "Space Shipp" from *Nu Bop*, or the "Orbit" leitmotif winding through *New Orbit*—one of the most ravishing albums of the last 10 years—there is a directness, a thematic coherence, even a riff-oriented catchiness, that one doesn't always hear in avant-garde jazz. (It's one clear difference between Shipp and Cecil Taylor.) Shipp himself described the aesthetic rather well with a song title from *Equilibrium*: "World of Blue Glass." "We search for forms of light in tones of blue," Shipp muses in *Logos and Language: A Post-Jazz Metaphorical Dialogue*, a book he co-published with Dalachinsky. "We seek the mathematical point where equations of blue pulsating light form a space of pure harmonics."

"Matthew is a natural-born musician, and he has the ability to make the music his own," opines Ware. "That's why I nicknamed him 'The Doctor,' man, because he knows how to, so to speak, 'fix' a piece of music that you put in front of him. That's what music is about—music is infinite."

Joe Morris, in the rare position of having worked with Shipp as both a guitarist and a bassist, comments: "Matt practices all the time and he trusts his instincts, so there's an organic sense of order that emerges out of a pretty cosmic environment. … He always plays what he intends to play. And it's always meant to be music that is transcendent. Some people think it's somehow passé to reach for that. I suspect they haven't had the kind of experience that Matt reaches for."

When Shipp refers to *4D* as "my last album," one must recall that he's been swearing off recording since at least 1999. "If my touring schedule was what I wanted it to be, I would never go into the studio again, ever," he declares. "I really want to stop recording but I just can't seem to get out of the cycle. I'm tired of conceptualizing recordings, even though I feel I have a gift for doing that. I just want to perform live. I basically keep going into the studio because I need the cash advances every once in a while."

Shipp's blunt assessment of business realities underlies his most polemical statements, including his controversial take on Shorter and Hancock. Thinking back on his anti-Shorter remarks of 2007, he admits: "Look, Wayne has a quartet of young players that are on fire." Does he dig Shorter's pianist, Danilo Perez? "Yeah. I think he's an excellent musician. It's not even a matter of that. I've heard the band a couple of times where Wayne was really questionable. People like him and Herbie Hancock, their careers were made from their early 20s on, and they've had all the accoutrements that the jazz industry can give. You can't give them the benefit of the doubt.

"Writers have often gotten me on a day when I'm in a bad mood over the fact that somebody like Ware or myself has to go out and prove ourselves every time, whereas people like this can go out there and bullshit and get away with it. And whenever they play a festival they're getting like 90 percent of the money the festival has. At times I feel someone like Herbie Hancock is taking up space. I feel his work doesn't warrant it. I feel everything he's done in the last 20 or 30 years is crap. That's my personal opinion. I have a right to say it."

The bloggers of *Destination: Out* mocked Shipp's comments on Shorter versus Ware as "plain cra-zee." Pianist Ethan Iverson lamented Shipp's "truly uninformed assessments" of Shorter, which, he argued, "happily go into the fool's ring and hang out along with the worst of Wynton, Branford, and Crouch." Shipp responds: "I don't hold the jazz tradition in the respect that Ethan does. On one level I do—I mean, it's the tradition. On another level, fuck all of them. And I mean that—fuck Herbie Hancock, fuck Wayne Shorter. On a certain level, fuck Louis Armstrong. I've had really nice conversations with Ethan, but, you know, if he wants to genuflect to these people, fine. I don't. They were out here doing what they needed to do. They obviously have a place in history and it's obviously deserved. But I've got to do what I do, I've got to say what I need to say to market myself the way I need to market myself, and if it means I say something that's perceived as nasty about an icon, then I'll do it, and I don't really give a fuck. [*Laughs.*] I don't care about them, and what does Wayne Shorter care?"

That's a mouthful, and Shipp knows it. "Sometimes when I do interviews I'm sort of playing a character. I mean everything I say, but there's a slight schizophrenic element. People have to realize that being a jazz musician is very frustrating. On any given day, you end up saying stuff. [And] this historical thing is so heavy in jazz that it's just distressing sometimes. You just want to relax and be in the moment. To have the whole weight of history being bandied about, all the time—that leads you sometimes to that extreme statement."

One of Shipp's prose pieces in *Logos and Language*, titled "Boxing and Jazz," puts all the gibes and bravado into further perspective. Noting how both disciplines involve "a refined language of will and transposed aggression," Shipp draws a parallel that wasn't lost on Miles Davis when he made *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* in 1970. "I am the greatest!" roared another boxing legend, and Shipp indeed seems to have borrowed a page from Muhammad Ali, even if it sometimes means being his own worst enemy. ***JT***