1. Jason Moran

Published by

Beuttler, Bill.
Make It New: Reshaping Jazz in the 21st Century.
Lever Press, 2019.
Project MUSE. https://doi.org/10.1353/book.68984.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/68984

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CHAPTER ONE

JASON MORAN

I saw a lot of great music researching this book in 2016. Jason Moran recording a solo piano album at New York's Park Avenue Armory. Vijay Iyer and Wadada Leo Smith performing music from their duo album of that year, *A Cosmic Rhythm with Each Stroke,* at New York's Met Breuer Museum and again at Harvard. Anat Cohen unveiling her new Tentet at the Jazz Standard, where George Wein was also in the audience, and at Wein's Newport Jazz Festival. The Bad Plus and friends doing their version of Ornette Coleman's *Science Fiction* at Newport. An evening of the Bad Plus at the Blue Note followed by Julian Lage and Gyan Riley performing John Zorn bagatelles at the Village Vanguard. Moran and Robert Glasper as a piano duo, playing and telling funny stories at the Blue Note. Esperanza Spalding and company performing her *Emily's D+Evolution* at Boston's Shubert Theatre. Rudresh Mahanthappa leading a quartet through his *Bird Calls* tribute to Charlie Parker at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art. Lage, Scott Colley, and Clarence Penn joining Miguel Zenón in Puerto Rico for a "Caravana Cultural" presentation of the music of Sonny Rollins.

I saw all that and more, and ranking them is something I'd generally avoid. But if forced to choose, my favorite jazz performance of that year was an afternoon trio set at the Charlie Parker Jazz Festival in New York's Tompkins Square Park. Jason Moran played acoustic grand piano and Fender Rhodes electric alongside two bona fide jazz masters, bassist Dave Holland (whose induction as a National Endowment

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for the Arts Jazz Master came the following April) and drummer Jack DeJohnette (who received the same honor in 2012). In keeping pace with these two great innovators, Moran erased any doubt that he is an artist worthy of their company—one, like others of his generation, as intent on expanding and updating jazz as Holland, DeJohnette, and their peers had been in the 1970s.

The park was already crowded when the trio came onstage on this pleasantly sunny August day. Three earlier groups had already performed, most notably the Donny McCaslin Quartet, whose profile had been boosted by backing David Bowie on his final album, released earlier that year. They came out dressed casually, Moran wearing a billed cap, gray shorts, and white sneakers, and started off abstractly, edging their way into Holland's "Four Winds," from his essential free-jazz album of 1973, *Conference of the Birds*.

Freedom rang throughout the set. If Moran was at all intimidated in such company, it didn't show. If anything, he appeared comfortably in charge. He smiled in admiration at what DeJohnette was doing on cymbals as they accompanied Holland's solo on the opener, and Holland in turn grinned at Moran and at what he was contributing harmonically.

Moran had played with each of them before: with DeJohnette on the Don Byron album *Ivey-Divey* (2004) and on the Rudresh Mahanthappa/Bunky Green collaboration *Apex* (2010); with Holland touring in the short-lived Overtone Quartet and, earlier, subbing for vibraphonist Steve Nelson on a Holland quintet tour. Holland and DeJohnette had worked together, too, most famously on the landmark Miles Davis fusion album *Bitches Brew*, whose 1970 release date preceded Moran's birth by five years. This was the first time the three of them had played together as a trio, though, and Moran clearly relished the opportunity.

"This is a dream come true to play with Jack DeJohnette and Dave Holland," he declared when they paused after the first tune for him to address the audience. "Let me just say that first off. We want to play a piece of music for Bobby Hutcherson, one of the greatest musicians ever in the world. We're gonna play a piece of his called 'Montara.' "

Hutcherson had died two weeks earlier, and the audience-friendly funk groove of his mid-1970s classic, accentuated by Moran's Rhodes, had an elegiac tinge to it as well as free-leaning improvisation from the trio. Then the freedom was ratcheted up fully for the set's highlight: a stretched-out medley of Juan Tizol's "Caravan," Duke Ellington's "Fleurette Africaine," and McCoy Tyner's "Inner Glimpse." Moran conjured both Tyner and Cecil Taylor as the trio roared through the latter, which culminated in a ferocious drum solo that left DeJohnette looking wrung out as they took their bows.

"Caravan" and "Fleurette Africaine" had an obvious link to a previous

intergenerational trio, when Ellington had been teamed with Charles Mingus and Max Roach on the 1963 classic *Money Jungle*. But what Moran and company did with "Caravan" in particular and throughout their set put me more in mind of a double album recorded live in Paris in February 1971 by Circle, a quartet Holland and Chick Corea had assembled upon leaving Miles Davis's fusion band to explore the avant-garde. Joining them were Barry Altschul and Anthony Braxton, the latter having recently begun releasing influential albums of his own (both men would also join Holland on *Conference of the Birds*). I still own the copy of *Paris-Concert* I bought while in high school, and retain fond memories of first encountering how Circle took Wayne Shorter's "Nefertiti" uptempo and launched it into the stratosphere. What I saw in Tompkins Square Park that afternoon had a touch of déjà vu to it. These were artists whose devotion to jazz history compelled them to honor it by taking even classic works to radically new places.

I spotted two other such artists chatting together backstage as the set ended. One was Vijay Iyer, Moran's friendly rival in piling up various accolades from the jazz world and beyond, and, like Moran, someone whose work is inspired by visionary musicians with links to the M-Base Collective and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). I had seen Iyer perform those memorable sets with AACM icon Wadada Leo Smith twice that spring. Chatting with Iyer was Henry Threadgill, an early AACM member who had won the Pulitzer Prize for Music that April. Moran has called Threadgill his favorite composer, and performed with him on Threadgill's album *Old Locks and Irregular Verbs*, released the same month as Threadgill's Pulitzer honor.

Other acclaimed musicians of the Moran-Iyer generation and younger have similar ties to M-Base and/or the AACM. One of them, Matana Roberts, is related to Moran (I saw him back her one night during her January 2016 residency at The Stone). An album of hers, *The Chicago Project* (2008), was produced by Iyer. Others are AACM members (Nicole Mitchell, Tomeka Reid) or have earned academic degrees studying under AACM legends Braxton (Mary Halvorson, Tyshawn Sorey, Steve Lehman) and/or George Lewis (Sorey, Lehman, Courtney Bryan). But none of them has yet captured as much attention from the jazz press as Moran and Iyer have.

Moran that afternoon was in the midst of an especially productive period. A few weeks earlier I'd seen him perform at the Newport Jazz Festival as part of the Charles Lloyd New Quartet. In March had come his adventurous live solo piano recording at Park Avenue Armory (I'd spotted Threadgill in the audience there, too, seated near pianist Ethan Iverson of the Bad Plus), which he put out three months later as his first self-released recording since leaving Blue Note Records. Four days before *The Armory Concert* dropped, he joined fellow Houston native

Robert Glasper for a lively duo piano set at New York's Blue Note Jazz Club. His annual Thanksgiving run at the Village Vanguard a few months later with his longtime Bandwagon trio mates Tarus Mateen and Nasheet Waits also led to a live album, *Thanksgiving at the Vanguard*, released in April 2017. An October 2016 studio session with guitarist Halvorson and cornetist Ron Miles yielded *BANGS*, a collection of forward-looking chamber music, spacious and lyrical, to which all three musicians contributed compositions and which Moran put out via Bandcamp in May 2017.

Moran's duties as artistic director for jazz at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, led to a new project of his own, "Muldrow Meets Mingus," for which he recruited the visionary singer/rapper/producer Georgia Anne Muldrow to help him reimagine "Fables of Faubus," "Goodbye Porkpie Hat," and other Charles Mingus classics, which they premiered in January 2017.

Moran had told me about that Mingus project over dinner one night in Boston shortly after the Armory concert. His wife, the vocalist Alicia Hall Moran, had been at the Armory concert, too, where she suggested that the best way to get him to find time for an interview would be to share a meal with him. "He likes to eat," she noted, smiling. So he and I did so on his next trip to teach at New England Conservatory. The Mingus project came up when we found ourselves discussing the pros and cons of social media.

A mention of a recent *GQ* piece about Kamasi Washington, whose three-CD debut album, *The Epic*, had captured the music world's attention the year before, prompted me to bring up a rival saxophonist who had recently disparaged Washington's musicianship.

"Oh, tons of musicians do," Moran responded. "It's amazing. Like, c'mon. I know people you should be mad at. Believe me, this ain't the cat."

I asked if he'd gotten wind of a Facebook kerfuffle a few years earlier in which guitarist Kurt Rosenwinkel was dismissive of the high praise accorded Vijay Iyer, who had recently been awarded a MacArthur Foundation genius grant.

"Oh my God, that was a big one," replied Moran, who had received his own MacArthur in 2010. "Vijay and I went to breakfast not long after that. When I'm in New York, I would take people to breakfast at Sylvia's up in Harlem. I did like twenty, twenty-five of 'em, just friends over for breakfast. Just to hang out, just to talk. I figure I drop my kids off for school, I'm up—so who wants to have breakfast at 9, 9:30? Vijay and I talked about that for a while, because it was a fucked-up thing to have to go through."

Dustups between musicians are nothing new, Moran pointed out. "It's always been a thing between certain kinds of musicians—like Lester Bowie and Wynton [Marsalis], or Dizzy [Gillespie] and Louis Armstrong," he said. "The Internet makes

it worse because those things become public. It's unfortunate when people have to deal with that shit. And everybody has to, to a degree. If you're online, somebody's going to come for you."

"Facebook can really alter reality for people," he said, pondering whether there were countervailing upsides to social media for musicians, beyond the obvious one of being able to publicize their performances and record releases for free. "I've watched it help the jazz scene because it keeps people up to date. Even pockets of scenes. I know a couple of cats on the West Coast. I would never call them to see what they're up to, but now I kind of know, passively. People in Chicago or Miami or Houston, people in DC, Philly, New York. I love that part of it. But it doesn't make it real. So if it I see a little ten-second clip of your gig where you play a drum solo, like, *it's a clip*.

"But at the other end of the spectrum," he continued, "I have totally been inspired by some things." He offered Muldrow as his example. "She's a genius. Ambrose [Akinmusire, trumpeter/composer whose acclaimed album *When the Heart Emerges Glistening* was co-produced by Moran] knows her, and Robert Glasper knows her. But she wrote this thing about Mingus on her Twitter page. I knew she comes from musicians, jazz musicians. She wrote this thing about Mingus, and I was like, 'What's up with that? Muldrow Meets Mingus.' Well, that's exactly what we're commissioning: we're commissioning her to write responses to Mingus's music."

"Did you ever see Mingus?" I asked, curious because I'd had the good luck to do so twice and not pausing to consider the unlikelihood of Moran having done so, given that Mingus's death occurred shortly before Moran's fourth birthday.

"No, I was too young," he answered. "My dad saw him. But I had Jaki Byard [as a professor], so that's the next best seat. I have a lot of affinity for those people. The neighborhood I grew up in in Houston is extremely political. Like, there was a church called Shrine of the Black Madonna that was kind of behind us. There were community centers that were very pro-black. The whole neighborhood kind of exuded this. 'Must have pride and know your heritage.' "

"That's weird for Texas, isn't it?" I asked.

"It sure is."

But it clearly helped shape Moran's worldview and art.

"I saw Bobby Seale[14] give a lecture in Houston when I was sixteen," he told me. "That's who was coming to our neighborhood. So learning music you were always learning it with that kind of stuff in mind. And it was also the same time that Public Enemy was out. So I had something that was kind of jazz being like some historical music dealing with that shit, and then Public Enemy with the contemporary focus dealing with the same thing."

Moran was taking on racial issues in his own career before "Muldrow Meets Mingus." The most widely known project in that regard to which he contributed has to be scoring the 2014 feature film *Selma* for director Ava DuVernay, with whom Moran also subsequently collaborated on her award-winning 2016 documentary *13th*, which draws a direct line from slavery and Jim Crow to the current state of the US prison system.

But composers of film scores often escape the notice of theatergoers. Moran's own most overt and wide-ranging project exploring race was his and his wife's five-day residency at the 2012 Whitney Biennial, titled *Bleed*, in part for its radical bleeding of music together with performance art, dance, conversation, journalism, and a variety of visual arts. I managed to catch the final day of performances.

By then I'd already had a taste of Moran's expansive view of how a jazz performance might differ from how they're typically staged in nightclubs. A few months earlier, I'd seen him and the Bandwagon in a double bill with Geri Allen at the 92nd Street Y in Tribeca. Their set contained freewheeling takes on some of their familiar fare—Duke Ellington's "Wig Wise," the standard "Body and Soul," and Moran's own "RFK in the Land of Apartheid," composed for a documentary with that title.

At one point the trio broke for a mid-set listening session, cuing up a recording of Gladys Knight singing "No One Could Love You More." The three of them sat back and chatted casually as the tune played, as if doing so were the most natural thing in the world. What they were driving at wasn't specified. A reference to Allen's Motown roots? A reminder of the comprehensiveness of Black American Music? But somehow the break made sense intuitively without its purpose being made explicit. The trio resumed playing to finish out the set, and Moran then brought out a couple of big boxes of gourmet cupcakes as a treat for the audience.

I saw Alicia Hall Moran perform around that time, too, as a cast member during the Broadway production of *The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess*. (She also occasionally appeared as Bess, in her role as understudy to Audra McDonald.) But my introduction to her work had been a performance of her Motown Project the year before at the Regattabar jazz club in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she demonstrated that she is as much an outside-the-box thinker as her husband. Jason accompanied her on piano with Mateen on bass, joined by classical guitarist Thomas Flippin and taiko drummer Kaoru Watanabe, as she and baritone Steven Herring sang operatic arrangements of Motown hits, including "Signed, Sealed, Delivered I'm Yours," "(Love Is Like a) Heat Wave," and "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone."

The Motown Project was presented during *Bleed*, as was an astonishing array of artistic collaborations, nearly all of which involved one or both of the Morans. These even included Alicia undergoing acupuncture to musical accompaniment, and both Jason and Alicia exploring Alexander Technique—a method of using

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mindful movement to reduce physical tension, also practiced by Julian Lage and other musicians—with a pair of instructors. "Alicia did it," Moran told me during our dinner in Boston, "and then she helped me get in touch with it just for posture at the piano."

On Sunday, two live presentations involving the Bandwagon (with Jamire Williams subbing for Nasheet Waits on drums) stood out. The first, "Live:Time," was an hourlong work inspired by the famous quilts of Gee's Bend, Alabama, with Alicia joining the band on vocals and Bill Frisell on guitar. The piece's mood changed remarkably as it shifted from one portion to the next, from a taste of Moran's trademark Gangsterism series to guitar groove to spiritual to a climax of the Bandwagon at full throttle—all interspersed with readings, including Frisell reading from a letter he had sent Moran on how to locate the isolated hamlet where the quilts were born. Later that afternoon came "Rain," originally commissioned by Jazz at Lincoln Center. During this performance, trumpeter Ralph Alessi slowly circled the room as he played, signifying the ring shouts brought to America by African slaves. The music built in intensity and freedom as it progressed, with Abdou M'Boup on kora and Marvin Sewell on blues-infused guitar.

There were also video installations to check out between the live events. The three most memorable had racial themes. *Threshold*, by art critic Maurice Berger, was inspired by conversations with the Morans about what they planned for *Bleed*. It showed African American characters crossing thresholds in popular films and television shows, metaphors for a people's transcendence of barriers meant to hold them down. Glenn Ligon's *The Death of Tom* showed blurry images from a scene he had recreated from an early film adaption of the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Moran's recorded piano accompanying the flickering imagery with a score Moran based on the Bert Williams song "Nobody." Most haunting of all was Kara Walker's use of wire and cut-paper figures to create a slow-moving, shadowy enactment of newly freed slaves being raped and murdered by an angry white mob, set to original music by the Morans.

The first interview specifically for this book took place the next day at the Moran's home in Harlem. My wife and I had a train to catch right afterward, so she accompanied me to the interview and hung out with the family's four-year-old twins near the grand piano while Jason and I talked at the opposite end of the spacious room.

It wasn't long before the conversation touched on race. "I can't imagine the built-up pressure of centuries that then allows [African American] musicians to get instruments, and how they quickly learn these instruments and decide this is the way to use them," Moran told me at one point, describing the early evolution of jazz.

"Like that we get to Charlie Parker from Scott Joplin in thirty or forty years. It kind of just goes really quickly." And then it keeps spawning other genres Moran adores and taps into in his own work. "I always hate when they say that jazz is America's greatest contribution," he continued. "What is blues? What is Motown? What is hip-hop? What is funk? What is jazz? How dare we think that jazz is more important than James Brown? This is nuts!"

Moran, like the others featured in this book, knows and respects jazz history but wants to move beyond merely preserving it. These musicians see the need for jazz to keep evolving to reflect the current times, as music did through the emergence of those other genres and as jazz's own most important figures had all done to earn their places in the canon.

"It always weighs on me when I hear stuff like that," Moran went on, "because I know jazz is great and its importance within the lineage is great. There's two approaches. Because it has to have a canon and people have to promote the canon. That's why there's still a metropolitan opera." He talked about how little new material gets staged at the Met. "They're doing occasional new pieces or new productions of old pieces, but that's me doing Fats Waller. I'm doing new production on old pieces. I'm actually changing the music, too. They're not changing the music so much. The conductor might have some new ideas about what to cut, but they're just adding different context."

That, generally speaking, has also been Jazz at Lincoln Center's approach to jazz. It isn't Moran's, but he values it. Years after the Whitney residency, during our dinner conversation, he told me that Wynton Marsalis had asked him to join his band shortly after he graduated from the Manhattan School of Music. Moran declined. "That doesn't seem like you," I said. "No," he agreed. "It was never going to happen. Ever. But when I got the Kennedy Center job the first person I called was him. I was like, 'We need to have breakfast.' I went in his neighborhood, and he sat me down and gave me a long talking to about what it is like in that world. It was so helpful."

"For me, music needs Jazz at Lincoln Center," he said. "It needs somebody that goes up there and says, 'This is that old stuff and we really spent a lot of time practicing it.' But on the other hand, you need people who are gonna say, 'I'm gonna dig in this dirt, and I'm looking for something, not even sure if there's anything down there. Just keep digging for stuff.' Its relationship to social strife, it's relevant.

"But the thing is, you can never assume what a person's private social strife is. And it's quite an assumption to think that nobody's thinking of anything because you don't hear it. What a person like Fred Hersch battles with, kind of on an epidemic level within his body, as a homosexual within the jazz community, which is totally misogynistic. What that even feels like. Or even race from his point of view.

Those discussions are had, typically, very privately. Fred and I, or Ethan Iverson and I, Mary Halvorson and I, talking about stuff. Putting stuff on the table. I talk very freely with them about race, because I trust that they understand how this functions. And they do, too. They are not naïve."

He then demonstrated how this can play out by describing some of the *Bleed* programming that I'd missed.

"The 'wake' Alicia curated Friday was these powerful women, one writer from the blog *Colorlines* read two pieces, one about Trayvon Martin and one about misogyny in hip-hop. Another writer read a piece about how hip-hop mistreated women in general and how it was affecting her daughter. After that Joan Jonas comes up and plays this very abstract piece with the Bandwagon—we do like thirty, forty minutes. After that Kara Walker comes and gives, as usual, a very bold performance, which has the image of Condoleezza Rice at a piano while she's reading transcripts from Abu Ghraib—you know, it's really rough. Then it turns into 'Brown Sugar,' Rolling Stones. And the people who saw that see that this is the conversation. These are the conversations I'm constantly having with people that inform the music to a degree.

"And after that Esperanza Spalding comes up and plays a solo bass set. It was like through all that toiling of the dirt . . ." He let the thought hang a moment. "Because that's Esperanza Spalding. You don't think Spalding's not having these conversations either? You think it's just some passé beautiful music full of technique? No, it's not. This is just how people manifest their work."

Moran's unwillingness to be hamstrung by jazz tradition was evident from my first contact with him, which came when I interviewed him for the *Boston Globe* in 2005 before a Boston performance touting his album *Same Mother*. Blue Note Records sent me a copy of the CD with a press release that I kept and filed away. It explained that the album's title came from Alicia watching Savion Glover and observing that dance movement in jazz, blues, and hip-hop all come "from the same mother," offering my first hint of the artistic collaboration the couple shares.

The press release also contained a quote from Moran that referenced his interest in art forms beyond music to explain his desire to absorb jazz history without permitting it to constrain his own art later: "I saw [Jean-Michel] Basquiat's work while in high school and I'd never seen anything so raw and comprehensible. There was something rare and strange about his color scheme, multiple perspectives, line and textures. Very functional too—if a piece was too big he put hinges on it so it would fit through the door. Yet he still wanted to prove that he could 'really draw.' I came up through jazz education, came to New York to study at Manhattan School of Music, but I think a lot of my schoolmates took the rules too seriously. Therefore

their personality was put on a backburner. I knew that was not the correct route. People like Jaki Byard taught me that you could learn the tradition, adhere to the rules just so much, and the music will never imprison you."

What caught my eye most of all, though, was the press release noting that two cousins of Moran's father used to stop by their home in Houston when touring with blues great Albert King. One of them had taught young Jason piano licks. I'd had a friend Tony in Chicago who played keyboards in King's band and knew that his brother had played drums in it as well. It seemed unlikely that two sets of brothers would have toured with King, so the first thing I did when I spoke with Jason was to ask if the cousins in question were Tony and Michael Llorens. "Yes!" he replied, and suddenly we had a family connection. He put me back in touch with Tony, who had relocated to Los Angeles at some point after I left Chicago, and I wound up quoting him in my *Globe* article about what he thought of Moran's *Same Mother* cover of King's "I'll Play the Blues for You": "When he took his solo he played all these tremolos on it. He told me I taught him to play that. Ain't that something? You never know what a child picks up."[15]

Moran had then just turned thirty, a rising star with his sixth album as a leader after several years as a sideman to Greg Osby. His third, *Black Stars* (2001), on which he and his Bandwagon trio mates were joined by the septuagenarian master Sam Rivers on saxophone and flute (as well as introducing the track "Sound It Out" on piano, before Moran slides onto the bench beside him and takes over), had already been an important breakthrough for him four years earlier. Ben Ratliff tapped it as the final entry in his *The New York Times Essential Library* book *Jazz: A Critic's Guide to the 100 Most Important Recordings* (2002). Gary Giddins, reviewing both the album and a New York performance for the *Village Voice*, praised it effusively and noted that Moran's teacher Jaki Byard had played on Rivers's great album *Fuchsia Swing Song* (1964). "The more Moran looks backward the more certain he is in moving forward," Giddins concluded. "At 26, he is good news for jazz's future."[16]

Moran's career really began blossoming in the years to follow. In 2010, he received both his MacArthur Foundation genius grant and a teaching appointment at New England Conservatory, the latter requiring traveling to Boston several times a year from his home in Harlem to coach student ensembles and teach master classes. The next year he was hired to replace the late Dr. Billy Taylor in overseeing jazz at the Kennedy Center. His promotion to Taylor's old title, artistic director for jazz, followed in 2014.

His move beyond music into multimedia projects began in those years as well. A few months before seeing *Bleed* at the Whitney, I'd reviewed a performance of Moran's *In My Mind: Monk at Town Hall, 1959* at NEC's Jordan Hall. Commissioned several years earlier to celebrate the ninetieth anniversary of Thelonious Monk's

birth year, Moran went well beyond performing music from that concert. He teamed with videographer David Dempewolf to create a project mixing music (played by "the Big Bandwagon"—his trio augmented by horns) with, among other things, a trove of historical photographs and conversations recorded during the original Town Hall rehearsals. Moran, in the accompanying program notes, explained that taking this multimedia approach "allows me to ruminate on African-American slavery, jazz history, the piano, my life and religion."

I was able to see two similarly expansive projects involving Moran when they came to Boston. His Fats Waller Dance Party, commissioned by Harlem Stage, was brought to the Berklee Performance Center in April 2014 by the Celebrity Series of Boston. Once again he went beyond simply making a night of performing Waller's hits. He and Meshell Ndegeocello radically updated much of the music, modernizing it, and Moran spent a significant portion of his time performing it wearing a huge papier-mâché Fats Waller mask. The cast included professional dancers, and the audience was encouraged to dance along. Seven months later, at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, Moran accompanied Joan Jonas on piano as she performed *Reanimation*, an absorbing blend of visual and performance art inspired by Icelandic Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness's novel *Under the* Glacier.

Another museum project I wish I'd seen was *Staged* (2015), for which Moran brought reproductions of New York jazz venues (the Savory Ballroom and the Three Deuces) to Brooklyn's Luhring Augustine Museum, where the Bandwagon gave two days of performances, and charcoal-on-paper artwork by Moran was also on display. The Luhring Augustine connection also led to the debut of *LOOP* in 2016, Moran's magazine of pieces by and interviews with jazz musicians. A second issue was scheduled for summer 2017.

Moran's "Looks of a Lot," a commissioned piece that he and the Bandwagon debuted at Chicago's Symphony Center with saxophonist Ken Vandermark and the Kenwood Academy Jazz Band in 2014, with a stage set by Chicago artist Theaster Gates, is one I particularly wish I'd seen. It not only happened in my hometown, it also called attention to the city's history of racial segregation and how that iniquity continues manifesting itself in the surge of gun violence there.

I did view a documentary by Radiclani Clytus on the making of the piece when he brought it to Boston. (Clytus was also at work on a documentary on Moran.) One moment from the performance that stood out involved high school musicians walking slowly past a makeshift casket in what was meant to resemble a funeral procession. Moran's piece had been intended to address gun violence, a scourge that the band itself fell victim to less than two weeks before the concert, when fifteen-year-old band member Aaron Rushing was shot dead a few blocks from his school. A second performance was held at the Kennedy Center in 2017, and that

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summer Moran recorded the project with the students for release on his record label.

Moran's purely musical busyness only continued to ramp up after our first meeting. When I talked to him about *Same Mother*, he hadn't had much sideman work since leaving Osby and launching his own trio, with the notable exception of Don Byron's *Ivey-Divey* project the year before. We speculated that other musicians might have assumed he was unavailable because of his Bandwagon commitments. But that soon began changing, with Moran appearing in rapid succession on albums with violinist Jenny Scheinman (*Crossing the Field,* 2008), a remarkably fresh standards album with vocalist Cassandra Wilson (*Loverly,* 2008), and a Rudresh Mahanthappa/Bunky Green collaboration (*Apex,* 2010). He also began a long, fruitful association with Charles Lloyd, as a member of Lloyd's New Quartet with Ruben Rogers and Eric Harland and as a recording partner on their 2013 duo album, *Hagar's Song*.

Holland and Threadgill are two other jazz legends who liked what they saw in Moran and eventually worked with him, Holland in his short-lived and unrecorded Overtone Quartet and Threadgill in his two-piano Ensemble Double Up.

"I knew Jason on the scene when he was starting to record his trio, the only trio records I was interested in," Dave Holland told me when I had a chance to ask him about Moran several months after the Tompkins Square performance.

"Tracing the roots, eh?" Holland responded when I brought up Moran's family connection to a pair of onetime Albert King sidemen. "Well, Jason's got all of that in his music. That's what I think is an incredible strength of what he does: there's all the tradition of the music, and then there's the whole performance art aspect to what he does as well—the multimedia thing. He's a real visionary for me, in many, many ways, and an extraordinary musician, of course. And very articulate. We both give classes at the New England Conservatory from time to time, and occasionally we'll be up there the same week. We've done a class together, and it's just so much fun, sharing ideas back and forth and then doing a little playing. He's wonderful with the students, and really makes them think about some other ways of looking at the music and the reference points and so on."

Henry Threadgill met Moran long before hiring him for his Ensemble Double Up. He told me he thinks it was Gene Lake who first told him about Moran, who would have been an undergraduate at the time. "He said, 'There's this one guy who is really crazy about your music,' " Threadgill recalled. "This was a long time ago. A little bit after Very Very Circus, maybe. After I met him, we ran into each other much later. I went to hear Bandwagon—a concert at Rose Hall, at Lincoln Center—and I caught him at a couple other places. Things just started to develop from there."

Prominent among the attributes Threadgill admires about Moran is his willingness to take risks. "He's open-minded, open-ended, you know?" Threadgill explained. "Because I can't really work with musicians that are stuffy. Period. That's fine, but you can't go anywhere with me. 'Cause you're stuck. I'm going over here, and you're stuck right there. I'm saying, 'Look here, we're jumping off this bridge without parachutes.' You got a parachute, I can't go." He laughed. "Only people without parachutes can go with me."

Musicians younger than Moran are similarly impressed.

"Jason Moran is the father of a lot of this shit, man," Christian Scott told me. "People are not saying that. But that Bandwagon band. Not *that* they're experimenting, but *how* they're experimenting. That's the shit. But no, Jason Moran is the father of what's going on conceptually. Anyone that says anything different from that is a fuckin' liar."

Robert Glasper arrived at Houston's High School for the Performing and Visual Arts the year after Moran's graduation from there, and went on to success of his own in both the jazz world and beyond, winning Grammy Awards for his own R&B projects and collaborating with high-wattage hip-hop stars including Mos Def, Kendrick Lamar, and Common. Glasper told Ethan Iverson, in a 2017 interview for Iverson's *Do the Math* blog, that he heard a recording the high school put out on which Moran played Tyner's "Inner Glimpse" and Kenny Kirkland's "Dienda." Moran as a high schooler sounded just like Kirkland, according to Glasper.

"He knows the whole lineage of jazz piano," Glasper told Iverson. "There are a lot of guys that dwell in that fine arts or 'go get the grant' world who can't really play. They found a crack in the door and get in there but I don't have a whole lot of respect for them. . . . Jason dwells in that world too but the fact that he came up the way he came up proves he's not skating, he's doing exactly what he wants to do."

Glasper, like Christian Scott, is also a big fan of Moran's trio.

"Bandwagon has their own sound," he told me when I caught up with him a few months after Iverson's interview. "They don't sound like anybody else. They sound like them. That's what's so dope about it. What's dope about it, too, is Tarus is one of the best hip-hop bass players out, but most people don't know that. I met Tarus Mateen at a Roots jam session. The Roots used to do jam sessions in New York every week. And Tarus was playing bass with them a lot. So I met him at the jam session playing bass. It was incredible. Tarus was throwing some Q-Tip shit out there. . . .

"Tarus is an amazing hip-hop bass player. All of them just know a lot of music. They studied it, they know it, and they can play it with respect to the genre, to what it is. And authentic, really authentic. That's how they all are. Nasheet and Tarus and Jason. They're the tightest band I've probably ever seen. As far as just, like, the trust

they have and where they go. And how they come back, when they come back, if they come back. It's incredible to watch."

How Moran came to make music like that is a story in itself, with a life-defining moment in his early teens that determined the artist he would become. He grew up middle class, the middle son of Andrew Moran, who worked in investment banking, and an educator mother, Mary Lou Moran, who also spent several years running a bakery from home. He began Suzuki-method lessons in classical piano at age six, which he didn't always appreciate. His piece "Cradle Song" on the album *Artist in Residence* (2006) has the sound of pencil scratching in the background, meant to convey his mother taking notes as he practiced. When I interviewed him at his home he offered to show me the potpourri still stuck inside his childhood upright piano, which he'd flung there in irritation many years before.

The idea that piano playing could be fun came along later, implanted by the boogie-woogie and other hipper styles that Moran's father's cousin would demonstrate for him on visits. "Tony would sit at that piano and play stuff, and I would be shocked. Because it never sounded like that when I played. I wanted to play like that. He always was having fun when he played the piano, and I was not. Then as I got better and better, I would check in with him to see what he was thinking. And then, I guess the biggest compliment, he heard 'I Will Play the Blues for You' from my version on the radio in LA. And he says, 'Who's this? They doing this shit right.' And then he heard it was me."

Moran's musical tastes early on ran toward hip-hop, though there was a middle-school flirtation with hardcore bands like the Dead Kennedys and Suicidal Tendencies, until he became "a little too obsessed" with them and his parents put an end to it. "I was still able to listen to Run DMC," he recalled. "Run DMC wasn't talking about that garbage. '*Suicidal Tendencies*.' I mean, the title. *Jeez*. I definitely shouldn't have been listening to them, but my brother was skating a lot. He was already in high school, and he was the one bringing those records."

Moran took up skateboarding, too, and much later managed to create a project that had the Bandwagon providing musical accompaniment to a group of San Francisco skateboarders. Tennis, golf, and family trips to museums and concert halls were also regular experiences for him growing up.

His interest in jazz began in August 1989, when he witnessed his parents mourning the death of a friend, Texas Congressman Mickey Leland.[17] Leland, forty-four, a prominent black legislator known for his dedication to ending hunger, had just perished in a plane crash in Ethiopia, and they were grieving his loss by listening to Thelonious Monk playing "Round Midnight."

Moran has often told this story of his birth as a jazz musician. "They were

watching the television, there was no sound," is a version he told me. "This is what I remember, so it might not be true. I remember walking in that room. Such passion—they're watching TV, no sound—they were listening to Thelonious Monk. So I went to look at the record. 'What is this?' Just listen to it over and over again. Made a tape. Tried to go downstairs and figure it out. All the time, from that point on, it was just Thelonious Monk."

That the superb Monk documentary *Thelonious Monk: Straight No Chaser* (1988), with jazz fan Clint Eastwood as its executive producer, was released about this time validated Monk's impact on the teenager. "Clint Eastwood is a huge star, and he's focusing on Monk," Moran explained. "You don't think about those films in that way, but they're actually influential to kids who might have just stumbled onto a path, and then they say, 'Oh, that's a good path to be on. It's not a traditional one, but it's a good one to be on.' "

Moran was fourteen at the time, about to enter high school. He spent a year at a public school and then transferred to HSPVA, graduating in 1993. Monk was, and remains, his lodestar, but Glasper is right about Moran having thoroughly immersed himself in the history of jazz piano. In his case, that meant the dominant figures studied by most aspiring jazz pianists as well as certain lesser known masters to whom Moran found himself especially drawn.

"I studied a whole lot of Bill Evans and a whole lot of Herbie Hancock, a whole lot of McCoy Tyner—like really was clones of them when I was in high school," Moran had told me the first time I talked to him. "And when I met McCoy Tyner in high school I thought, 'Man, I can go ahead and pass away, I've met the god.' And they are [gods]: What they've contributed to the history is amazing. And they are equal to my people like Andrew Hill and Herbie Nichols.

"But it all started with Thelonious Monk. That was the person I decided to base everyone else on. So it wasn't Art Tatum, or it wasn't Wynton Kelly or Red Garland or Oscar Peterson. It was Monk. When you're first learning something, that's what you're gonna consider is right. And so Monk to me was all that was right within music, within jazz and within composition, and everything else had to measure up to Monk for it to be viable. And so of course I studied a lot of those other piano players, know a lot of their solos. But also people like Herbie Nichols. It's also a lot of my peers were playing those styles so much . . ."

"It got boring?" I suggested.

"Well, you felt that you were always hearing that," Moran replied. "And I just knew that there was so much out there for me to focus on, trying to play like Herbie—Hancock—I could also focus on playing like Herbie Nichols and see what those two produce as something that I ingested, rather than just Herbie Hancock. And so everything that I'm playing is still like a mixture of all these really fine

pianists. And I still see all the traces that I've taken from Bill Evans or from Herbie Nichols or from Cecil Taylor."

Two additional key developments occurred during Moran's HSPVA years. First, attending a high school dedicated to an array of performing and visual arts made collaborations among divergent art forms come naturally to him as an adult. He had already worked with other types of aspiring artists as a teenager, including having his best friend design the poster for his senior recital.

Second, Moran met an upperclassman named Eddy Hobizal, who was awarded third place at the 1989 Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz International Piano Competition during Moran's freshman year. "He had this pantheon approach to piano in high school," said Moran of Hobizal. "I didn't know anything and he was about to graduate, so I was intimidated—like any jazz jock. I would ask him to give me stuff to listen to. He would be, like, 'Art Tatum.' "

Thus came Moran's introduction to stride piano, which proved especially useful when he chose the Manhattan School of Music for college specifically to study with Jaki Byard.

"By the time I was here studying with Jaki Byard, I knew that [Byard] was into that, so I really started listening," Moran said. "I thought it would do me some good to be kind of comfortable with it before I got up here to school. So I was sitting in front of him at my first lesson and he said, 'Oh.' I didn't play it well, but he knew I was going for it.

"Also Thelonious Monk: He's the perfect cat to listen to that deals with modernism and tradition at the same time. So he's dealing with the stride stuff, it's very spare, and he's dealing with all these angular lines and melodies. So he was the perfect one. You could pivot: tip it a little bit and then he'd be dealing with Ellington; tip it another way and then he's pushing John Coltrane to another level.

"But yeah, I knew being with Jaki Byard that I would have to get into it. And I might say that to a degree it was just to please Jaki, because who wants to be studying with a teacher who doesn't get what they're into."

There were lessons where Moran didn't feel like playing, and so he and Byard would talk, mostly about social issues like integration. They talked about Byard being with Kenny Clarke in the Army, fighting with Mingus, traveling through the South, being on the road and meeting Teddy Wilson, loving Earl Hines, teaching at New England Conservatory, then teaching at the Manhattan School, and the difference between schools. Those life lessons Moran considers at least as critical to his development as the technical ones. But Byard's impact on Moran's approach to the piano itself was extraordinary.

"I knew I was gonna learn a lot of history at the piano, and how to make that current," he told me. "When I was studying with him he was showing me all this—the

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Erroll Garner thing or the Earl Hines thing or the Art Tatum thing—and how he modified it. So he would do a stride piano, but what he was doing with his right hand would sound like they were from two different planets.

"He was constantly challenging those bounds of what could be possible with traditional elements. And that gave me a great respect for tradition from him, and how important it was to study and how important it was to be really knowledgeable about it—and still feel like you're making your contribution today. Because I'll never be able to play as good as Earl Hines at all. And what pianists used to do back then is extremely more technically savvy than people are doing today. And so I just thought that a lot of the techniques that the pianists were using you could use today and it would sound like it was new, but it was really, really old."

Moran got his chance to put what he learned from Byard to use when he joined Greg Osby's quartet for a European tour during his senior year of college, having been recommended to Osby by his HSPVA and Manhattan School classmate Eric Harland, who was already the drummer in Osby's quartet. It was Moran's first important tour, but the Osby connection proved essential for other reasons as well.

Then in his mid-thirties, Osby was associated with the M-Base Collective, an association of like-minded, Brooklyn-based musicians that included fellow saxophonists Steve Coleman (the musician most closely identified with the M-Base concept) and Gary Thomas, vocalist Cassandra Wilson, pianist Geri Allen, cornetist Graham Haynes, guitarist David Gilmore, drummer Marvin "Smitty" Smith, and others. These artists respected jazz tradition while rejecting being confined by it; they wanted their music to reflect their own experiences rather than imitating the work of their predecessors, the knock on Wynton Marsalis and subsequent "young lions" who rose to prominence in the late 1980s and early 1990s by taking a neoclassical approach to jazz.

Osby was an innovator, and in 1997 he was having trouble finding a pianist who could keep up with the music he envisioned. So much so that he decided to risk hiring Moran for that European tour before hearing him play piano, based largely on a lengthy phone interview. "I was going through several different pianists, well-established pianists in New York," Osby told me, "none of whom fit the requirements of my music and just my particulars as a composer. So Eric Harland, who was in the band at the time, he realized my frustration. He recommended Jason, whom he'd grown up with, and they had a lot of history together—they were also classmates at Manhattan School of Music. He said he would fit my music like hand in glove. So Jason came down to witness my band at Sweet Basil in New York. And he was really enthusiastic: 'Man, I'll do the gig right now!'

"But of course I couldn't fire the guy who was on the gig at that point. So that

night, Jason and I, we had a marathon conversation on the phone for about three or four hours. He gave me a detailing of his aspirations as a young artist. He made a great deal of really important and striking references, which really, I think that was the selling point. Because he made references to pianists that a lot of people of this generation *didn't*. And he was very, very descriptive, very definitive, very, very solid with his outreach. And it impressed me, you know, the conversation. And my conclusion was that if he was one tenth as good as what he's talking about, well then he would certainly be my guy. He talked about all of my favorite people. And it wasn't just the normal list of go-to people. He talked about a lot of peripheral characters, a lot of the less-heralded figures in the music, innovators whom I considered just as or more important than the ones who are most often talked about.

"So yeah, the first time that I actually heard him, after we were on the road, was on the bandstand in Vienna, Austria. So he played, and I felt a great deal of comfort as he played and a great deal of security and familiarity. But I really got to hear him after I stopped playing, and I stood off to the side of the bandstand, and I could hear him play. That was his audition, as they say: trial by fire."

By the time I heard Osby's version of the story, I had already heard Moran tell a roomful of New England Conservatory students his side of it. Saying to himself before the Vienna gig, "Jason, this is it. All your years studying with Jaki Byard, all these things you think you know . . . now's your chance. No friends here, just Eric and the band and a bunch of Austrians. They don't know nothing about you. Twenty-one years old. So I played, and I—you can turn on that part that says, 'I'm in it, I'm invested in every moment'—and I turned it on then. I don't think it sounded that great, but at the end of the gig, Greg said, 'Damn, that was all right. That's good enough for me.' He gave me like $500. Like, whoa! Man! Oh my God! I just sat in my room looking at the money like, 'Damn! This is the dream. I'm playing music, getting cash. Oh man!' "

Shortly thereafter, Moran said, at a tour stop in Germany, Osby decided he didn't feel like playing an encore, so he sent Moran out to play one leading a trio.

"I think I finally played 'Have You Met Miss Jones?' or something like that," Moran told the students. "Because I couldn't think. I got through it, and then I had to make an assessment of myself. It was clear in that moment that I could assess myself: That was nothing, that was just nothing. I was very honest with myself. I recorded, I listened back: There was no magic in that. But then I was like, 'You know what? I'm going to find it, though!' And on that tour he kept letting me search for it. You want to be in an environment where a person wants to promote what you have to say. 'Go ahead, the stage is yours.' And through over and over getting that opportunity, that's when I started to find what I had to say. It took a while. And you'll know when you have something to say because someone else will come up

to you and say, 'I heard you. I heard you.' And it will be someone you don't know. 'I heard you.' And for me that's enough: $500 a night just to have someone say, 'I heard you.' "

Osby was an immediate and enthusiastic champion of his young protégé.

"From the very onset we connected both musically and personally," Osby confirmed. "And I set the wheels in motion to present him as a front man, as an artist. Very early on during this tenure we had, I gave him feature status—it was 'The Greg Osby Four, featuring Jason Moran'—which is never done. But I endeavored to present him to the world, because he was a class find as far as I was concerned. He was, basically, as they say, exactly what the doctor ordered. He fit the description stylistically, conceptually, supportively, artistically. In every possible way, he was the answer. He was like Allen Iverson on piano."

Osby chuckled at his basketball metaphor. But he was serious about the star potential he recognized in Moran.

"My music, as it's written and composed and presented, is very, very specific," he elaborated. "And it takes somebody who is a cut above just your standard proficient young player. Somebody who had a lot more vision, a lot more scope, and is not reaching for a reference. And somebody who was completely open to these alternative approaches. Jason, you know, he never blinked, he never winced, he never recoiled in horror. He was always *game.* And that was what I needed also. Because I had been encountering a great deal of resistance, and also, I won't say incompetence, but I will say people who failed to measure up to my expectations. Even though, like I said, they were accomplished players. He was very young, he was a diamond in the rough, there were some things that were quite unrefined, there was a bit of wildness. But I really embraced his spirit and his ability to deliver."

Moran wound up performing on seven Osby albums over the next five years. Osby also introduced Moran to Andrew Hill and Muhal Richard Abrams, two of the off-the-beaten-path pianists Moran cited in the conversation that caused Osby to hire him. Osby had worked as a sideman to both of them, and thought it important that Moran have direct contact with them rather than merely studying them from afar.

"Jason embodied the spirit of these people," Osby explained. "He was kind of a hybrid of all of these players, you know? Herbie Nichols, Andrew Hill, Muhal Richard Abrams, Thelonious Monk, McCoy Tyner—he had all of these particulars at hand. And he could very easily shift or play a direct facsimile of their playing, or an extension of that. He possessed all of those characterizations. So I took it upon myself to make the introduction. I thought it was important that he get the information directly from the sources, these sage innovators and icons, as I would classify them. And they also embraced him and took to him as well. Because Jason,

of course, is very personable. He also listens. He's kind of like a musical sponge—he absorbs that information, and he knows how to process it and incorporate it into his work."

Hill and Abrams both became important mentors to Moran.

"These two people, again, they rest on the periphery of the scene," said Osby. "You wouldn't find a lot of young players who would even know who they are, much less refer to them and seek them out. But Jason did, and I said, 'Wow, you know Muhal? You know about Andrew?' He couldn't have been any more than nineteen to twenty years old. So I thought it was essential that he meet these people direct."

Osby also helped land Moran a recording contract with Blue Note Records, the major label which Osby had been with since 1990.

"I almost put my recording contract in jeopardy by trying to force the hand," Osby recalled. "I went to the then-president of Blue Note Records, Bruce Lundvall. I went to his office, and I said, 'I have a young guy in my band, I think you should check him out.' I had brought people to the label before that, but nothing like this. To me, this was like a rare find, and I was really excited about it. We were doing a week in New York, and I said, 'You should come check him out.'

"Bruce was apprehensive. He said, 'I just signed another player, another pianist, and I really don't have any more room on the roster.' And I said, 'This guy is leagues beyond what that guy is capable of,' whom I also knew well. And he said, 'Well, I don't know . . .' So I kind of slapped his desk and said, 'Listen man, I'm telling you! I'm telling you!' I was very adamant, very insistent. He reared back, because he was a little bit shocked—he'd never seen me that animated, I guess. I don't know how he read it, but he was like, 'Man, what's going on with this guy?'

"So he actually came down to the club, and after the first set, he approached Jason and he said, 'Young man, you're remarkable. And I'm willing to sign you on the spot. Come to my office tomorrow.' It was that immediate. . . . Jason was the 'it' guy at that point."

Osby appeared on Moran's debut album as a leader, *Soundtrack to Human Motion* (1999), as did Harland, the brilliant vibraphonist/composer Stefon Harris (Moran's college roommate, who in 2017 was named associate dean and director of jazz arts at their alma mater), and bassist Lonnie Plaxico. Moran's sophomore release, *Facing Left* (2000), came the next year and introduced his Bandwagon trio. Osby had a hand in forming that unit as well, Moran having first played with bassist Tarus Mateen and drummer Nasheet Waits in the Osby-led Blue Note supergroup New Directions.

"That's when I guess he really found his people who could serve his purposes more efficiently, more accurately," Osby noted. "He found kindred spirits. They

all have that . . . they're mining for what's next. I saw it happen, in fact. They were connected so patently that I had to make an adjustment. I'd played with all of them individually, but together they created this vortex, this whirlwind of sounds. It was unstable at times. I had to rely on every bit of access that I had in order to stay afloat. And I said, 'Wow. This is the birth of something very special.' "

Twenty years on, Moran is imparting wisdom to students of his own. I observed him doing so at a handful of New England Conservatory master classes in 2015 and 2016. One class focused on music's relation to death. He screened several YouTube clips: Son House performing "Death Letter," whose place in the pantheon of great music, he said, was driven home by Cassandra Wilson when they played the same song while he was touring in her band. John Coltrane's "Alabama," written for the four schoolgirls who died in the infamous church bombing. Ambrose Akinmusire. Leontyne Price. Jessye Norman. Scenes from the films *Alexander Nevsky* and *The Godfather: Part II* (Moran not bothering to mention that Bandwagon interpretations of the music accompanying those scenes appeared on his albums *Same Mother* and *Facing Left*, respectively).

He spoke of performing at funerals: With Henry Threadgill at Ornette Coleman's. With Greg Osby at mentor Andrew Hill's. With his wife at his own mother's, after she succumbed to leukemia. "It was a difficult position to be put in, to maintain composure to get through a song," he said of playing for his mother. "Especially if you're a musician in a family, it's like, 'OK, of course he's going to play.' " Alicia got him through the spiritual they chose, "Give Me Jesus."

The focus throughout was on the meaning that informs great music.

"In the past five years," Moran told the students, "I've been asked to make music for some of the most harrowing sides of history in films, and in videos by artists. How do you make music for the rape of young girls by a gang of angry white men? What sound accompanies that? The murder of the family and the rape of a young girl by a mob of angry white men. What sound have we learned in school that preps us for that?

"You don't know what your music is actually going to require. You might just think it's a gig to make a hundred dollars or something like that, but for me in the last 10 years it has been less and less about that, and more about: How does music begin to be a balm for society, a healing balm? And how does it agitate society?"

Music, for Moran, isn't merely about playing beautiful notes. It's about conveying genuine emotion rooted in one's understanding of the wider world.

"I think I was asking the question to my teacher, 'What is the right time for me to play shows and be ready?' " Moran said. "And he was like, 'Well, what do you have to say? That's when you'll know what to write.' I had never thought about

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that. I just thought about my songs, that I transcribe, and that was supposed to be enough. Shit. You travel the world, you get off these planes and show up to these venues and you meet people you don't know—you'd better know every emotion that comes out of your instrument. You'd better really know: Know every song, and know it in yourself."

That teacher, of course, was Jaki Byard, the focus of another master class of Moran's that I attended. This time Moran showed *Anything for Jazz,*[18] a short 1980 documentary on Byard, directed by Dan Algrant and available on YouTube, that included Ron Carter and Bill Evans commenting on how certain great musicians—meaning Byard, though neither named him—never get their due. Byard's inability to achieve greater renown, Moran suggested, may have fueled his skepticism toward competitions and awards, and toward a widely adored pianist or two whose fame had eclipsed his.

Moran's lecture on Byard was far-ranging and, he told the students, concerned matters he generally kept to himself. "He was the reason I am the type of musician I am," he said. "Everything I think I invented, he actually already invented, a very long time ago."

He talked about listening to recordings of Charles Mingus's great band with Byard and Eric Dolphy while in high school, and choosing the Manhattan School despite being offered better financial packages elsewhere so that he could study with Byard.

"What I thought made them one of the best bands in the history of music is how they treated their own compositions," Moran told the students. "The textures that they used, the amounts of dips and dives that they would make, dynamics, the variety of language within one group—meaning people speaking different languages. Sonic languages. And how political they were, too. They seemed to be able to combine all that much in the way that Ellington also combined excellence with political activism. Jaki Byard was a pianist who was making a lot of this stuff work. His regard for piano history."

Moran's lecture covered a lot of ground. He demonstrated keyboard exercises Byard assigned for enlarging the span and flexibility of his hands, played samples of Byard's music, highlighted the importance he placed on being able to discuss history and social issues with Byard alongside his weekly private piano sessions. He talked about other professors with a more hidebound approach to jazz, who rejected the very things that Byard had been teaching him about how to go about accompanying other musicians.

"Literally when I went into my improvisation class and started playing that stuff," Moran recalled, "the teacher said to me, 'You can't play like that in here. You'll never work. You'll never earn $20 for playing like that.' I was a senior. Those kind

of teachers were at the school at the same time I was learning from Jaki Byard. . . .

“I’ve always liked people like Jaki,” he continued. “Those are my heroes. Herbie and McCoy, too. But one-on-one, Jaki’s got the more weird stuff that I really need in my playing. He’s got the thing that it’s going to take some time to figure out how to massage it into place, and into how I want to play.”

Andrew Hill, the subject of the other master class I witnessed, is another of those people Moran likes who are less known than they deserve to be—a fact Moran mentioned a couple of times during the lecture, recounting how he once described Hill as “unsung,” to which Hill angrily shot back, “I’m not ‘unsung.’ I’m under-promoted.”

The lecture had begun with Moran playing along to a recording of Hill’s.

“That song is called ‘Smoke Stack,’ ” he said afterward, “and when I heard it the first time I thought I had never heard anything so messy in my life. So beautifully messy. Every person in the ensemble was part of putting their finger in the paint. It’s gorgeous. Just gorgeous to me. And I aimed to work with people who enjoyed putting their finger in the paint. Even if they did it very slowly and deliberately, still they put their fingers in the paint. And Andrew Hill, for me, is the one who does that. The way he blurs reality. Really think about it like that. The way he plays melodies. He doesn’t treat the melody as a piece of fact, either. It’s a feeling that can change.”

Hill also, Moran said, “was to a degree my first impetus for composing. I really kind of followed some of the things that he laid out in his compositions—well, I felt like I did—and so I got struck by how a musician could play in a way that would confuse people but seem so right for me.”

Much of the lecture focused on the need for a musician to have a personal pantheon. Hill’s own had included people he encountered coming up in Chicago, among them Albert Ammons, Earl Hines, and the classical composer Paul Hindemith. Hill urged Moran to find a pantheon of his own.

“I stayed close to Andrew up until he was gone,” Moran said. “He for me is pantheon. Him and his connection to Earl Hines. Jaki Byard—*his* connection to Earl Hines. So I’m fourth-generation Earl Hines. By virtue of that fact alone, I’m fourth-generation Earl Hines. By having two teachers who spent so much time with him. That gives me the lifeblood. And you hear it, you *hear* your tribe in the music that you like. You actually hear them. They call you.”

When the class began to wind down, the topic turned to what to do with your pantheon once you’d found one.

“All that to say, I wish more people knew about Andrew Hill,” Moran said, wrapping up. “But also, that’s a tribe thing. It’s like, and *all* my people, that’s just the tribe that I roll with. My tribe is not the one that’s like out there like that. Henry

Threadgill, Muhal Richard Abrams, Jaki Byard. Andrew Hill. Steve Coleman. Greg Osby. That tribe's not really [widely known], and that's who I am. It circulates kind of like on another wavelength. And it's cool right there. That's just where we are.

"Now, compare that to who? Josh Redman. Dave Holland. Esperanza Spalding. That's another tribe. That's my tribe, too, but in a very different way. You know what I mean? I think about all that. There are ways that people function within the jazz world. And Andrew's way is seen as very difficult. . . .

"What Andrew figured out was that maybe he wouldn't have to circulate on this popularity contest thing, but he could circulate in a lane that would allow him to keep making work. So one thing he said to me was, 'Jason, you have to find your benefactor.' The fuck was that? They don't talk about that at Manhattan School of Music. They sure should, though. Like who's gonna help you make this stuff? That sometimes you're just gonna need help doing it. Who's gonna do it? And he really woke that part of me up, too. And I will say that, my tribe, they know how to do that. All the people I mentioned, they kind of know how to do that. Find the people to help them make a thing. They're not trapped by that. They do make those things. And they get help to make them. I mean financial help to make it.

"Any other questions?"

One student, a guitarist, asked for advice about how an aspiring musician should go about assembling a personal canon of influences. Moran asked him to name three guitarists he likes.

"My three would probably be Django Reinhardt, Jim Hall, and then I listen to a lot of piano players," was his answer. "But a third guitarist . . . Julian Lage, I would say."

"That's cool," said Moran. "Do you hear something similar in all of them?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"The shapes of their gestures, I would say. There's something that's very directional and intuitive about it. But I've also been hearing, in sort of a shape-wise way, Andrew Hill—that's part of what's been bringing me in."

"Did you hear the album with Jim Hall and Andrew Hill?" Moran asked. "It's a Greg Osby record, called *The Invisible Hand*. That's a beautiful record. Terri Lyne Carrington plays drums. Andrew and Jim Hall were on there together. I probably have videotape of these sessions. It's beautiful, because there is something about their version of modernism that I might say that I hear in people that you mentioned. And Julian is a fairly new wunderkind that seems to have been embraced by the *entire* guitar community, from Nels Cline to Gene Bertoncini. That whole pantheon, he's trying to develop a way to work with them."

That led Moran back to his own story and how musicians must strive to take what they borrow and move beyond their influences.

"Something that I think made me gravitate towards Andrew was because the first person I heard was Monk. I mean, I didn't have any taste for jazz, and hearing Monk—so that's my base level. That's a pretty odd base level to start with. As a pianist, as a composer, this is the one I'm starting with. I'm starting with this right out of the blocks. And so when I hear Andrew Hill or Herbie Nichols, the people who I think were really giving me so much more energy off of that tree, then it made sense that he was the one before."

Moran told a story about his own fascination with pianists that had influenced Monk. He named Herman Chittison as one, a pianist few remember but whose recording of "Embraceable You," Moran said, reveals an obvious link to Monk. "You hear really clearly people that are stealing from places whether they say it or not," he noted. The trick is to use such technical borrowings to forge unique art of one's own.

"OK, so that's just the music part," Moran explained. "That's only half as important as the context you're gonna put the music in. So [a musician's influences] only give you enough to get to the door. They don't tell you what to say once you get inside the door. And that part, they wouldn't talk about it in school either. I just had to learn that later. Still learning it now. So what is the context, and to set up groups that help you achieve it.

"I tell this story about playing pool with Ornette Coleman. He breaks, the balls go everywhere. And I shoot. Then it's his shot. And he just takes his pool cue and goes *whoooooosh*. All the balls all over the table. And then he takes one and the cue ball, and he puts the ball in front of the hole and he shoots. And takes another one, does the same thing. About an hour and a half we just did that. And that was, like, 'Set up your game.' You know? And that is the baddest fuckin' music lesson I ever saw."

Moran laughed.

"You have control to set up the rules. And if you think you're supposed to get up here and solo the way [Charlie] Parker did or any of these people, *psssh*. That ain't it. I can't do that the way Andrew Hill did. That's a different time, different brain, different setup. So that's not what I'm supposed to do. My context is not the same, and it's changing dramatically. In the past ten years it's changed so much. So you have the opportunity to see, 'How can I reconfigure all this?' And then *that's* when your voice comes through. 'Cause only you can see that."

And with that Moran thanked his audience for listening and dismissed class.

Moran has had his share of important mentors. But his wife's influence has also been key, a point he acknowledges in the 2017 book *The Meaning of Michelle: 16 Writers on the Iconic First Lady and How Her Journey Inspires Our Own*, edited by

Veronica Chambers. In one chapter, excerpted in *The Daily Beast*, Alicia and Jason discuss Michelle Obama's influence on them and the culture at large. The chapter is titled "The Composer and the Brain: A Conversation about Music, Marriage, Power, Creativity, Partnership . . . and the Obamas," and in it Jason spells out to whom "the Brain" refers:

> *The Brain is pretty literal. I met Alicia as she graduated from Barnard. What she brought into my life was an intellectual component that was totally absent. None of my friends were discussing music in a way that brought in place and the landscapes that the music emerges from, what are the codes and meanings. She had this amazingly rigorous comprehension of not only Black music, but German music and French music and what it means to culture and society.*
>
> *I was learning how to do the music, but I wasn't necessarily concerned with why I was making it. Alicia is the one who said, "You need to turn that around. If you turn this around sooner, you'll be ahead of nearly everyone else because it's clear that none of your friends are thinking about this."*

That made me want to know more. I emailed Jason to ask whether Alicia would be willing to talk to me. "Alicia is up for talking," he emailed back. "And you are right, I can't really be where I am without her help."

In his Andrew Hill lecture, Moran had quoted Hill telling him, "Jason, you have to align yourself with the pantheon."

"So who's the pantheon?" Moran had asked. "My wife is part of the pantheon, because of who her parents are. And that becomes a very important decision, who becomes your partner in your life. And how do they help you reflect, how do they shine up your mirror every once in a while. 'I see it's a little rough around the edge. Let me shine you off.' "

Alicia Hall was raised in New York City and Connecticut in a family of overachievers. She is the great grandniece of arranger-composer Hall Johnson, renowned for tracking down and transcribing slave songs and orchestrating them for choirs. "In the '30s he was scoring films with his choir, the Hall Johnson Choir," Moran had told the students during his lecture on music's relation to death, setting up the story of performing with Alicia at his mother's funeral. "Those singers that I played, Leontyne Price and Jessye Norman, all knew Hall Johnson, because you had to come see him if you were going to sing a Negro spiritual. He was the expert in New York City for years."

Alicia's parents weren't musicians but both had comparably successful careers. Her father, Ira D. Hall, retired as CEO of the Wall Street firm Utendahl Capital Management in 2004 after having held key posts at Texaco, IBM, and elsewhere,

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and has served as a director on a variety of corporate boards, including twenty years with the Jackie Robinson Foundation and, beginning with the 2017–2018 season, as chairman of the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts of Miami-Dade County. Her mother, Carole Hall, taught high school English in northern California (both she and Alicia's father are graduates of Stanford University) before launching a career in book publishing.

"She was one of a handful of editors during one of the heydays of publishing, in the '80s, when Toni Morrison was still in editing," Alicia told me shortly after I got her on the phone, explaining her own moment of language-obsessed riffing on the word *stereotype* and its relationship to jazz musicians. "So they shared ideas. My mother is an equal to Toni Morrison. I've never said that out loud. She's not an equal writer or author; my mom's not a writer at all. But the idea that we kind of . . ."

She caught herself digressing and switched the subject back to her relationship with Jason.

They met at the Manhattan School of Music, where Alicia studied classical music after completing her Barnard degree. She told me she arrived at the Manhattan School, "a school that had such a high-powered jazz program," without knowing any young people who played jazz.

"I didn't know it was a profession that one could decide that they wanted to undertake at age eighteen," she said. "This was a revelation for me, that this is even possible. I went to Manhattan School of Music for classical training, and I did have some inkling that those things were possible from a young age for classical musicians. But the stereotype of jazz musicians is that they are an old man with a saxophone who is struggling to make ends meet. Then, when you have an interface with all these young, cool people, male and female, people who you find interesting and who find you equally interesting and exotic in your way, that's life-changing. So I got to tell them things that other people think about jazz. What people say about you."

She told a story about how once, early in their relationship, she and Jason had gone to an upscale restaurant together. "The type that you might find in a movie, a fantasy version," she said, describing a place filled primarily with black clientele. "You know, they're playing hip-hop and R&B on the radio but the chicken is like $25 per plate. I said, 'The thing about jazz, nobody in here can name a jazz musician. Not one of 'em. And these are your black people. And if they can, they will be dead. And if they are dead, they won't know what instrument they play.'

"He was beside himself, with a kind of jocular, 'Alicia, get out of here.' But we went down the bar. I said, 'Jason, nobody knows what instrument Miles Davis played, if they have even heard of Thelonious Monk.' And so we went down the

bar. I think it was that nobody knew that Miles Davis played trumpet. We got a lot of saxophone, because of what I told you."

Alicia helps ensure that Jason continues casting his eyes outside any particular jazz or artistic bubble.

"I've also been helpful to him in a generative sense, in terms of finding the artists between genres," she explained. "He has a friendly island for everybody, no matter what kind of music you're making out here. If you are truly out here with good intentions, he can make an intellectual home for the music that you're coming from, and see your legacy. That's why he's a great teacher. . . . If you're New Orleans-based, and you're young and you meet Jason at the airport and you're talking about some very local ideas about music, he can talk to you like that is the center of the world. Because he gets it: that for you, it is. We regard people who play from the center of their world in high esteem, whether they are relatively ignorant and just starting out or blazing up the major festivals.

"I think that I've been helpful to him. I gave him kind of this ability to compartmentalize his experience and passion in other people. . . . He doesn't feel the need to downgrade [other people's] experience, or upgrade. It's just a real, literal, 'What am I looking at? And who are you talking about? And what have you to say? What is that feeling like with you?' So, with him, I think I've been able to slow down his process of receiving information, and that makes him an institutional gem.

"But I'm just explaining something that was very organic," she added. "Something that was very helpful for me was reading books. At Columbia I got to take a class with Mark Tucker[T9] on just Duke Ellington. Changed my life. And taught me how to talk to Jason when I would meet him, which was about two years later."

I told her about how she had come up a few times in his master classes. How she had gotten him through their performing a spiritual, whose title he'd forgotten as he recounted the story, at his mother's funeral. ("Give Me Jesus," she said, supplying the missing title.)

How he considers her his best critic. "One person wrote the review 'Jason Moran was a pointless noodler,' " he'd said. "It's still her favorite line. She'd hear me and she'd go, 'Jason, pointless noodling, pointless noodling.' " Alicia laughed when I read her the quote. "Yeah, he never forgets that one review. 'Pointless noodling.' "

How it had taken him years to compose a song for her, a fact she'd kept reminding him of until it finally happened: "He was playing a song one day and I was like, 'That's my song.' I said, 'Does it have a name?' He said no. I said, 'We know what the name of that song is, right?' He said, 'Yup, we do.' We'd been saying that for ten years, but that one, it really was. It jumped at me, and I loved it. And sure enough, on the album he had named it 'Alicia.' "

How at the Manhattan School he'd occasionally had her accompany him to

his private classes with Jaki Byard, and how he had followed Alicia to her classes as well. “For us culturally it was really important for us to have African American teachers, because we wanted to see who we wanted to be,” he’d confided during his Byard lecture. “I needed to see, hear it from his mouth, and I needed to hear it from her teacher Hilda Harris’s mouth—one of the first African Americans to sing with the Metropolitan Opera. I needed to hear her say what it felt like, and then come back to these institutions and want to share it with us. I needed to have them be my definition of excellence.”

That story resonated with Alicia as exemplifying their relationship. “I have to say that’s almost 100 percent right there,” she said. “Like, who dates—who *knows* any person, forget ‘dates’—who knows a person and then follows that person into their conservatory lesson with the teacher at their regularly appointed time? A regular lesson. This is not a workshop, it’s not a parents’ visiting day. It’s not a special commission, it’s not a mock performance, it’s not a dress rehearsal.”

I laughed and asked, “Which of the two of you had the bright idea to do that first?”

“Oh, I’m sure it was Jason,” she said. “I can’t imagine myself saying, ‘I’d like to watch your piano lesson.’ Never would do that. It wouldn’t occur to me.”

“You don’t seem like a shrinking violet, though,” I said, “so that’s why I asked.”

“No, why would I? That’s a personal thing. That to me is a sacred relationship, and I would not project myself onto it. And I think that’s a big secret of my involvement with Jason. As deeply as I will go in where I’m not invited, I have the utmost grace in his presence. And respect. It seems sometimes like I’m ripping his head off, but only about the things he will allow me. And I just have a sense for what those things are.

“I don’t touch the artist nerve, like that thing in his brain,” she clarified. “That’s a beautiful place in him. And I have my own artist space, you know? There’s some places you go in and get a dialogue and some places that the dogs just go ‘*argh!*’ I’m not afraid of the bark, but I do enjoy being his friend and his partner in it. I think people are shocked by how aggressive you can be with a lover. But play them on their side. I’m on his side. It’s not a scrimmage. It’s like: we’re on the same team, tackling, and on the outside it looks like, *Wow, she don’t have no respect for his opinions.* It’s just the opposite. It’s that I’m feeding the other part of his brain. If I feel that it wants to come out, we go in, we throw down. I’m not fighting him; we’re fighting with the idea, and we do that very well. It’s one of the most exciting things.”

“He comes back at you with his critiques?”

“Yeah, he tries,” she said. “He’s not as verbal as me, so he can’t. He’s got to play it out, and that is some amazing magic.”

“That’s where we want to be,” she added. “It’s always an emotional place. It’s never a musical conversation; it’s a color. I know about eleven hundred shades of Jason Moran. I just do. Also, because we both are petrified of being bored, so we know a million places in the other that are flammable. I’m a Leo, and my parents are Leos, so I’m a Leo among Leos who will be heard. I really know how to get up on a chair and scream it out if I need to. And I’ve done it. It’s never graceful, but you have to fight for your artist husband sometimes. In himself. Not with other people. Oh, my God. In private. It’s fun.”

A Facebook acquaintance of mine, a well-known writer on politics, emailed me a few years ago to inquire for a perspective student about the journalism program at the college where I teach. While he was at it, he asked for recommendations of musicians on the current jazz scene that he should check out. He had been a jazz fan when younger, before work and family became his focus, and was now curious about what had happened to it while he had been away.

I suggested he start with Moran and either of two albums: *Ten* (2010), because it was then the most recent Bandwagon album, a celebration of the trio’s decade together that gave a good sense of the variety of their work, including pleasing takes on pieces by both Byard (“To Bob Vatel of Paris”) and Monk (“Crepuscule with Nellie”). Or *Modernistic* (2002), Moran’s first solo piano album, because, as Alicia writes in her liner notes, “in it you will hear his life.” No Monk or Byard pieces this time, but stride via James P. Johnson’s “You’ve Got to Be Modernistic,” Moran wresting something new and worthy from perhaps the most covered standard of all (“Body and Soul”), hip-hop (Afrika Bambaataa’s “Planet Rock”), Muhal Richard Abrams (“Time Into Space Into Time”), two additions to Moran’s Basquiat-inspired Gangsterism series, Schumann (“Auf Einer Burg/In a Fortress”), and a stately, set-closing tribute to his family roots (“Gentle Shifts South”).

Those two still rank high in the Moran oeuvre. But I now might also name his first few albums since leaving Blue Note to create his own label and issue his recordings via Bandcamp.

“I just thought, ‘Well, I don’t need this label anymore,’ ” he told me, explaining that decision. “Maybe it was my ego, but I was like, ‘I’m doing y’all a favor now.’ Anytime you think that’s what’s happening, you probably should leave. And Bruce Lundvall [Blue Note’s late president] died, and he’s the reason I stayed with them, because he was such a supporter. He passed away. Also I just thought, the way that record sales go now, I’d rather just own my material, me personally.”

Thanksgiving at the Vanguard (2017) shows the Bandwagon in a familiar live setting, seven years beyond *Ten* in their shared evolution, with tributes to Monk and Byard (the latter performed solo by Moran), yet another Gangsterism excursion,

compositions by Alicia ("Blessing the Boats") and Waits ("Between Nothingness and Infinity"), and one composition of Moran's from his second solo piano album ("South Side Digging") among its offerings.

The newer solo album is essential: *Modernistic* had revealed the roots of Moran's approach to the piano; *The Armory Concert* shows him stretching those roots even further, his playing grown freer and less bound to the music of others. His album with Ron Miles and Mary Halvorson, *BANGS*, also moves beyond jazz into the more expansive realm that the AACM founders had christened "creative music." Like *Cane*, the four-part suite he had composed earlier for the classical wind quartet Imani Winds, *BANGS* showed Moran flexing modern chamber music muscles.

When I talked to Henry Threadgill about Moran, he was familiar with *The Armory Concert*, having been there the night it was recorded. "A really great concert," he called it. He hadn't heard about *BANGS* but said my description of it sounded interesting and that he'd make a point of having Jason send him a copy.

Threadgill had just been discussing his own habit of moving from one method of making music to new ones. "I'm about moving forward," he explained. "It's hard to do that when you become a stylist. You don't need to look over here to go forward, because you keep refining what you've got. That's what stylists do: they keep refining what they've got. To their credit, you know? I don't fall in that category. I don't have that talent. I'm happy and good with what I do."

"Do you think Jason takes that same approach?" I asked.

"I think so," Threadgill answered. "Right now he does. He's still got a lot of time in front of him. I hope he keeps moving forward like this."

It seems likely that he will. Jaki Byard, like Monk and the other rebellious elders who shaped and reshaped the jazz canon, taught Moran to keep taking risks and to discover his own true artistic self.

"You figure out who you are and what statement you want to make," Moran had said at the conclusion of his NEC master class on Byard. "I wasn't going to be an obvious player, you know what I mean? It's like a thing that I champion to players now. Because there are ways to make it work, you know? Most of us don't want to go into that fire, but they really laid out a lot of ground for us to walk on. Unfortunately, most of us don't. We're too scared. We are *too scared*. We are too scared. We are too scared! I'm telling you right now! We too scared! We don't want nobody to say no shit to us. We too scared. You're too scared! You're too scared."

Those words about being scared, Moran altering the emphasis with each pass, rang like a challenge—issued both to Moran himself and to everyone else in the room.

"Especially to sound 'ugly,' " he added, keeping it personal. "I think Jaki made it OK for me to sound ugly. I think he plays ugly sometimes. And that's good. So I

can be ugly, too. I can put on my new tuxedo and still play ugly. I can use that to rub, you know what I mean? Somehow Jaki does that.

"So I'm thankful for all the students who got to study with him," Moran said, wrapping up, "because I think everybody got something different. You ask Fred Hersch about him, he'll tell you something totally different, you know?[20] But these are parts of the things he enabled in me. As a student, it would be my only job to try to act on the lessons that he gave me, which weren't so obvious all the time. But years later, I'm positive how each one changed the trajectory of my personal career. To hear him say that shit about the awards makes me question every award I get. Because I hear his voice. Like, 'That's cool, but . . .' " Moran laughed. "I'm very aware of him."

Please visit the open access version of Make It New *to see a video resource for Chapter One:* https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11469938.comp.1