

Here, There & Everywhere

The curious evolution of cornetist Taylor Ho Bynum. By Ted Panken

In March 2007, toward the end of a long dinner with this writer and cornetist Taylor Ho Bynum, Anthony Braxton opined that Bynum's generation of improvisers were stronger, "technically and conceptually," than his.

"People read better and know their instruments better," Braxton told his former student at Wesleyan University, by then a valued collaborator and de facto straw boss for many Braxton ensembles. "Your generation might not all be original on the same level as the guys I came up with, but they are better musicians pound-for-pound."

Bynum disagreed. "You guys had to fight to establish the fact that you could pull from Coltrane or Schoenberg or Sun Ra or Stockhausen," he said. "You had to fight to find a record. That gave your generation a strength that ours doesn't always have. We had this incredible diversity of music at our fingertips, and that ease of pedagogy strengthened us technically, enhanced our awareness of different musics. But if knowledge is so easy to get, you might not know what to do with it."

"Each generation deals with the challenges related to their time space," Braxton responded. "You're an example of your generation's new possibilities. Trumpet players 20-30 years ago couldn't do what you're doing now." He mentioned Bynum's mastery of his famously "impossible-to-play" *Composition 96*. "Technically, it didn't represent a challenge. You sat down and started playing violin parts. I said, 'Oh my God, what am I going to do with this guy?' Yes, we had it harder in some ways, and you guys are on our shoulders. Your generation is at that point where the fight begins. The question becomes: Can you go the distance?"

Five years later, Bynum, 36, is assiduously fighting that battle on multiple fronts, augmenting a capacious level of musical production with a broad array of — as he puts it on his blog — "organizational-administrative-production" activities, all *pro bono*. He's president of the Tri-Centric Foundation, a non-profit devoted to propagating and producing Braxton's extraordinary corpus, most dramatically via an April 2011 recording of his four-act opera *Trillium E* [Braxton House], for which Bynum contracted



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a 43-piece orchestra and 12 vocalists (he conducted the vocalists), and an October staging of two of the acts at Roulette in Brooklyn. The 2011 edition of Festival of New Trumpet Music, which he’s co-captained with Dave Douglas since 2006, included an homage to Bill Dixon, a friend and mentor from the mid-’90s until his recent passing, and a celebration of Kenny Wheeler, Braxton’s front-line trumpet partner during the mid-’70s.

“I’m a busy-body, so I end up taking initiative in those contexts to make sure everything gets done,” Bynum says jokingly in mid-December over lunch. Some years back, he recalled, while attending a concert presented by the New York branch of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, he was stunned to see Muhal Richard Abrams working the box office and Amina Claudine Myers taking his ticket. “These are my heroes, willing to get their hands dirty. As artists, there’s no time to be delicate or pretentious or special. We need to get our work done, and we need to make it happen.”

As an example, he mentioned a three-week September sojourn through New England during which he bicycled from gig to gig, as much as one hundred miles at a clip, playing with a different band at each stop. He intends to do the same on the West Coast, Vancouver to San Diego, later in 2012.

“It brings the music to a different kind of audience, and it’s a much more affordable touring model than flying to Europe,” Bynum says. “It’s the only time I’ve felt healthier after the tour than before it. We have to apply the same creativity to how, when and where we present our music as we do to making it. It’s an increasingly important challenge, and I feel lucky that my mentors taught me some of those values.”

Bynum was in New York City to play a Jazz Gallery concert behind the November release of *Apparent Distance*, on Firehouse 12 Records, a New Haven-based label that he co-founded with arts entrepreneur Nick Lloyd. On that imprint, he’s supervised consequential recordings by, among others, Dixon, Tyshawn Sorey, Mary Halvorson, and himself. Titled for a four-section, 45-minute suite for cornet, alto saxophone (Jim Hobbs), bass trombone and tuba (Bill Lowe), guitar (Halvorson), bass (Ken Filiano) and drums (Tomas Fujiwara), *Apparent Distance* upholds Braxton’s encomium to Bynum’s skills.

As an instrumentalist, Bynum improvises with sound and silence in the manner of Wadada Leo Smith, Bill Dixon and Lester Bowie. He maintains a tangible narrative arc and pulse within his solos, weaving a cohesive sonic fabric

from precisely executed screams, squawks, blurts, bumbles, whispers and more conventionally rendered notes and tones. The feel is conversation, never didactic. As a composer, he deftly assigns his bandmates different characters and roles, finding, as Halvorson puts it, “great moments and great platforms for each person in the band to shine.” Each frontline protagonist has a highly typed sound, yet they blend as one in the ensembles. Notated sections sound improvised; improvised sections sound composed.

The date augments several recent documents of collaborative projects. On *Station Direct*, the second recording by The Thirteenth Assembly, Bynum, Halvorson, Fujiwara and violinist Jessica Pavone, all Braxtonians, play each other’s pieces, which blend and recontextualize highbrow and populist idioms. *Stepwise*, a duo with Fujiwara, illuminates Bynum’s ability to dialog in notes and tones; *Next* comprises six rubato collective improvisations with bassoonist Sara Schoenbeck and guitarist Joe Morris; and *Book of Three* is a more pulse-driven, equally open-ended triologue with bassist John Hébert and drummer Gerald Cleaver.

Bynum mentioned that he was starting the mix phase of the second recording by Positive Catastrophe, an avant-salsa-meets-funk-meets-Sun Ra tentet that he co-leads with percussionist-vocalist Abraham Gomez-Delgado. “Of all my groups, it deals most explicitly with rhythm,” he says. “It’s the band where, as a writer, I let myself play with genre most explicitly.”

In this regard, Bynum mentioned Duke Ellington, the patron of Rex Stewart and Cootie Williams, his primary inspirations in applying the techniques of quarter-valving, alternate embouchures, and various plungers and mutes towards onomatopoeic ends. “We say that Ellington swings, but he wasn’t necessarily trying to define what swing was. He created concert works, too, like ‘Black, Brown and Beige.’ I’m not interested in being part of a musical tradition that tells me I can’t do anything. Nor am I interested in saying, ‘Oh, we can’t use a melody, we can’t use a groove.’ Whether it’s for conservative or revolutionary principles, telling me I can or can’t do anything is where I start to feel stifled. That’s why I love Anthony’s term ‘transidiomatic.’ I’m not negating idiom; I’m not denying my love for these traditions or their influence on me. But I won’t be restricted by definitions placed upon them. With Positive Catastrophe, we can use the salsa thing every so often, but we also go out of the clave all the time.”



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Bynum entered Braxton's orbit in 1993, when he matriculated at Wesleyan. After enduring a difficult freshman year, he dropped out, and biked from Vancouver to San Francisco, where he lived for several months, working on a construction crew. Recognizing the relative advantages of academia, he moved to New York and enrolled in the New School jazz program in 1995. Dissatisfied with the prevailing "straightahead" orthodoxies that he perceived in the New School pedagogy, he returned to Wesleyan in the spring for further work with Braxton and a creative community that included such young luminaries as Steve Lehman, Michael Attias, Chris Jonas, James Fei and Guillermo Brown.

After graduating in 1997, Bynum worked several gigs with Braxton before moving to Boston, where he lived "as a working musician" until 2002, when he returned to Wesleyan as a graduate student. "Anthony wants you not to be a clone, and I needed to be away from him and have other experiences and get better," he says. "Boston is big enough that there was a bit of everything, but small enough that I could get gigs just because people needed a trumpet player. It raised the technical bar required to function professionally, and was a chance to maintain a consistent identity as a performer throughout all these contexts."

On the one hand, Bynum fulfilled the journeyman function — interacting with elite "mainstream" players in Bill Lowe's repertory big band; in a New Orleans-style brass band; and at wedding gigs. On the other hand, he networked with Boston's rich community of speculative improvisers — workshoping with extended-techniques trumpeter Greg Kelly; deconstructing

standards ("post-minimalist improv meets 'The Nearness of You'") in a group with drummer Eric Rosenthal; navigating composer Mark Harvey's "post Ellington-Ives version of the big-band tradition" in the Aardvark Orchestra; writing for a composers' collective with fellow brass players Lowe and Stephen Haynes; and raising his game to hang with the virtuoso improvisers in the Jim Hobbs' Fully Celebrated Orchestra.

At the suggestion of FCO bassist Timo Shanko, "who knew my interest in Rex Stewart and Don Cherry," Bynum converted to cornet — a 1910 Conn. "Trumpets tend to sit on top of an ensemble, while a cornet tends to blend into it," he says. "The old horns aren't as slotted, so they're timbrally flexible — intonation is more of a challenge, plus it's easy to pull notes out of tune when you want to. When the horn started falling apart, I bought a 1908 Conn."

Born in Brookline, a Boston suburb, Bynum grew up with a bird's eye view of what a life in the arts might be. His parents were divorced, and his mother — a history teacher whose family had emigrated from China in 1947 — rented rooms to young opera singers participating in the New England component of the national auditions for the Metropolitan Opera. "Having working artists — singers, conductors and directors — as regular members of the household made music not just a pastime, but something that could be your livelihood," he says. Aside from the forced diet of opera, Bynum listened to Hendrix and Prince, Stravinsky and Bartok. A voracious reader, he wrote plays and directed them, developing a taste for multimedia presentation and "the idea that a narrative could lead off to unexpected directions."

Sweet Lorraine

“My mother fell in love with opera as a young woman,



and she ended up chairing the New England regional audition for the Metropolitan Opera,” Taylor Ho Bynum recalls. “In that way, she befriended a lot of young singers. We were renting out rooms in our house, a sort of bed-and-breakfast thing, and my mother contributed to the local opera companies by housing singers during the course of their run in town instead of making a cash

donation. Singers started staying with us for a couple of months at a time, including a lot of the young singers she’d befriended. They might pay a token amount or help out with child care or around the house — they’d become members of the family.

“One of my mother’s closest friends of those young singers who came up for auditions was Lorraine Hunt Lieberson (pictured), the most acclaimed mezzo of her age, who died of cancer at 51, three years ago. Lorraine stayed with us for nine years until she met and married Peter Lieberson, a composer who also died recently. She became sort of my crazy Aunt Lorraine, who would give me hand-me-downs and go off with me to see Stevie Wonder. She was also incredibly encouraging. She’d sit in with my jazz band at the ice cream store.

“Coming home to hear Lorraine practicing Bach in the living room was an intense experience. She was a consummate artist who transcended genre and approached her work with seriousness and passion and intensity — the kind of person who could push the envelope artistically if she was singing Handel. She was always interested in the next step, and always committed to new music. There’s a real irony that I just worked on *Trillium*. I want to get away from my family upbringing by getting involved in the craziest, most experimental, avant-garde music I can find, and of course I end up conducting an opera!” —TP

Perhaps these proclivities inspired the 15-year-old Bynum — a “strong, competent trumpeter on the youth orchestra track,” he says, who “didn’t know how to improvise” — to embrace alternatives “to the traditional jazz format where you come back to where you start” after attending a rehearsal of Bill Lowe’s jazz ensemble class at Northeastern University. Even then, Lowe recalls, Bynum — who at 16 launched a weekly gig, sometimes with Fujiwara, at the ice cream store where he worked — “had a maturity, a focus; he became a leader of that group early on. In his musical imagination and compositional skills, he was quite

ahead of most students. He was already moving in a creative direction. He had the courage to take the model of Don Cherry, because he liked what that sound was about, although that didn’t cause him to reject mainstream trumpet players.”

A musician with his foot in multiple traditions, Lowe — who taught at Wesleyan during the ’80s, and suggested to Bynum that he might thrive there — downplays his impact on Bynum’s development. But Bynum is quite clear that he benefitted greatly from their master-apprentice relationship. “Bill’s attitude was that you had to be ready to improvise — later he’d show me the harmonies,” Bynum says. “Like Anthony, he took me out of the institutional setting and onto the bandstand. Even when I wasn’t playing, I’d show up at Bill’s gigs to help set up the drum kit or move equipment up the stairs. I understood that if your elders give you the gift of something, you have a responsibility to try to give something back.

“I have a sense of idealism and arrogance. In addition to feeling that responsibility, I also feel, ‘Dammit, I can do it better than what’s happening now, so let me get it done right.’ If you wait for someone to do it for you, you’ll be waiting a long time. Helping to conduct and produce Braxton’s opera was one of my most incredible artistic experiences. Pulling together 60 musicians in New York, all palpably hungry to be involved in a project of this kind of creativity — you feed off that energy. It gives me strength to keep trying. Everything in this culture tells us to quit and not do this kind of music. I’m a reasonably intelligent person. I could make more money and live more comfortably and have better health insurance doing something else. Having a chance to pay tribute to and help out elders who’ve been doing it for the past 50-60 years is one thing that reminds me of the reason we do this.”

This being said, Bynum intends to scale back on both organizational and performance activities during the first half of 2012, “to take time for musical hibernation and development.” He’ll make ends meet with freelance work: grant writing, private teaching, and conducting interviews for Yale’s Oral History of American Music Project.

“It parallels with my interest in trying to collect artists’ words while they’re still here,” Bynum says of the latter activity, citing recordings by Braxton and Dixon that contain documentary DVDs on which both discuss their creative process. “It’s very difficult to articulate this idea of music that’s neither composed nor improvised, or to document it on a score or a set of instructions. It’s usually best articulated by the practitioners themselves.”

Perhaps he’s gearing up for the pitched battle that he and Braxton spoke of five years ago. “My generation came up after the jazz wars, the genre definitions, the camps, the term ‘jazz,’ which I don’t think anyone wants to waste time or breath fighting over,” he says. “It’s not a period where you can say any faction is dominant. For me, the core search of this kind of music is balancing the individual voice with the ensemble voice, simultaneously celebrating a sense of self and a sense of the collective. So many musicians are fighting for totally unique voices, which is hard to market, and on an economic level things are disastrous. But on a purely creative level, it’s an incredibly exciting time. I couldn’t be more optimistic and inspired.” ▲