



# ROUGH AROUND THE EDGES

UNDERSTANDING THE RAW YET REFINED ART OF MYRA MELFORD.

B Y S H A U N B R A D Y



The architect Frank Lloyd Wright built houses that seemed to emerge from, or be absorbed by, the landscape around them, that at times appeared to be carved from the rocks and earth, at others to be in a process of reclamation by the surrounding foliage. The artist Cy Twombly painted canvases that could be easily mistaken for the frenzied

scrawl of a mid-tantrum child, littered with terse, gestural marks that show the impact of an aggressive and impulsive imagination. Animator William Kentridge shoots films where every frame reveals the ghostly afterimages of its own past, vividly active charcoal drawings whose illusionistic movement is accompanied by the smudges and smears of erasure and change. Composer Henry Threadgill writes music whose eccentric rhythms and whimsical melodic flights can evoke the simple joys of a parade marching by or a calliope piping through the air from some distant carnival, camouflaging the cerebral complexity of its inner workings.

All four of those artists have profoundly influenced the work of pianist and composer Myra Melford, who admires their “primitivism” — a quality that a less open-minded observer might dismiss as crude or unrefined. “I tend to be drawn to artists whose work has a certain hand-hewn quirkiness to it,” Melford explains. “It might be extremely masterful, but it’s not overly polished. Like Thelonious Monk — you could never quibble about

his mastery as a pianist. He knew exactly how to get the sound on the piano that he wanted, how to create these unbelievably difficult, rhythmic phrases, and he was doing something completely different than his peers. Yet it had this very authentic, raw, primal quality. All of these people have very original voices that share an attractive roughness.”

Melford’s admiration for such artists is boldly reflected in her own music. As a pianist, she can trace elegant filigrees of shimmering brilliance and delicate fragility, each note so exactly placed that a single breath might threaten to shatter its evanescent beauty. But she also tends to erupt in sudden bursts of violence, slamming her forearm onto the keyboard to summon a thunderous tremor or launching into a serrated, zig-zagging tear that leaves a vivid scar across the music.

“Myra’s a fierce energy to reckon with,” says flutist Nicole Mitchell, one of Melford’s collaborators, along with bassist Joëlle Léandre, in the collective Tiger Trio. “She’ll crawl into the piano, and you might worry about it being broken. There’s no limit to the ferocity in how she attacks the instrument, and yet she still has this huge range of dynamics and stylistic character.”

As a composer, Melford crafts pieces intricately designed to evoke the full range of those dynamics. Throughout the 10 compositions on *The Other Side of Air* (Firehouse 12), the second release by her remarkable quintet Snowy Egret, it can be difficult to pinpoint exactly where oblique composition yields to deeply attuned improvisation. As with Wright’s ability to design buildings in harmony with their natural environments, so Melford possesses a unique gift for weaving the singular voices of her collaborators — in Snowy Egret, cornetist Ron Miles,

guitarist Liberty Ellman, bassist Stomu Takeishi and drummer Tyshawn Sorey — into a rich tapestry in which each color stands out vibrantly while fusing together into a transfixing, harmonious whole.

literally, Melford was born into her inspirations. She was raised outside of Chicago in a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Her father was an avid fan of the influential architect, and when not living in one of his works the family would often tour the region admiring his other creations or visiting his Wisconsin home and studio. “He was a big part of my growing up,” Melford says

of Wright. “Even as a kid, I could recognize a certain aesthetic and a certain originality in his architecture, and I really responded to that.”

After arriving in New York City in the early 1980s, Melford began to study with Henry Threadgill. She soon discovered surprising parallels between the philosophies of the idiosyncratic multi-reedist/composer and the architect whose work she’d grown up surrounded by. “Wright’s basic idea was to blur the distinctions between what was exterior and what was interior in a building,” she explains. “I think that dovetails nicely with Henry’s desire to blur the lines between composition and improvisation. Wright would make these buildings that seemed to perch right on the edge of a ravine, with elements that would seem to grow out of the main core of the building like the branches of a tree.



# A PAIR OF TRIOS

Nicole Mitchell, Myra Melford and Joëlle Léandre



At last year’s October Revolution of Jazz & Contemporary Music festival in Philadelphia, the Tiger Trio found itself in an awkward arrangement. Performing in the city’s historic Christ Church, which counted several of the Founding Fathers among its colonial-era parishioners, Myra Melford’s piano was placed at floor level, facing away from the audience, while violinist Nicole Mitchell and bassist Joëlle Léandre were perched well above her in the pulpit.

The results were, at first, hesitant and stilted, especially as sound reverberated around the cavernous church. But eventually the trio embraced the weirdness of the situation, at first with laughter and playful interactions, then developing into increasingly barbed

interplay with Melford delving into the instrument’s innards to conjure percussive attacks.

“There’s a spirit and joy of being three women that are really serious about our work,” says Mitchell. “But there’s also a lot of comedy when we play together.”

The Tiger Trio is one of two collective trios in which Melford is currently involved, both of which comprise all female members. In MZM, she’s joined by harp and electronics player Zeena Parkins and koto master Miya Masaoka. At an earlier time in her career, Melford says, she would have written off the gender dynamics of these groups as little more than coincidence; now, against the backdrop of the current social climate as

well as her role as an educator, she places considerably more stock in the idea.

“I’ve always had this ambivalence about identifying as a woman musician,” she says. “But as I’ve gotten older and reflected a lot more, I’ve felt this need or desire to nurture young women players. The truth is there are still way more men playing this music, although things are changing. In light of the #MeToo movement and how that’s extended into the realm of jazz and improvised music, I realize that I have to recognize this as an important issue that I need to support changing in whatever way that I can.” —SB



From left: Ron Miles, Stomu Takeishi, Myra Melford, Tyshawn Sorey and Liberty Ellman

Henry talked a lot about starting with a very simple cell, phrase or motif and exploring it, coming up with permutations or variations of that idea, and then putting them together to create a vehicle for improvisation. They both had the inspiration that you allowed the form of your creation to grow out of the environment or out of a single idea.”

The main lesson that Melford took from these inspirations and mentors, one that lies at the heart of her stunning originality as a composer, is the idea of crafting musical environments to be explored, thereby stoking the fires of curiosity and imagination. “I try to create sonic spaces that you inhabit, so you have to figure out how to move through them rather than just using the phrases that you learned when you were practicing bebop. For me, the idea evolved that music was like aural architecture, and that whether I was improvising or composing, I was creating a space and then inviting the audience to be in that space with me and the

other musicians. That led to this loftier and maybe kind of corny, but quite sincere, idea of creating a space in which people could have some kind of meaningful experience.”

That aspiration ties Melford’s music to other major sources of inspiration: her studies of Eastern spirituality, philosophy and martial arts. When we spoke in mid-December, Melford was preparing to spend the holidays on a yoga and meditation retreat in the Catskills, at an ashram where

she’d lived and worked for some time in the early 2000s, prior to moving to the West Coast to join the faculty at UC Berkeley.

Melford has explored a variety of spiritual philosophies without adhering to any one in particular, everything from Indian meditation to the sacred traditions of Mexico’s Huichol Indians. The title of Snowy Egret’s new album, *The Other Side of Air*, is an example of the kind of Zen head-scratcher that Melford tries to pose with her compositions — questions not in search of definitive answers but

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meant to lead one's curiosity on an open-ended quest leading simultaneously inward and outward.

"I'm not dogmatic in any way," she says. "I could look back and say that my journey as a musician is about synthesizing all of these things that inform and inspire me. I filter them all through my own sensibility and then try to find a way to express those in my own way. It's that expression that I'm trying to share with other people through my creative work — and my work as a teacher, as well."

**M**elford has now spent nearly 15 years living on the West Coast, enough time to nurture a number of meaningful relationships while maintaining her ties to the avant-jazz community in New York City, where she made her name during the previous two decades. While Snowy Egret has become the primary vehicle for her own compositions, she is also involved in other creative endeavors, from solo piano work to a duo with clarinetist Ben Goldberg to several collective trios. "I love playing in so many different improvisational settings," she says, "because in each of them I get to practice being present and alert and trusting my responses, but in very different musical contexts."

The source of inspiration that led directly to the formation of Snowy Egret was Uruguayan author and journalist Eduardo Galeano's *Memory of Fire* trilogy, a poetic chronicle of the history of North and South America. To realize the music she created in response to Galeano's epic masterpiece, Melford

experimented with a variety of different line-ups before settling on one that remained close in spirit and instrumentation to her previous ensembles *Be Bread* and *Same River, Twice*.

Where Snowy Egret's self-titled debut largely consisted of music she'd created before forming the band, *The Other Side of Air* was composed with the group's specific voices in mind, and was developed onstage during Melford's first stint as a leader at the Village Vanguard in 2016. "That space is very inspiring," she says. "I had heard so many great recordings from there before I ever came to New York, and I had then gone to hear so many of my heroes once I moved there in the mid-'80s. I can remember hearing Don Pullen playing there and seeing blood on the keyboard after his set."

The artwork of Cy Twombly and William Kentridge has loomed large in Melford's thinking in recent years, and both provided fuel for the music on *The Other Side of Air*. Kentridge's charcoal animations, every frame of which reveals the intervention of its creator's hands, directly inspired the album's opening track, "Motion Stop Frame." And Twombly's gloriously messy canvases were the launch-point for "Dried Print on Cardboard." More generally, the intuitive and primal instincts on display in both artists' work served as guiding lights for Melford's creative process. "I took Kentridge's process as a point of departure for how I might explore the idea of hand-drawn animation in a very different context," she says. "And in Twombly there's this great, unbridled energy that just jumps off the page that I totally relate to, especially in my own playing. It's not without mastery, of course, but I think that childlike sense of curiosity and play is what I love about improvisation."

Melford often shares the visual inspirations

behind her compositions with her bandmates, which Ron Miles says helps point the instrumentalists toward fertile new territory. “Having that input added to the music happening in real time allows for a very unique expression,” he says. “There’s so much information in her pieces, so each time we play one of the compositions we can lean on the material for inspiration. We just hear deeper and deeper, and the roles [of composer and improviser] get blurrier.”

Some pieces on the album reinvent earlier compositions for the new ensemble. “Attic” was originally penned for her solo album *Life Carries Me This Way*, which was dedicated to artist and family friend Don Reich. “Living Music” revisits a piece originally recorded in the '90s by Equal Interest, Melford’s trio with Leroy Jenkins and Joseph Jarman.

Like Threadgill, Jenkins and Jarman were both integral members of the influential, Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. While Melford has never been a member of the organization, she clearly shares some of its foundational tenets. With her penchant for digging deeply into past traditions while surging boldly forward, drawing inspiration from wherever it might be found, she embodies the AACM mantra “ancient to the future.”

As Mitchell, a latter-day leader in the AACM ranks, says, “To me, a consummate jazz artist is someone who has embraced the whole history of the music and yet is

forward-thinking and able to transcend time and style through the very knowledge that they’ve dug into. Myra has a very original way of doing that. At any moment she could go deep into the legacy of the music because she’s studied it thoroughly, but she can go into a lot of different realms from one second to the next.”

Melford continues to press forward into new realms of creation. As 2019 dawned, she was doggedly at work on her first composition for a new music ensemble, an ambitious work commissioned by the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players intended

to prompt improvisation from classically trained musicians, for which she plans to incorporate electronically manipulated recordings of her extended techniques inside the piano. She’s also collaborating with an electronic music composer and former student on a multi-media installation project that will allow her to bring audiences inside the piano with her.

“I’m always thinking about what the next project might be. Between juggling a full-time career as a professor and trying

to do lots of performing, composing and bandleading, it takes a few years for things to get to the point where they’re fully realized.” Whatever form those ideas take, though, Melford says the ultimate goal remains the same: “I want to create a space in which people can have some kind of authentic experience of who they really are, to get in touch with something true about themselves or their experience. I realize that’s a very grandiose idea in a way, but it’s a lifelong pursuit.” ■

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