



## BOTH SIDES NOW



For more than 30 years, **MYRA MELFORD** has toiled in the avant-garde fields. Today, the mainstream is finally beginning to take note of her work.

By Matthew Kassel

BRYAN MURRAY

On a New York evening in mid-autumn, the pianist Myra Melford, playing with her quintet, Snowy Egret, opened the first set of a two-night run at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola with "Small Thoughts," a memorable track from her new album, *The Other Side of Air*. Released on the Firehouse 12 label in November, the record is inspired by two of Melford's favorite visual artists, Cy Twombly and William Kentridge, and in many ways, "Small Thoughts"—a spindly tune held together with contrapuntal guitar, cornet, piano, and bass lines, culminating in a fierce drum solo—bore their sketch-based imprint. Melford, who in some ways resembles a bird, with an aquiline nose and short gray curly hair, sat at the keyboard, pounding away with percussive force and smiling mischievously.

If it seemed as if she were getting away with something, it may be because, not too long ago, Melford would probably not have expected to find herself performing at a venue affiliated with Wynton Marsalis, the renowned trumpeter who serves as artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, where Dizzy's is based. Melford moved to New York in 1984, where she lived for 20 years before settling in the Bay Area, and her downtown world—in which she absorbed the teachings of avant-gardists like John Zorn, Butch Morris, Leroy Jenkins, and Henry Threadgill—was far removed from Marsalis' uptown jazz sanctuary, established in 1987.



DON DIXON

► At the SFJazz Center, San Francisco, November 2018

Still, time has shown that whatever aesthetic schism existed between those two worlds has been largely sealed up—and Melford, whose sometimes cutting sound is, refreshingly, always rounded out with blues language, embodies that rapprochement. That was the takeaway three years ago, at least, when Melford, in her first appearance at Jazz at Lincoln Center as part of a piano revue called "Handful of Keys," performed her own composition, "The Strawberry," at Frederick P. Rose Hall.

Arranged by the saxophonist Ted Nash, the piece was a showcase for Melford's idiosyncratic approach: her solo began tamely and ended wildly, as she karate-chopped the keys in a style reminiscent of Cecil Taylor. "Her writing and playing those nights opened a lot of eyes and ears," Nash told me in an enthusiastic email, and Marsalis echoed that sentiment. "To these concerts, she brought unique style and tremendous spontaneity," he said. "She was an absolute joy to be around and to play with."

Melford, who turned 62 in early January, doesn't need Marsalis' imprimatur, of course. "I think it's pretty clear that Myra is one of the definitive pianists and



composers in improvised music,” said Ron Miles, who plays cornet in Snowy Egret. “And has been for a while.” But her recent appearances at Jazz at Lincoln Center, along with a week-long engagement in 2016 at the Village Vanguard—her first as a leader—suggest that jazz’s more mainstream institutions are, at last, catching up with Myra Melford.

**Not that she’s been waiting** for their call. Melford has always let her instincts guide her, and since the early ’90s, she’s performed and recorded with a dizzying number of groups, so many that it can be difficult to keep track of her pan-stylistic output when scanning her long discography. A new documentary about Melford’s work, *12 from 25*, makes that abundantly clear, featuring shows from a 2015 residency at the



► With frequent collaborator Allison Miller (left) at the Stone in New York, March 2015

Stone in which Melford reunited with the dozen or so bands she’s led over roughly the past three decades, including the evocatively named Be Bread, Crush, and Same River, Twice.

“What I like is music that’s flexible and where it can be really different depending on who’s playing it,” Melford told me in an interview backstage at Dizzy’s in early November. Like Duke Ellington before her, she often writes with musicians in mind, and she’s drawn to artists who have strong personalities, both on their instruments and on stage. It’s a preference Melford may have picked up, when she first got into

jazz, from the Art Ensemble of Chicago, whose members were as much focused on flamboyant costumes and theatrics as music.

Melford, who was born in Evanston, Ill., just outside Chicago, came relatively late to improvised music, though she has always had a connection to the blues. In her youth, she was classically trained by Erwin Helfer, a respected pianist in the boogie-woogie tradition, and she would often imitate his playing. “Those are my roots,” Melford said, “and I think that’s why it comes out so naturally for me.”

At college in the Pacific Northwest, Melford discovered jazz, drawn in by the unorthodox stylings of Anthony Braxton, Oliver Lake, and Marty Ehrlich, among others. “When we first met, she thought of herself as a student, and it’s been exciting to see how she’s brought together her influences into a very individual approach,” said Ehrlich, the saxophonist who has played with Melford for decades. “When I think of Myra’s music, I think of a wonderfully direct expressivity, a great empathetic approach to improvising, and also a great sense of mood.”

When Melford moved to New York in the early ’80s, she took an autodidactic approach to jazz rather than going to graduate school, studying with Jaki Byard and Don Pullen, whose rough attack at the keyboard still deeply informs her playing. During her time in the city, she performed at a mix of experimental and more established venues, including Roulette, Sweet Basil, and the Knitting Factory, for which she formed her first group as a leader—a trio with drummer Reggie Nicholson and bassist Lindsey Horner—on a tour of Europe in 1990.

But it wasn’t until Melford went out west that her career really began to take off. In 2004, she became a professor of composition and improvisational practices at the University of California, Berkeley, a position that had been previously occupied by saxophonist Steve Coleman. Perhaps the academic post has given her music a veneer of institutional

authority, or maybe the job has provided her with the freedom to explore her own musical interests in greater depth. Along with her professorial duties, Melford is encouraged to pursue her own projects, and she is often on the road when she isn’t teaching. Whatever the reason is, “I’m probably doing better than ever,” she said.

**Over the past 15 years or so, Melford** has released some of her finest records, including *The Whole Tree Gone*—an album with Be Bread, which features the elegant acoustic guitar of Brandon Ross—and the eponymous debut of Snowy Egret, a band she formed in 2012. The name came to her because of a dream in which she witnessed a big white egret perched in mountain pose on a telephone wire. “It swooped down, and I thought it was going to land in a very shallow reflection pool by my feet,” Melford recalled. “But instead, when it hit the water, it kept going deeper and deeper and disappeared.” Emerging from the water, the egret had transformed into a cross between “a bird and a woman and an angel,” which soared into the sky and vanished.

When Melford woke up, she felt as if she had experienced some sort of spiritual epiphany. “There was something about the quality of the dream that, I think, is what I aspire to express in my music,” she told me, and there’s something to that. The specificity of the image—an angelic bird-woman, mid-flight—lends itself to vivid interpretation, and Melford’s willingness to let herself be influenced by her unconscious suggests that her music is guided by her “intuitions,” as she put it, rather than her “rational mind.”

Not that her process is entirely shamanistic. It’s a balance. Her previous music with Snowy Egret, for instance, was inspired by something concrete, the Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano’s *Memory of Fire* trilogy. Melford’s decision to compose with Twombly and Kentridge in mind for her latest record

was based on her admiration for their loose, expressive styles. “I tend to like rougher, less polished kinds of things,” she mused. “And both of them have that in their drawing, and it feels more immediate to me, and direct. My own handwriting is terribly messy, so I relate to it on that level, but it’s also that sense of a rush of ideas—I have to get them down or I have to get them out.”

The ideas she brings to *The Other Side of Air* are, in many ways, entirely new for her. “Motion Stop Frame,” the first track on the record, is her musical read on stop-motion animation. “I wanted to have a contrast between a very forward-moving kind of material and these moments of stasis, and then use that as a kind of template for how we might improvise,” said Melford, who in her scores leaves ample room for her bandmates—including Liberty Ellman on guitar, Stomu Takeishi on acoustic bass guitar, and Tyshawn Sorey on drums—to interpret the material.

For “Dry Print,” Melford began with a tune that was traditionally swinging. “But it’s not really my thing,” she explained. “I don’t really identify with it as my music or my compositional style, so I wanted to find a way to chop up this melody and put something else underneath it that felt more like my kind of rhythmic feeling.” With the help of notation software, which she’s been experimenting with lately, she copied and pasted a bass line and a melody into a computer program and then began scrambling the melodic line, resolving the harmony as she went along. “That was really different,” Melford said, “and that’s actually one of my favorite pieces.”

On the title track, which is in two parts, the influence of Twombly and Kentridge was most direct. The phrase “the other side of air,” Melford claimed, came from the name of a piece by one of these artists. Curiously, she couldn’t find the title when asked (and *JazzTimes* has been unable to verify it independently), but it certainly *seems* like a phrase either of them could have used. Her best

GIL CORRE





► Promo shot for 1996's *The Same River, Twice* (left to right): Chris Speed, Erik Friedlander, Dave Douglas, Michael Sarin, Melford

current guess is that it was “something one or the other of them mentioned in discussing their process or intentions. I started thinking about what a cool image that would be for a piece of music: What is the other side of air? To me it sounds like a magical doorway to another world.”

Speaking of other worlds, Melford has spent a lot of time in Mexico’s central highlands with the indigenous Huichol people—between 2009 and 2014, she traveled there regularly as part of a cultural exchange program—and she also had Huichol traditions in mind as she composed “The Other Side of Air II.”

“Their whole landscape was sacred, and they had a very deep relationship, cosmologically, with the various

gods that inhabited this landscape,” she explained. “They had this idea that spiritual development had to do with opening doorways into other realms, and so I was thinking about that, where it’s a little bit reflective and ruminating, and then it reaches this point of a kind of ecstasy.”

Deep down, Melford is always striving for the ecstatic moment. “As cliché or corny as this might sound, at the heart of it, what I want to do is connect with people through the music, but also take them someplace else through it, and hopefully someplace positive. Maybe opening some other world for them, because I remember going to hear Ornette Coleman as a young college student, or the first time I listened

to a Cecil Taylor record, how they did that for me.”

**Along with Snowy Egret, Melford** has also been busy performing in two relatively new collectives, MZM and Tiger Trio. They are both free-improv groups, entirely made up of women. MZM, which put out a self-titled record in 2017 on the Infrequent Seams label, includes Melford on acoustic and prepared piano, Zeena Parkins on harp, and Miya Masaoka on koto, the Japanese stringed instrument. Their music is loose and spasmodic.

Tiger Trio, with a different textural quality than MZM but a similar underlying spirit, features Melford on piano alongside Joëlle Léandre on bass and Nicole Mitchell on flute. The group put

out its first record, *Unleashed*, in 2016 on the Parisian label Rogueart, and a new album is currently in the works, to be released about halfway through 2019, around the time Melford returns to the Stone for a five-day residency.

Melford appreciates playing in these groups, she told me, because the majority of the musicians in her previous bands have been men, and the opportunity to play with women has been refreshing for her. “We have a different kind of hang,” she said, “which I guess makes sense.”

The feeling is mutual. “Myra is an incredible artist because she expresses a deep sense of legacy,” Mitchell said of her bandmate in an admiring email. “She takes the history seriously, as she can jump into stride or a rag at any moment, while also covering the terrain of eloquently rhythmic postmodern harmonies and yet can groove you into a blues-infused dance seduction.”

Another reason Melford likes playing free, she said, is because it broadens her sense of intuition, along with her receptivity to what others in the band are putting forth. “It requires a really deep

kind of listening,” she said. “Both to my own impulses and to what the others are playing.” In her opinion, improvising in MZM and Tiger Trio isn’t entirely different from improvising an arrangement or a solo on a piece with Snowy Egret, but somehow her experiences with all three bands complement one another, creating a kind of fluidity that allows her to seek structure when the moment demands it or abandon structure when an arrangement is too constricting. “It’s kind of synergistic,” she explained.

At Berkeley, Melford is currently designing a new course, which will look at contemporary music through the lens of improvisation and compare it to improvisation in other areas such as creative writing, design, and theater. The goal is to see if it’s possible to approach a “theory of improvisation,” in her words, and to examine how developing the skills of an improviser might be useful regardless of the field you’re going into.

It has certainly been useful for Melford. Drummer Allison Miller met Melford around 2005, when she played in a trio with the pianist at the Jazz

Standard. Since then, they have played together a number of times, including in Miller’s band, Boom Tic Boom, for about a decade. Miller told me in a phone interview that one of the primary reasons she started the band was so she could write for Melford. “I admire the intention with which she approaches each song,” Miller said. “She’s had her vision and she’s stuck to it for most of her career. That’s not easy to do.”

Recently, they were in the studio together, recording a new Boom Tic Boom album, *Glitter Wolf*, which will be released in February. Miller recalled that two solos in particular by Melford blew her away. At one point during the recording process, Miller said, Melford played so intensely and with such force that a piano tuner had to be brought in halfway through the day rather than at the end of the session—not a common occurrence. But if you’ve seen Melford at the keyboard, then you can understand why that might have been the case.

“When she plays,” Miller said, “I almost think of her as a bird let out of a cage.” **JT**



► Snowy Egret (left to right): Ron Miles, Stomu Takeishi, Melford, Tyshawn Sorey, Liberty Ellman

KELLY JENSEN