

*Journal of the Society for American Music* (2013), Volume 7, Number 3, pp. 343–347.  
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## RECORDING REVIEWS

The Roots, *Undun*. Def Jam 001628202, 2011.

Kanye West and Jay-Z, *Watch the Throne*. Roc-A-Fella/Roc Nation/Def Jam 001542602, 2011.

Luxury rap is a term that's been bandied about in recent years to describe hip hop's fascination with the finer—and pricier—things in life. The term suggests a step beyond the general desire for money and cars, as rappers have become increasingly sophisticated in their tastes and bent on finding rhymes for their favorite brand names. Whether clothing (Gucci, Louis Vuitton, and Burberry are old favorites), spirits (Cristal and Courvoisier have both been immortalized in song), or cars (Rick Ross's Maybach Music<sup>1</sup> is an entire record label named for the impossibly expensive German automobile), high-end items have festooned some of the hottest beats in the last decade. From the heart of hip hop's consumerist culture flows the 2011 Kanye West/Jay-Z collaboration *Watch the Throne*, the platinum standard of luxury rap.

When speaking of luxury, we might as well start with the throne. Jay-Z has long thought of himself as rap's don, kingpin, and kingmaker, and Kanye seems the most eager of his protégés to inherit the empire. The two first collaborated on Jay-Z's *The Dynasty: Roc La Familia* (2000), an album initially intended to showcase artists on Jay-Z's Roc-A-Fella label. Kanye produced one song on the album ("This Can't Be Life," featuring his signature "chipmunk" sound, made by raising the pitch of and speeding up sampled voices) before being welcomed more fully into Jay-Z's familia on *The Blueprint* (2001), for which he produced four tracks, including the lead single "Izzo (H.O.V.A.)," an anthem that became one of Jay-Z's mainstays. Since then, Kanye has produced regularly for Jay-Z, who in turn has appeared as a guest rapper on several of West's own singles.

The throne room where the duo reigns is dotted with luxury items. Jay-Z rides in a Rolls Royce Corniche ("No Church in the Wild"), presumably while wearing one or more of his many watches—Rolex ("Niggas in Paris" and "Otis"), Hublot ("Otis"), and/or Audemars Piguet ("Niggas in Paris"), perhaps. Of course, if he needs to go very far, he'll probably just use his Gulfstream 450 private jet ("Otis"). Kanye has a private jet, too ("Gotta Have It"), as well as a Benz, an "other Benz," and an "other other Benz" ("Otis"). And he's graduated from his earliest days, when he couldn't pronounce Versace ("Ver-say-cee" on *The College Dropout*'s "All Falls Down"), now dropping the hautest of couture names—Margiela—on "Niggas in Paris."

The album even sounds expensive. Although Kanye isn't sole producer of *Watch the Throne*, it bears his distinctive mark, featuring the sampled voices of many well-known artists mixed into the gospel inflections of his hip hop sound. Because

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent contextualization of cars in hip hop, see Adrienne Brown, "Drive Slow: Rehearing Hip Hop Automotivity," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24/3 (2012): 265–75.

it's a throne room, it isn't surprising to hear the elite gather to take part: James Brown, Otis Redding, Nina Simone, and Quincy Jones all make appearances in sampled form. By rapping alongside such well-known artists, Jay-Z and Kanye further establish themselves as musical royalty. At the same time, they continue to flaunt their wealth, as the amount of music sampled combines with the notoriety of musicians heard on those samples to drive the price of licensing fees quite high.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the visual imagery of wealth provided by their lyrics, then, Jay-Z and Kanye also make sure that their wealth echoes across the sample-based soundscape, as well.

The price tags on these physical and musical luxuries could tax even the most loyal listener's patience, especially at the time of album's release in August 2011 when the United States was still struggling through a deep recession while Congress bickered its way to a reduced credit rating from Standard and Poor's. But the high-ticket items exist within a larger framework. Both artists display an acquisitive nature from their earliest work, aspiring to own the sorts of expensive objects that would mark the ascension from hip hop's gutters to its highest echelons—a theme common across hip hop, in fact—and *Watch the Throne* reflects upon years of untold wealth and what it means to be a rich, black rapper in the United States.

The first handful of tracks on *Throne* (“No Church in the Wild,” “Liftoff,” “Niggas in Paris,” “Otis,” and “Gotta Have It”) contain the most explicit mentions of the duo's fortunes and are also five of the seven singles released for airplay. On the back end of the album, however, Jay-Z and Kanye meditate on the loss, violence, and desperation bred by economic stratification in the United States and the continued barricades that separate many Americans from the upward mobility promised to children (“Welcome to the Jungle,” “Who Gon Stop Me,” “Murder to Excellence,” and “Made It in America”). These final tracks bring the opening set into focus, as one realizes that even the most decadent songs on the album present each man's wealth as a mark that opens him to heightened criticism and surveillance. And although it's hard to feel sorry for these multi-millionaires, *Watch the Throne* makes an effort to tie the resentment of black wealth to ongoing racial inequality. Elsewhere, Kanye has twisted LL Cool J's line from “Illegal Search,” “Can't a young man make money anymore?” so that “man” becomes “nigga,” adding, as any skilled rapper would, a second layer of meaning to the question. On *Watch the Throne*, Kanye and Jay-Z suggest a double trap: because of their blackness, it's harder to make money, and once they get it, they face greater scrutiny than they otherwise would.

It isn't a new idea, but the two rappers present it in an intriguing manner. Because Kanye and Jay-Z not only lead with their most audacious tracks, but also ensure that those same songs are the ones with which casual listeners—radio listeners—will be most familiar, they open themselves to exactly the sort of criticism they lament. Listeners must make an effort to find buried tracks like “Who Gon Stop Me” and

<sup>2</sup> Joanna Demers discusses the changing nature of hip hop sampling over the last two decades in the “Duplication” chapter of *Steal This Music: How Intellectual Property Affects Musical Creativity* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006). Joseph Schloss's *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004) is an important contribution to the understanding of the technique as well.

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“Murder to Excellence” in order to access the context that explains “Otis” and “Niggas in Paris.”<sup>3</sup> The first five tracks prove a true gambit, then, where Kanye and Jay-Z offer up their pawn—luxury rap—to the critics and listeners who are only interested in a shallow listening, preserving the throne for those ready to engage in a deep play.

There may be no less likely face of luxury rap than the Roots, whose latest album, *Undun* (2011), moved a fraction of the copies that *Watch the Throne* did. But *Undun* would be impossible without the luxuries the iconic hip hop band enjoys. Since 2009, the Roots have performed as the house band for *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, where they provide intro and outro music, accompany guest singers, and accommodate musicians who sit in with them for a night. The daily rehearsals, impromptu jams, and steady money have allowed the band to mature at an astonishing rate. Although most of the band’s musicians maintain side projects, the consistency and financial security of the *Late Night* gig means the members spend more time playing and being together than would otherwise be possible with such a large band.<sup>4</sup> The steady paycheck means less pressure to generate hits, allowing the group the freedom to generate a relatively low-selling album with little worry that their wallets will suffer.

*Undun* is a tragedy, the story of Redford Stevens, who dies in the opening tracks and whose story is told in reverse over the course of the album, ending with his birth. Redford turns to crime as a way out of poverty, briefly ascending to a luxurious lifestyle (“to a king from a pawn,” as Truck North puts it in “Kool On”) before his inevitable fall. It doesn’t exactly seem like the stuff of mainstream hip hop and pop, but drummer Questlove moves things forward with his signature boom-boom-bap as the rest of the band drifts through catchy blues, jazz, and rock riffs. *Undun* and *Throne*, in fact, sound as if they’re made by musicians who grew up on the same Motown, gospel, and soul sounds. But whereas Kanye and Jay-Z assemble these musical elements into a string of standalone tracks built on layers of sampled and digital loops, the Roots work these genres into a cohesive, arched narrative, weaving in and out of styles and sometimes wading through free-form atmospherics as they relate *Undun*’s story from back to front and from death to death.

Because *Undun* proceeds in reverse, the first track, “Dun,” is really the outro, the end of the story. Indeed, the first sound the listener hears is evidence of Redford’s death, a flatline surrounded by ambient noise, before the album rolls back into the final moments of his life with the gradually emerging thump of a heartbeat. Each of the three acts contains three tracks, and from “Dun” proceeds Act III, where Redford comes to grips with the fact that he’s dead (“Sleep,” part lullaby, part dirge), dies (“Make My”), and realizes that all of his money still leaves him

<sup>3</sup> The title of the song “Niggas in Paris” itself carries potential connections to the history of black intellectuals and artists who have expressed greater acceptance in Europe—especially Paris.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Ryan explores the benefits and stigmas of being a house band in “‘Beale Street Blues?’ Tourism, Musical Labor, and the Fetishization of Poverty in Blues Discourse,” *Ethnomusicology* 55/3 (2011): 473–503. Ryan’s study focuses on the blues, but her conclusions warrant extrapolation to other genres, especially one as closely related to the blues as hip hop. The desire of musical tourists to hear impoverished musicians is directly related to the problems of luxury, race, and poverty explored in *Watch the Throne* and *Undun*.

wanting (“One Time”). Act II culminates in the life Redford thought he wanted. “Kool On” is the most radio-ready track on the album, a liquid blues riff featuring a series of toasts to his own greatness, a handful of boasts about his rise to the top, and the closest Redford ever comes to feeling invincible. The rest of Act II tells how he arrived at invincibility, with “The OtherSide” trying to justify the means to Redford’s material gains and the relentless march “Stomp” relaying the resolve required to kill and crawl over impoverished men who are otherwise no different from him if Redford hopes to climb to the top. Finally, Act I (“Lighthouse,” “I Remember,” and “Tip the Scale”) is a three-part meditation on the desperation of poverty. We find Redford returning time and again to the idea of suicide as he reflects on the string of petty crimes that have led him to kill. In place of suicide, Redford chooses more homicide—the “Lighthouse” that he thinks will save him from drowning.

A tragedy told in reverse should yield at least a bit of optimism, but death haunts every corner of *Undun*. There is resurrection here, to be sure, but Redford doesn’t rise to any life worth living. Even in Act II, where he ascends to the heights he imagined he wanted, the guest vocals of Greg Porn on each of those three tracks (the only three featuring Porn on the album) function as a Greek chorus might, so the sound of Porn’s voice always points to Redford’s imminent fall. The end of the album brings us to the beginning of *Undun*’s reverse narrative, so upon completion of Act I, all that remains is the instrumental intro, a four-part suite that features a string quartet that offers only a modicum of solace and stands in for innocent days that Redford can’t remember. The final sound of *Undun*—the sound that *opens* Redford’s life—is a dissonant, low-register piano, marking this man for death in his first moments and closing the circle that began with the outro’s flatline.

Ultimately, *Undun* and *Watch the Throne* are built of the same materials, as each album digests similar musical predecessors, questions the logic of acquisitive consumerism, and highlights the double bind that, on the one hand, makes wealth more difficult for a young black man to attain and, on the other, assures that he becomes the locus of abjection once he gets it. All of this while relentlessly tonguing the sore that is the poverty problem in the United States. The damning dissonance that ends *Undun* and begins Redford’s life signals that he never had a chance; he was born into a system—a country—that would tip his scale toward death. And the final two (non-bonus) tracks of *Watch the Throne* suggest the same, even as they masquerade as patriotism and love. “Made It In America” wonders how it is that Martin Luther King and Corretta Scott, Malcolm X and Betty Shabazz (much less Kanye and Jay-Z), could possibly “make it” in America. Meanwhile, the infectious, soulful hook of the final track, “Ooooh, I love you so / But why I love you, I’ll never know,” becomes, in the scope of the entire album, a tortured love sickness (an infected soul) brought on by the duo’s investment in a system that would rather see them broke(n). In this way, luxury becomes a dangerous game in the mouths of these artists, as *Watch the Throne* sounds more and more like Kanye and Jay-Z’s version of *Undun*’s “Kool On,” that moment of success fraught with the hazards of succeeding in ways one isn’t supposed to.

*Watch the Throne* and *Undun* offer a variety of entry points for the discussion of hip hop in the classroom. *Throne*’s double life of fun, sophomoric tracks juxtaposed

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with biting social critique embodies much of hip hop music and discourse. Although hip hop fans will argue over whether the genre should exist for the purpose of partying or for social and political critique, these two goals have always shared hip hop's sonic space.<sup>5</sup> From Grandmaster Flash to Public Enemy to Nicki Minaj, the genre has exhibited an astonishing ability to offer barbed correctives in one measure and irresistible grooves in the next. *Throne* is no different: a salient critical agenda hidden inside a collection of catchy tunes built from the debris of greatest hits past. Meanwhile, *Undun* offers a more overt message without losing sight of the need to groove. The kind of grooving the Roots do, however, is the (still-emerging) product of more than two decades' worth of an experiment with one of the great novelties of hip hop: a band. Whereas on *Undun* the Roots occasionally refuse to settle into a protracted groove the way a looped beat might, the band resolutely continues to settle into itself, creating unique soundscapes in the world of hip hop. The dynamics of the band's interplay, combined with the conceptual narrative of *Undun*, suggest an album that would fit as neatly into a rock-oriented survey as it would a hip hop course.

It's this hybrid nature of *Undun* and *Watch the Throne* that reveals the gaps and overlaps between the two (whether as individual albums or as representations of the gapping and overlapping spaces occupied by the albums' artists in the hip hop world) as well as between the ideals and realities of life in the United States. Each album ultimately performs—in different ways—the idea it wants to convey, taking on the nature of that which it critiques in the hopes that its listeners will be willing to work and play at the same time.

Justin D. Burton



*Journal of the Society for American Music* (2013) Volume 7, Number 3, pp. 347–350.  
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Jay Farrar, Will Johnson, Anders Parker, and Yim Yames, with lyrics by Woody Guthrie, *New Multitudes*. Rounder 11661-9129-2, 2012.

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie, better known to generations of folk music enthusiasts simply as “Woody,” would have turned 100 on 14 July 2012—if Huntington's Chorea had not prematurely ended his life on 3 October 1967. But the momentous occasion of his birth has been honored with celebrations, concerts, and publications focusing on the man and his music—including the CD compilation *New Multitudes*, which contains new musical settings of previously unrecorded lyrics. Here Guthrie's words

<sup>5</sup> The first chapter of Mark Katz's *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip Hop DJ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) highlights the dual politics/party nature of the genre admirably.

come alive through the efforts of alternative-country/folkies Jay Farrar, Anders Parker, Yim Yames, and Will Johnson.

However, this legacy effort did not start with Guthrie's centennial. For decades, various artists have strived to keep the songster's work in the public eye. One particular collaboration comes to mind when considering this new one. Jay Farrar's old Uncle Tupelo bandmate Jeff Tweedy, along with the other members of Wilco and singer/songwriter Billy Bragg, took on the task of invigorating unrecorded lyrics from the Woody Guthrie Archives by setting them to music and presenting their efforts to a contemporary audience who might not have otherwise known of the little wooly-haired guitar picker from Oklahoma. These efforts culminated in *Mermaid Avenue* (1998) and *Mermaid Avenue Vol. II* (2000).<sup>1</sup>

I mention these past projects because it may seem that Farrar, in *New Multitudes*, is still in competition with Tweedy—their volatile relationship being legendary. But this new collection is neither the brainchild of Farrar nor of any other individual musician involved in its production. This CD is truly a collaborative effort. For Farrar, Parker, Yames, and Johnson each has taken up Guthrie's lyrics and helmed three songs apiece, with the others members (along with a few additional musicians) supplying backing vocals and instrumentation.

Although *New Multitudes* appears freshly born, its gestation period was epic. Well over a decade ago, Nora Guthrie asked Jay Farrar to draw from the thousands of lyrics written by her father, but the alt-country songster was reluctant. In fact, it was several years before he ever found his way to the Woody Guthrie Archives in Manhattan.<sup>2</sup> But once he immersed himself in the many lyrical musings housed there, Farrar decided that a collaboration of sorts with Guthrie was in fact a good idea. Certainly, he takes well to Guthrie's poetic lines, not a surprise considering the latter stands as a forefather to the alt-country family as a whole. Guthrie never really fit well into the classic country-western framework. He forged his own path even if he drew heavily upon the traditional music of America, and this approach has always been Farrar's as well. In fact, Guthrie has been a particular touchstone of Farrar's for some time. For example, on "Bandages and Scars" from Son Volt's *Okemah and the Melody of Riot* (2005), he sings, "Woody Guthrie's words ringing in my head" as he reflects on a multitude of big-ticket troubles such as the ozone layer and lead poisoning.<sup>3</sup>

On this new project, Farrar seems less interested in a broad picture of woe and picks out some of Guthrie's lyrics that have more hopeful or lovelorn subjects. The album opens and closes with Farrar's contributions, as "Hoping Machine" and the title track appear as functional bookends. "Careless Reckless Love," though, is his best effort. It comes across as a barroom tearjerker, with a bittersweet caress that lingers long after the song has passed. Although Guthrie may be better known for his political material, his love songs draw upon the same imagistic ability that makes

<sup>1</sup> Billy Bragg and Wilco, *Mermaid Avenue*, Elektra 62204–2, 1998; Billy Bragg and Wilco, *Mermaid Avenue Vol. II*, Elektra 62522–2, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> The Woody Guthrie Archives moved to the University of Tulsa in the spring of 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Son Volt, *Okemah and Melody of Riot*, Sony B0009UKYF2, 2005.

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a piece like “Deportees” linger decades after its creation, and in Farrar’s able hands, these qualities shine through.

After Farrar decided to visit the Woody Guthrie Archives, he brought along Anders Parker as a potential partner. Parker has worked with Farrar before in Gob Iron, whose only album, *Death Songs for the Living*, consisted almost entirely of reworkings of songs taken from the black heart of America’s own musical tradition, the same kind of source material that Harry Smith showcased so well in his 1952, Folkways-issued *Anthology of American Folk Music*.<sup>4</sup> As a result, Parker is well skilled in handling others’ efforts but still recasting them so that they seem newly minted. Here, Parker crafted the music for “Fly High,” “Old L.A.,” and “Angel’s Blues.” His earnest and molasses-easy vocals dominate each effort, even when the backing guitars or drums push behind him, as if urging him to speed up or shout. But he never does, resisting this impulse most successfully on “Angel’s Blues.” This unrushed approach works well with the material, not surprising in that Guthrie himself was well known for lingering on the words, emphasizing the slow rhythms and visual imagery encoded in his lyrics.

At first glance, Yim Yames might seem an unlikely conduit for Woody Guthrie’s work; he has been touted by *Rolling Stone* as a guitar god and has thrashed his way across the U.S. as a member of My Morning Jacket, whose output comes across more as rock-pop angst than constrained folk. But Guthrie’s work has touched the heart of many a musical revolutionary, including John Lennon and Joe Strummer. Perhaps Yames is just another in a long line of surprising Guthrie aficionados. On *New Multitudes*, Yames vibes “My Revolutionary Mind,” “Talking Empty Bed Blues,” and “Changing World,” all of which are handled as delicately as one might a crystal vase. Even the sometimes-percussive “Changing World” comes across as an energetic sing along, evoking “Wimoweh” rather than rock-god rattle.

Although he is a fellow member of Monsters of Folk with Yim Yames, Will Johnson may be the least-known participant in this project. But his efforts stand out. Both “V.D. City” and “No Fear” surge forward, finding the tension and passion in Guthrie’s lyrics and pushing them up through the ambient noise mix that dominates many of the songs on this project. But it is “Chorine My Sheba Queen” that truly tips the balance in Johnson’s favor. A quiet number, it still demands attention from the listener. The lyrics praise the title character, so the words play out as a sweet love song until the final verse, where we find out that “she took off like a new machine.” But Johnson, with these ending lines in mind, encodes the entirety of the piece with an ache, a longing for a past vision of a love who has disappeared and disappointed long before the first notes are sounded. According to an interview with the *Austin Chronicle*, Johnson wrote the song in a mere seventeen minutes, just after he had received the Guthrie-penned piece from Farrar. Johnson revealed, “The lyrics struck me in a way that the music sounded automatic. It made such sense to my soul and my spirit. It’s got an empty and regretful tone, but in a very beautiful way. I just latched onto it.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Gob Iron, *Death Songs for the Living*, Transmit Sound/Legacy 02017–2, 2006; Harry Smith, ed., *Anthology of American Folk Music*, Smithsonian Folkways FP 251–FP 253, 1952.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Austin Powell, “Off the Record,” *Austin Chronicle*, 18 September 2009.

Despite the reality that this project draws upon the effort of several musicians, each with his own unique take on American roots music, *New Multitudes* makes for a rather satisfying whole rather than a scattering of interesting pieces. Certainly, the past connections between the participants here could explain this cohesion. But more essential is the lyrical unity. For underneath the work as a whole is Woody Guthrie and his artistic spirit. It is not his project, but he is the father to his sons: Farrar, Anders, Yames, and Johnson—and together they make a fine family band.

Mark Allan Jackson

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*Journal of the Society for American Music* (2013) Volume 7, Number 3, pp. 350–353.  
© The Society for American Music 2013 doi:10.1017/S175219631300031X

Glenn Burleigh, *Let God Arise: Opus 35, Cantata for Eastertime*. The Ambassador's Concert Choir; Graceway Baptist Church Adult Choir; Glenn Burleigh, conductor. Burleigh Music Inspirations, 1997, 2 CDs.

A recurrent theme in nearly four centuries of Christian music in the United States has been the precarious negotiations between “traditional” and “contemporary” musical styles and texts. This tension, inaugurated with colonial controversies over the “Old Way” and “Regular Way” of congregational singing, sharpened in the twentieth century as churches struggled to reckon with a burgeoning popular music industry that increasingly shaped parishioners’ tastes. Recent phenomena ranging from jazz masses to “praise bands” reflect ecclesiastical efforts to connect older forms of doctrine and ritual to updated sonic contexts in order to remain culturally relevant. This historical context provides one framework within which to interpret a 1997 recording of Glenn Burleigh’s *Let God Arise: Opus 35, Cantata for Eastertime*, a large-scale sacred choral work melding Western art music and African American vernacular idioms such as blues, jazz, and, predominantly, gospel. In the composer’s own words, the piece represents his “divine call to reach out to people of all races [and] ages . . . the music is a fusion of classical, gospel, jazz, spirituals, and a ‘hint’ of country and western. Something for everyone!”

Published in 1995, *Let God Arise* reflects the creative thrust of Burleigh’s oeuvre, characterized by a bridging of classical and African American popular styles.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, little or no scholarship documents the career of the Oklahoma-born conductor, composer, and pianist.<sup>2</sup> What can be learned of Burleigh (1949–2007)

<sup>1</sup> Glenn Edward Burleigh, *Let God Arise: Opus 35, Easter Cantata for Chorus, Soli, and Orchestra* (Houston: Burleigh Inspirations Music, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Burleigh is mentioned in neither a recent *Encyclopedia of African American Music* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2011), nor in Samuel Floyd’s seminal *International Dictionary of Black*

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comes chiefly from his own website, <http://www.glenmusik.com/>, once maintained by the composer and now operating *in memoriam*. Piecing a few sources together, a picture emerges of an artist following in the footsteps of earlier black composers such as William Grant Still, Florence Price, R. Nathaniel Dett, Duke Ellington, and William Dawson, who brought classical training to bear on African American musical and literary culture.<sup>3</sup> *Opus 35* also argues for Burleigh's inclusion among the ranks of more straightforwardly gospel choral composers such as James Cleveland and Richard Smallwood; in particular, Burleigh's anthem-like pieces have much in common with the more contemporary Smallwood.

The cantata is scored in twenty-one sections or movements for SATB chorus, male and female soli, and small orchestra (violin, trumpet, trombone, tuba, saxophone, vibes, percussion, bass, keyboard synthesizer, piano, and Hammond B-3 organ). The instrumentation, derived from both traditional orchestral and jazz contexts, foregrounds the work's synthesis between art and popular music. Although Burleigh's website explains that narration and drama can be added to the work, none is included in this recording. Neither liner notes nor the website provides data on the cantata's libretto or librettist; however, most of the textual sources are easily identifiable as Biblical (drawn primarily from the King James Version), with scattered quotes from spirituals and Anglo-Protestant hymns of earlier centuries. Other non-Biblical texts are interwoven; their sources are unknown. The narrative scope of the cantata encompasses the fall of humanity, scenes and words from Christ's life, and sections of the Passion as described in the four New Testament gospels. The cantata's structure is non-linear and recursive—for instance, Christ's crucifixion occurs prior to many of his most famous sayings, reversing the order given in the gospels. Additionally, seminal characters such as Christ are not assigned to a single vocal soloist, instead rotating among singers (sometimes within a single movement). The aesthetic effect of these choices—particularly in tandem with the lack of a narrator—reduces the potential dramatic coherence and forward impetus of the work.

The cantata's prevailing musical aesthetic is the sound of the mass gospel choir pioneered in the late 1960s and early 1970s by James Cleveland. The simple choral writing, as Burleigh himself states on his website, was intended "for the masses of believers everywhere. There are no complicated academic fugues to digest. Harmonies are simple. Melodies are easily grasped."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, harmonies hew mostly to diatonic major and minor keys, occasionally drawing from the blues scale and only rarely using chromatic or expanded harmonies (when they occur, they evoke 1970s soul music). Choral textures are primarily homophonic and homorhythmic;

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*Composers* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1999). He is also absent from Eileen Southern's discussion of black classical composers in the third edition of *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> These sources include a handful of articles and advertisements in Black newspapers such as the *New York Amsterdam News*, the music catalogues of publishers such as J. W. Pepper, and the archives of Columbia College Chicago's Center for Black Music Research, which holds over two dozen of Burleigh's scores (donated by the composer).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.glenmusik.com/letgodarise.html>

the listener receives welcome polyphonic relief with limited antiphonal choral writing (often split by gender) and call-and-response between soloists and choir. The movements' structures derive from popular song, older hymnody, and gospel music rather than from classical forms. Burleigh uses strophic forms, the verse-refrain structures first seen in American hymnody in nineteenth-century revival songs, and expanded AABA forms, often with repeated bridges. Some movements include "vamp" sections that in repetition, length, intensity, and improvisatory nature approach the vamps that are structurally significant in black gospel music.

Throughout the cantata, "classical" instruments such as the violin sonically fade into the background, although it is unclear whether this results from poor studio mixing or deliberate arrangement. Foregrounded are the gospel-inflected playing styles of Burleigh on the piano and the Hammond B-3 organ. These instruments are highlighted in free-rhythm, virtuosic introductions and call-and-response dialogues with vocal soloists—prominent markers of black gospel music. Burleigh's rapid runs, exploitation of the piano's ranges, tremolos, incisively rolled chords, and dramatic arpeggios channel both nineteenth-century classical keyboard virtuosos and earlier black gospel pianists such as Roberta Martin and James Cleveland. His distinctive solos, especially the fantasia-like introductions that precede some movements, sound improvised. This transferral of improvisation, a hallmark of black gospel music, into a classical context constitutes an interpretive challenge for the performers. The choir and some instruments often seem to perform fixed, notated parts, whereas many of the vocal soloists and keyboard instruments appear to enjoy more musical "wiggle room." Although impossible to ascertain without the score, the melismatic runs of many of the soloists would surely be nearly impossible to notate. Other soloists, however, sound much more classically-trained and eschew improvisation, which leads to an inconsistent vocal aesthetic. As a result, the recording rarely reaches the level of musical and rhetorical excitement that often occurs in black gospel music performance. According to Burleigh, however, his goal was not to replicate a gospel experience, but to merge gospel and classical music, so this characteristic cannot properly be considered a failing.

The album's liner notes, written by the composer, are thin, containing no information about compositional process or the work's premiere. They include brief statements on the devotional nature of the work and Burleigh's sense of sacred calling. Performer and production credits are listed in detail, excepting the recording venue. Deducing from the lack of congregational sound, the recording probably occurred in either an empty church or a recording studio with no audience present. The notes also contain data about the Glenn Burleigh Music Workshop; the entrepreneurial composer self-produced and self-published many of his works, including *Opus 35*. No lyrics are printed.

The musical quality of the performance is sometimes admirable, particularly among the instrumentalists and the gospel-inflected soloists. The choral ensemble occasionally struggles with intonation and, seeming uncertain whether to adopt a more classically trained timbre or the wider vibrato associated with gospel music, does not achieve consistent blend. Diction is clearly articulated most

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of the time, with occasional unclear declamation. In contrast with the artistic subtlety heard in the album's best solos, the choir rarely ventures outside of a mezzo-forte dynamic level, and sometimes exhibits imprecise releases and attacks. The quality of recorded sound is relatively high throughout the album, with the exception of the aforementioned difficulty of hearing certain instruments clearly.

The major contributions of this recording to the discography of American music are threefold. First, it captures a recent choral work by an under-documented African American composer; second, it gives listeners the chance to hear a work that typically would be performed primarily in the context of black churches; third, it represents a rare instance of a large-scale dramatic sacred work from the black gospel choral tradition captured on recording (mass choir recordings of individual songs are quite common, but discs of larger works are not). The recording would augment the academic study or personal collection of those interested in the mass gospel choir movement, U.S. sacred choral music incorporating vernacular styles, and African American composers.

Carrie Allen Tipton



*Journal of the Society for American Music* (2013) Volume 7, Number 3, pp. 353–355.  
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John Luther Adams, *Four Thousand Holes*. Stephen Drury, piano; Scott Deal, percussion; The Callithumpian Consort. Cold Blue Music CB0035, 2011.

John Luther Adams's 2011 Cold Blue Music release containing *Four Thousand Holes* (2010) and . . . *and bells remembered* (2005) presents a curious pairing of works. It is likely, however, that coupling any of Adams's better-known pieces with *Four Thousand Holes* would yield a similarly unexpected result for listeners accustomed to this composer's distinctive voice and vocabulary. *Four Thousand Holes* stands apart in Adams's oeuvre, or at least among those works that have been recorded in the past thirty-three years, and in perplexing ways. Its singularity raises questions about where the composer is headed, or if this is simply a temporary detour. The second piece on the disc, . . . *and bells remembered*, is more in line with earlier works of this sonic cosmographer.

Starting with the 1979 Opus One Records LP of Adams's now canonical *song-birdsongs*, and through recordings including *A Northern Suite* (1981); *Clouds of Forgetting*, *Clouds of Unknowing* (1996); and *The Light That Fills the World* (2002) among a couple dozen others, the composer has been positioned by critics, scholars, and an ever-growing group of followers as nature's twenty-first-century musician-collaborator *in excelsis*. Adams, who in his twenties adopted Alaska's boreal forests as his home, is regularly compared to *Walden's* Concord woodsman. His 2004 book, *Winter Music: Composing the North*, reinforced this image with its reflective journal entries and multiple photographs of the bearded composer,

one showing him trudging through the woods to his studio.<sup>1</sup> He is talked of as a logical heir to Olivier Messiaen, the twentieth-century musician-theologian-ornithologist.

Adams's oeuvre enacts, heretofore, a decades-long and oft-repeated commitment to "an ecology of music," which grew out his earlier environmental activism. It was, in fact, work for environmental groups in the 1970s that brought Adams to the Alaskan wilderness in the first place. In the intervening years, he has burrowed deep through the hard Arctic ground to plant roots in one of the most challenging places on earth. Silent, white space as far as the eye can see floats above a trembling, quaking earth and glistens beneath skies alive with the phantasmagoric lights of the aurora borealis. We often hear the wonder in Adams's music and become similarly awestruck. It is difficult not to recognize one's role within nature's larger enterprise when surrounded by such dramatis personae. Adams's pieces *In the White Silence*, *Dark Wind*, *The Immeasurable Space of Tones*, *Roar*, *Red Arc/Blue Veil* invite listeners to match their mindfulness with the composer's and to pay attention to the natural environment in ways they might never have considered prior to hearing his thoroughly captivating sound creations.

Insights into Adams's thinking about *Four Thousand Holes* are limited to what has been written in numerous published discussions of the piece since the recording came out, and the minimal remarks that accompany the CD. The latter consist of two statements: A quote explaining the origins of the title as coming from John Lennon's "A Day in the Life": "And though the holes were rather small / They had to count them all"; and the briefest of explanations by Adams about the composition of the piece itself: "In *Four Thousand Holes* I limited myself to the most basic elements of Western music—major and minor triads and four-bar phrases—sculpting these found objects into lush harmonies and rhythmically complex fields of sound." There are no other notes, and nothing at all to illuminate . . . *and bells remember*. The absence of liner notes for this CD contrasts with the polyphony of voices present in the liner notes of his earlier recordings. I'm thinking especially of the extremely thoughtful commentary provided by Steven Schick and the composer in notes for the 2005 Mode recording of *Strange and Sacred Noise* that also includes brief quotes from works by Jacques Attali and Barnett Newman. Music shouldn't require explanation to be meaningful, but it wouldn't hurt to have some input from enlightened others, particularly when a work is so different from what has come before.

Consideration of . . . *and bells remembered* establishes a base line from which to measure the distance Adams has traversed on the way to *Four Thousand Holes*. The ringing sounds of chimes, vibraphone, orchestra bells, bowed vibraphone, and bowed crotales, emerge and dissolve in a gentle parade of sonorities that slowly rises in pitch over the course of the ten-minute piece. The deliberate pace of their appearance and disappearance allows us to hear in, around, and through the sounds, to feel their kinship with one another, and to follow them to their dissolution. The

<sup>1</sup> John Luther Adams, *Winter Music: Composing the North* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004).

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resonances pull us into their world and we follow them. . . . *and bells remembered* is all about listening, and perhaps about following a sound beyond audibility where all we have is the memory of the sound. This is a shimmering, redolent sound environment: a listener's paradise.

*Four Thousand Holes* explores a different place. Although it uses vibraphone and orchestral bells, and thus shares some basic sound material with . . . *and bells remembered*, the work seems to be more a display vehicle for pianist Stephen Drury, who commissioned the piece with funding from the Meet the Composer organization. Vibraphone, bells, and piano are all subjected to Adams's electronic "aura," but the piano takes center stage. Heavy, assertive, insistent major and minor triadic chords are struck and buried across the range of the keyboard; they insist upon rather than invite attention. The Lennon quote is not without meaning. We hear the Adams of his Beatles-loving days, and in fact the composer has been quoted as acknowledging the inspiration of "a couple of Beatles songs" in conjunction with *Four Thousand Holes*.<sup>2</sup> But although the simple harmonies of the Fab Four might have inspired Adams, the self-conscious showiness of the pop group is present as well. One can imagine the pianist ricocheting off the piano bench in the best virtuoso style as he sinks all his weight into the keyboard and rebounds.

The comparison of *bells* to *Holes* is like that of ballet to modern dance. Where the former is about lift and weightlessness and transcendence, the latter is a study in the forces of gravity and control. This piece is about speaking and being heard, about making an impression on the sonic environment, but perhaps the materials are too limited to sustain such an elongated oration. Although there are many moments of rhythmic and sonic interest, the piece, for all its resonance, doesn't ring true for this listener. Adams's locus seems to have changed and perhaps he's not quite comfortable in this new place.

This is no criticism of the playing of pianist Stephen Drury, who brilliantly metes out his energies and attention over the course of the work. As with his recordings of works by John Cage, Charles Ives, Frederic Rzewski, and John Zorn, Drury proves himself worthy of inclusion among an elite corps of contemporary pianists who are technically and temperamentally up to the most demanding literature. Nor do I have anything less than accolades for the quality of the recorded sound. Recordists Jeremy Sarna and Patrick Keating, and Nathaniel Reichman who was in charge of the final edits, mixing and mastering, have done a stunning job of bringing both large and small sounds to life. My dilemma is with the eponymous piece: after six months of trying, I still haven't found my way into it. Whether this is a shortcoming of the composer or of the listener, I don't know. Perhaps we both have to get comfortable with John Luther Adams's move.

Denise Von Glahn

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<sup>2</sup> David Weininger, "A New Adams Piece is More Ecstatic than Earthly," *Boston Globe*, 17 June 2011. [www.boston.com/ae/music/articles/2011/06/17/john\\_luther\\_adamss\\_four\\_thousand\\_holes\\_gets\\_its\\_first\\_live\\_performance\\_at\\_jordan\\_hall\\_next\\_week/](http://www.boston.com/ae/music/articles/2011/06/17/john_luther_adamss_four_thousand_holes_gets_its_first_live_performance_at_jordan_hall_next_week/).

*Journal of the Society for American Music* (2013) Volume 7, Number 3, pp. 356–357.  
© The Society for American Music 2013 doi:10.1017/S1752196313000333

Mobtown Modern Big Band, *The Re-(w)rite of Spring*. Arranged and directed by Darryl Brenzel. Innova 824, 2012.

The premiere performance and recording of Darryl Brenzel's re-imagining of the *Rite of Spring* was made on 12 May 2010, before an audience in Baltimore's Metro Gallery. This arrangement, for jazz big band, was written at the request of Brian Sacawa, Curator of Baltimore's Mobtown Modern Music Series, but was not motivated by any desire to mark the approaching centennial anniversary of Stravinsky's ballet in 2013. Sacawa thought it would translate well into jazz; Brenzel agreed and began his adaptation in the fall of 2008.

Brenzel retains the fourteen scenes of the two acts of the original, begins each with its distinctive themes, and assigns them to the instruments in his band that evoke the colors of Stravinsky's scoring. Whereas Stravinsky's *Rite* runs about thirty-three minutes, however, Brenzel's performance lasts nearly an hour and a quarter, meaning that about two-thirds of the CD comprises material written by Brenzel or improvised by members of the band.

The Mobtown Modern Big Band (MMBB) is an ensemble of jazz virtuosi, and although no larger than earlier big bands (the Sauter-Finnegan Orchestra and those of Stan Kenton and especially Don Ellis—who had a passion for complex meters—come to mind), there is a notable variety in instrumentation. There are six sax players (counting Brenzel on solo alto in the closing *Sacrificial Dance*) who double on clarinet and flute, and four trumpeters who double on flugelhorn. Showcasing the latter, Michael Johnston effectively sets the mood of the *Introduction* of act 2 and the close of scene 13, *Ritual Action of the Ancestors*. The four trombones provide solid chords and angular riffs that capture Stravinsky's unique rhythmic and metric traits, notably in scene 6, *Procession of the Sage*. (The duration of the movement in Stravinsky's score is about forty seconds; Brenzel's version extends to about four minutes.) Keyboardist Timothy Young's tasty improvisation in this movement is based in part upon Stravinsky's harmonies.

*The Sage*, movement seven, comprises only four measures in Stravinsky's score. Bassist Jeff Lopez (or Brenzel?) expands it to three minutes of compelling improvisation, played pizzicato, and recalls the sustained pitch collection of measure four. Brenzel begins the signature movement of the work, *Dance of the Young Girls*, with an inserted four-bar drum introduction that sounds weak compared to what follows. The brass carry the iconic chordal material of the dance, and while preserving the accents of the movement, which negate the traditional effect of the barline, one misses the timbre of the heavy down-bows of the strings in the original. Additionally, changing the groups of four even sixteenth notes of Stravinsky's bassoon part (m. 9) into a triplet and an eighth detracts more than it adds, and the mixed meters of *Ritual of the Rival Tribes* seem to have been reduced to a consistent and less interesting 4/4.

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Stravinsky was himself not averse to re-scoring the works of other composers (Bach, Grieg, Chopin, Mussorgsky), and rhythmic and harmonic elements of jazz pervade his works. Some of his pieces were even composed in specific jazz styles (*Piano-rag-music*, 1919), and one could argue that the first two musical influences to encompass the entire globe were jazz and the music of Stravinsky.

Further, attempts to wed classical idioms, genres, and styles with jazz are numerous. Consider Ellington's *Nutcracker Suite* (after Tchaikovsky), the so-called *Third Stream* works by Gunther Schuller (his "Little Blue Devil" from *Seven Studies on Themes of Paul Klee* is a tour de force), and the arrangements by Gil Evans. Some jazz-classical composers experimented with twelve-tone serialism. The desire to make jazz "classical" has been an ongoing passion of composers in both genres.

And that brings us back to the recording at hand. *Rewriting* a piece by Stravinsky in a jazz idiom gives reason for pause. What are the objectives? One would certainly not presume to improve on the original. Transcriptions from one performance medium to another are legion, and making a composition available to an instrument or ensemble for which it was not originally intended can have aesthetic and pedagogical value. How a "rewriting" of a work of the stature of the *Rite* is justified, however, is less obvious. A general audience might not be sufficiently familiar with the original work to appreciate the merits of the arrangement, and some might accept the arrangement as an accurate re-orchestration of the original. The uneven responses from the audience to this performance, retained on the CD, and the occasional cheers for featured soloists sound self-conscious, and lead one to wonder if they understood Brenzel's objectives. Brilliant solos—and there are many on this recording—are often followed by anemic applause.

A literal rewrite of Stravinsky's score may not have been Brenzel's goal, but his liner notes do little to suggest where themes, harmonies, and rhythms are cited or paraphrased, and most important, where improvisations begin and end. The space devoted to an extensive description of his personal angst in undertaking and completing the project, and the photographs and trendy design of his liner notes would have been better used to assist the listener in sorting out Stravinsky's rhythmic and metric techniques, and especially his harmonic language, and how these were transferred to an arrangement for big band. Cross-references to the score used to create the rewrite would be helpful to the jazz scholar and performer.

Despite these concerns, this is a CD that serious jazz musicians should listen to. The improvisations are fresh, section work is tight, intonation is excellent, and the band swings. The sound mix is very good, although the baritone sax is sometimes too heavy, and for a live recording, the audio quality is outstanding. Jazz musicians in colleges and universities with jazz programs would benefit from playing this score (assuming there is a comprehensible score available). If there is a reissue of the CD, I suggest a more accurate title: "Improvisations on themes from Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*."

Richard D. Wetzel

