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Book Review

Universal Tonality: The Life and Music of William Parker

Cisco Bradley
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Reviewed by Benjamin Barson

> *Who cares about good art, bad art, when the world is dying?*
> —Jonas Mekas

One unfamiliar with bassist William Parker's work may ask a question of this nature when deciding whether or not to engage with Cisco Bradley's recently released *Universal Tonality: The Life and Music of William Parker*. As far-right movements grow ever emboldened against a backdrop of climate-induced scarcity, a global pandemic, and ever-unbounded economic inequality and corporate malfeasance, this 416-page deep-dive into the life and work of an influential avant-garde composer and instrumentalist may initially feel irrelevant. Perhaps William Parker himself can best speak to these questions:

> Ask a starving child what jazz is
>
> And that child might say jazz
>
> Is a hot plate of food.
>
> In the final analysis,
>
> Who cares what jazz is
>
> If we have no respect for life,
>
> If the world is dying. (174)

The searing honesty of this paragraph, its humble and vulnerable self-questioning, its subtle and yet powerful invocation of revolutionary music as essential spiritual nutrition, and the fact that Parker's own voice is so centered, are all part of the unique methodology of *Universal Tonality*, which is the most important jazz biography or autobiography since George Lewis's *A Power Strong Than Itself* or John Szwed's *Space is the Place.* An innovative and effective structure fuses Parker's voice and poetry with Bradley's decades-long practice of music scholarship and critique. The result is a book that transforms the very definition of jazz biography, in addition to providing a powerful picture of a revolutionary artist's practice in the late twentieth and twenty-first century. As Bradley himself explains, "Parker's impeccable memory and storytelling ability, traits that everyone observes of him, make him the best source to speak of his own experience" (9), and Bradley manages his own voice delicately and masterfully as he seeks to center not only Parker's life but also the communities and collaborations that made it meaningful.

Universal Tonality prioritizes situating Parker's work and African American music more generally in a powerful historical framework, and the book's introductory chapter is innovative and deeply moving, providing a compelling overview of both the Parker family's genealogical branches and the various branches of North Carolina Black experience through slavery, emancipation, and the Great Migration. Bradley's training as a historian really shines here, as he is able to combine

archival research (much of it quite limited) with secondary sources and other historical context, including Equiano's autobiography, to create rich vignettes that link Igbo traditions (of what is modern-day Nigeria) to maroon life in North Carolina (Parker descended from a prominent maroon community) to the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem (where his ancestors relocated during the Great Migration). While his treatment of Reconstruction is somewhat limited—an engagement with Justin Behrend's thesis in *Reconstructing Democracy* (2014), which emphasizes African American grassroots engagement with a sometimes top-down Republican party, would have thematically fit Bradley's arc of Black agency and creative communal innovation—the opening chapter is a sweeping accomplishment which alone could be read as a meaningful introduction to any African American history course.

A deft mix of sociology and Parker's own voice help depict the structural racism that was embedded in Parker's early childhood in the South Bronx—a space Parker still felt was a "postcard for poetics" (61). Moments when Parker's own words appear are particularly noted: "They pushed us all together, Blacks and Puerto Ricans, and there was nothing there to empower people" (90), as well as Bradley's framing of the extensive interviews he recorded: "Parker could recall no Black-owned businesses in the area where he grew up" (90). In many ways, especially where education is concerned, Parker's life reads like a chapter in George Lipsitz's *The Possessive Investment of Whiteness*. Students of hip-hop will be familiar with the Cross Bronx Expressway, which also negatively impacted Parker's life and community. Bradley details Parker's forays into record collecting, including using money allocated by his parents for clothing to fuel his increasingly insatiable appetite for the new sounds of the likes of Albert Ayler and Ornette Coleman. "Inspiring music, amid the social maelstrom of life in the South Bronx, was the saving grace of Parker's childhood" (53), what Parker himself calls a "maze" filled with the potential for physical and psychological violence (55). "It wasn't until I got into the avant-garde," Parker says, "that I really began to see some light, some heavy light within all of the confusion of my life [. . .] It was a wake-up call to our inner being" (68, 73). A parallel foundational to Parker's journey of self-discovery were the Black Power and Black Arts Movements, which partially inspired him to "maintain . . . [his] own sovereignty as a human being (63)," including books by poets including Larry Neal, Don L. Lee (Haki R. Madhubuti), Gi Scott-Heron, James Baldwin, Nikki Giovanni, and Kenneth Patchen (67). It was within this context that Parker heard avant-garde jazz or new Black music as "an insurrection against European musical bondage" (67). Bradley does a deft job summarizing the different impetuses and waves of the new music in dialogue with its attendant revolutionary literati, as well as the ways in which each of these tendencies and lessons directly inspired and impacted Parker.

On that note, the book's third chapter ("Consciousness") is fascinating even for those familiar with the Black Arts Movement and the contribution of Archie Shepp and Amiri Baraka, whose work takes up much of the chapter. Fascinating because it is, in a sense, an "Adventure in perception," as we experience these works through the eyes and consciousness of William Parker and witness a very instructive example of how the new music shaped a generation of Black radical thought. It is another testament to Bradley's uncanny ability to make historical movements and a "seething mass of sensations" (71) come to life in individuals. Yet Bradley and Parker make clear that his inspiration was global and ecumenical, including not only the likes of Coltrane and Baraka but also Nicaraguan poet and priest Ernesto Cardenal, who he heard on East 10th Street; Polish theater director and theorist Jerzy Grotowski; the work of Swedish director Ingmar Bergman; filmmaker Stan Brakhage; and many others. The description of the impact of the European cinematic avant-garde and the sprinklings of power quotes is equally stirring as Bradley's distillation of Baraka and Shepp's work. Interestingly, the first creative output that Bradley focuses on is Parker's poetry from his early teens (which was nearly published by a movement publisher) and his film/photography from his later teens. Parker found

the ability to translate these motifs into music and explained his interdisciplinary approach as such: “There were no walls between writing, film, music . . . it was as if there was a room filled with sound, and another with words, one with images, and so forth. But the carpet in all of these rooms was imagination—it linked everything together. One inspired the other” (82).

Chapter 4 considers alternative pedagogical models and Parker’s search for his musical voice as he navigated the straight-ahead conventions of grassroots jazz education in a program based in Harlem called Jazzmobile. In a way, this chapter is as much about the state of jazz education as it is about Parker’s life, and a way for Parker to insert his own highly developed ideas about pedagogy and spirituality in sound into the text. Bradley quotes Cooper-Moore: “I have a musical education that I have been trying to get away from for fifty years. William is who he is because he had nobody telling him what to do but him. It’s as if he said to himself, ‘what is in me? How do I get it out of me?’ He’s one of the gifted ones” (98). Parker’s eventual encounter with the Bronx-based cultural center Third World, run by Black liturgist Ben Caldwell, allowed him to play with and bandlead the larger and more experimental Aumic Orchestra and gave him the opportunity to meet Sun Ra. This endeavor, as Bradley himself points out, provides a rare snapshot of a poorly documented but clearly vibrant creative music scene in the 1970s South Bronx. Parker also begins playing in the East Village, including with Coltrane alumnus Rashied Ali. Cooper also centers Parker’s work with his wife and longtime collaborator, Patricia Nicholson, who created the innovative “Centering Dance Music Ensemble” in the second half of the 1970s, which often included poetry, collective improvisation, choreography, multiple dancers, and mixed instrumentation groups that focused on “sound-movement communication” which required “immense in-the-moment focus” (130).

It is around these sections that Bradley’s skill as a music critic and interpreter come to the foreground. Indeed, I cannot think of someone more prepared to take on the immensely challenging and rewarding work of putting words to Parker’s *oeuvre* (as well as creating spaces for Parker’s own descriptions of his work to breathe). In addition to his training as a historian, Bradley is the editor of *Jazz Right Now: Improvised and Experimental Music,* and he frequently publishes and edits interviews, artist features, and album reviews on the site, along with a dedicated team of volunteers. Well-versed in avant-garde and non-traditional jazz practice, Bradley can put to language subjects as experiential and otherworldly as Parker’s bass approach during his collaborations with Nicholson, as is evidenced in his piece “Commitment.” A particularly striking paragraph reveals Bradley’s skill in helping us hear the music through language:

> Added to the rest of his developing concepts, one day it came to Parker, when he was practicing arco technique (bowing), that each string was a band of light and the bow was a prism. To Parker the harmonics were different colors in the light spectrum, and “each of those colors has an effect on people.” Combining his two main concepts at the time—pizzicato bass as a trap drum set and arco work with strings as bands of light—set Parker on a productive path forward, reaching deeper levels of understanding his instrument and its limitless possibilities. (134-135)

In addition to taking seriously the visual and synaesthetic aspects of music, these descriptions of Parker’s “sound paintings” are an invaluable contribution the book makes that will appeal not only to jazz studies scholars within academia but also practicing musicians, for there are concepts here that are truly invaluable to both bassists and creative musicians in general. Indeed, one might be inspired (I know, as a baritone saxophonist, I was) to attempt to put such concepts to use. Bradley and Parker do not only describe Parker’s technique and sound but also those of a litany of underdocumented musicians from the avant-garde camp, including

saxophonist David S. Ware (who “always had a big sound” [135]), drummer Susie Ibarra (who “plays color and swings things” [183]), and bassoonist Karen Borca (“a groundbreaking player and barrier smasher” [155]), among dozens of other avant-garde players, some who have left an archival footprint and others who have been violently excised from the dominant jazz narrative.

Indeed, in some ways, the dizzying and inspiring network that Parker and Nicholson developed reads as a much-needed alternative to the bebop fundamentalism of Ken Burns’s *Jazz*, ideologically powered by trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and jazz critic Stanley Crouch. It would be difficult to write a book of this nature that did not engage the erasure that these three figures participated in towards the music’s revolutionary wing, and Bradley spends just the right amount of energy and time assessing their work. Part of this history is quite central to the book’s narrative, for Crouch’s infamous 1982 review of pianist Cecil Taylor in the *Village Voice*, which outed Taylor as gay, came as Parker was the bassist for Taylor and achieving a significant amount of international work as a result of this association. Although only a page and a half in length, Bradley excellently surmises the impact of the “market-cornering gesture” that partitioners and defenders of the neotraditionalist movement engaged in, also pointing out its synergy with attacks on Black radical artists in other fields (161). Bradley’s book should be read as a much-needed corrective to this story of gaps and silences, to which we might add Michael Heller’s *Loft Jazz* (2012) and Bill Shoemaker’s *Jazz in the 1970s: Diverging Streams* (2017); Bradley and Parker’s careful attention to their collaborators and side persons point to future research that deserves the attention of jazz historians and writers.

Particularly moving is Parker’s own invocation to revolution, in which his rootedness in the Black Arts Movement becomes readily apparent. Beginning in Chapter 7, “‘It Is the Job of the Artist to Incite Revolution’: In Order to Survive,” Parker’s political voice becomes more centered and powerful as he transitions from Cecil Taylor’s bassist to the bandleader of a group named In Order to Survive. As stated earlier, Parker’s own writing on his music is so poignant that his quotations alone make for purposeful pauses from the engaged reader. He is incredibly poetic in describing his music, mixing humour, the mystical, and a critique of power and Imperialism with striking fluidity. He explains of his piece “The Golden Bell” that it is intended to invoke “a kingdom where all the trumpet players live in harmony without critics polls,” a song inspired by the “ascension of the spirit into another place where the only tears cried were tears of happiness” (224). The concept behind Parker’s Curtis Mayfield tribute, called “The Inside Songs of Curtis Mayfield,” is described by Parker as “People’s Music” dedicated to the “reclamation of land, self-determination, and the right to change existing structures rather than assimilation into a quagmire misnamed progress” (241). He explains of his 2011 release *Crumbling in the Shadows Is Fraulein Miller’s Stale Cake* that the album was dedicated to a slave exodus, when “those displaced and tortured Africans held out their arms, they intertwined them like branches from a tree. Becoming unified as one voice they looked into the slave master’s eyes and walked off the plantation never to be seen again” (259). Of equal weight is Parker’s commitment to dedicate his compositions and improvisations to both personal mentors and historic figures, and Bradley always provides context around the individual being honoured. Included in his pantheon of dedications are Alan Shorter, Billy Bang, Don Cherry, dancer Rodney Diverlus, prisoner and Black liberation activist George Jackson, June Jordan, and several significant leaders of Indigenous resistance struggles in Northern America including Sitting Bull and the Navajo chief Manuelito. Parker was deeply committed to solidarity with Native American activism and history. Parker explains elsewhere that “The goal of this music is to never forget their grooves and funk that is very close to the heart of all Indigenous peoples wherever they came from” (230). In some ways, Parker’s historiography of creative artists, activists, and freedom fighters maps powerfully onto his concept of “Universal Tonality,” which Bradley explains is “the idea that

master musicians from any part of the world should be able to meet and play together, to speak to one another through their musical languages . . . Parker's claim to universalism is his boldest artistic statement, and through this he has demanded a place for revolutionary Black music on the world stage" (271).

One of the book's limitations is the relative lack of attention paid towards gender or women artists' experiences throughout Parker's career. In particular, the discussion of drummer Susie Ibarra from his trio In Order to Survive seems muted. Ibarra denounced the misogyny and unwanted sexual advances she experienced as a female drummer in the free jazz space in a 1999 *New York Times* profile, and we are told that "as this conflict ended up cutting through In Order to Survive, Parker decided to vary the lineups for the concerts he had booked through the remainder of 1999" (189). Bradley explains that Parker's collaborator Cooper-Moore "thought more could have been done to heal the fissure" (189) without further context or details. In a creative space overwhelmingly dominated by men, and with most of the book's central collaborators being men—save the crucial chapter on Parker's collaboration with his wife Patricia Nicholson and a later section on vocalist Leena Conquest—Bradley deprives us of a more detailed discussion of the contradictions and limitations of the scene's approach to women artists. Such an addition would have been welcome and might have provided necessary context for Ibarra's departure from Parker's band.

Universal Tonality is nonetheless a major accomplishment, providing a critical biography of a pivotal figure of the jazz avant-grade who is a repository of the "Black revolutionary spiritual school of music" (271). As the conclusion of the book details, Parker is widely acknowledged as an elder of the experimental wing of jazz known for his prolific output and incessant innovation, which as Bradley points out, "shatters the image of the so-called decline of the music" (275). The accompanying 11-page discography and 93 pages of notes and bibliography will provide future scholars interested in several of the underdocumented players mentioned to delve further into the important project of highlighting unheralded voices from the music's revolutionary wing. Perhaps most profoundly, *Universal Tonality* does a deft job amplifying the voices of a marginalized group of Black artists and allies who sought to change the world through their revolutionary improvised music in the last quarter of the twentieth century up until now. Their art is a clarion call to the important work we have yet to do.

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