

JAZZ PIANIST CECIL TAYLOR

A Far-out And Distant Character INTERVIEWED BY
THOMAS STANLEY

PIANIST CECIL TAYLOR IS AN ANACHRONISM. A polished, erudite gentleman, he calls to mind a long-gone era of noble artist-intellectuals. Cecil Taylor is also a motherfucker. A distance runner and junkyard dog in the race for artistic survival, count Mr. Taylor among the ten men whom you'd least like to piss off.

The seventy-year-old pianist-composer-dancer proudly celebrates his Afro-Indian ancestry and unapologetically leads a Gay life. He's not above splashing the chalky walls of Anglo-patriarchy with rebellious graffiti. Dig it — if you don't, these walls will entomb your ass. But decisive action moves walls, not angry words. When Taylor acts decisively, well — he's a motherfucker. Case in point: 1994: Taylor sidesteps all the pontifications about what is Jazz at **Lincoln Center** by renting the exclusive **Alice Tully Hall** for his own birthday performance. Fifteen grand of his own cheddar. That's decisive.

Taylor's place in history has been firmly cemented by a life lived briskly at the molten center of Twentieth Century music — a life that the artist gives no indications of relinquishing anytime soon. His work in the late Fifties with **Steve Lacy**, **Dennis Charles** and **Buell Neidlinger** was the starting point for an unfinished journey on which he would seek to exploit the plasticity of rhythm and harmony in ways unanticipated on the bandstands of Bop or in the concert halls of Europe. He later worked with expeditionaries like **Max Roach**, **Jimmy Lyons** and **Sunny Murray**. Taylor's creations are the tonal equivalent of powerful and gracefully symmetric suspension bridges forming ad hoc from a swarm of buzzing bees. At his beckoning, harmonic intervals become strange integers and metric constraints slip away like beads of mercury.

As a player, Taylor mounts his instrument with deliberate abandon. This smallish man with immaculate hands and the arms of a welterweight contender has taken on the mammoth task of reconfiguring the piano as a portable instrument — an instrument that, like guitar or flute, one can dance with while playing.

For his efforts he has been the target of some of the most damning critical assessment ever heaped upon an experimental musician. Through a resiliency born of commitment he has survived to see his experiment become canon and to dish back a little doo-doo of his own. My opportunity to sit down with Mr. Taylor was a blessing bestowed by a wonderful sprite of a Jewish grandmother — **Trudy Morse** might be four feet tall standing on a stepladder, but behind the scenes of Avant-garde Jazz she looms like an unspoken giant. She has gained the confidence of titans like **Anthony Braxton**, the late **Sun Ra**, and Cecil Taylor. When I heard that Taylor was presenting a commissioned work at the **Library Of Congress** I asked Trudy to hook me up. She invited me to come to the Library's **Coolidge Auditorium** and hang out. When Cecil appeared, he sat down at the piano and played furiously for an uninterrupted hour. It was a difficult piece and he silently signaled his accompanist — violinist **Mat Maneri** — with an arsenal of stern gazes and assuring nods. Cecil wore a rumpled shirt and shorts that were once white. A black stocking cap was pushed down over the stubborn tangle of gray dreadlocks ringing his mostly bald head. Afterward, I folded myself into the hand-selected entourage that would follow Cecil back to his hotel. "You may not get an interview per se," Trudy warned, "but Cecil will tell stories. He has an incredible memory, you know. You just be there." And there I was — Cecil lets you know what he wants to talk about by talking about it.

Before the informal soirée could kick off, Cecil shed the threads he had worn to release his bees in the moldy marble halls of this nation's capital. He emerged from his bedroom, looking quite refreshed, to kick it 'til dawn with a few of his friends. He wore a punishing set of soft suede moccasin boots with intricate multi-hued tribal designs pressed into their tops. He also sported a crushed velvet waistcoat complete with tails and a natty suede vest that matched his footwear. His neck was weighted with jewelry that cried out to be touched, not just seen.

THIS IS CECIL TAYLOR'S DANCE AND IT'S ON.

TAYLOR: [*picking up on a conversation in progress*] We should have some champagne, I guess. **Trudy** told me about you. Listen, did I tell you that I met her in **Hirshfield** when I was doing a piano concert with Roger — what was the last name? He was an Australian treasure. And he's really a contemporary pianist. **Hirshfield** was in '87 the university where the most advanced English contemporary music was heard. So after the concert Roger and I are sitting, you know, and I hear a knock on the door and this little lady's standing there. So we hung out. She walked in the next afternoon with the complete dossier of what I'd been doing and all the musicians that had been working with me. She'd even done something with **Anthony Braxton** — he's fabulous. He's fabulous. It's not my way, but I mean he's — I'm just fascinated by him. I worry

about him sometimes. He almost had a heart attack. He's up in this university and he eats junk food.

Did you see the opera that he did? Because, you know, *The New York Times* and *The Village Voice* were not very kind. Three members of the orchestra that I have spoken to went to that and they said it was incredible. Now Anthony is seventy-two and he's in Paris; he wrote this piece and he takes it to the building where the Jazz whatever-that-is is, and he takes it upstairs to where **Pierre Boulez** and those people are, and they look at it and say, "Well, what is this?" Now, just by chance I happened to read in *The New York Times* about **Philip Glass**'s opera [*Koyaanisqatsi*] and the first line was, "Well, this is not quite an Opera, but Philip has found new ground." **The Brooklyn Academy Of Music** was right around the corner so I went

to hear Philip Glass's new work. Frankly, I began to get physically ill. I escaped to the bathroom and it was over, and people applauded for at least five minutes. Now I must say this: there were three times when, in terms of orchestration, he did something that saved those pieces. But, man —

SECONDS: *Doomed from the beginning?*

TAYLOR: You remember **Fluxus** [art collective circa '66]? **Charlotte Moorman**? Now dig this: Fluxus — I knew about them, right? I go to Central Park on this certain day and there's Charlotte, who played cello. And here comes Mr. Glass. Beautiful day, and the piano's by the water. It's the first time I'd ever seen him. You know, at one point he wanted to be **Archie Shepp**'s pianist. What I'm getting to is, a Black young man who was an electronic composer played first. The next performer was Philip Glass. Philip sat down and played the piano. I mean, I'd heard him play before, but this was childlike in the most embarrassing way. When you think of what he's achieved and this whole minimalist thing, it's extraordinary —

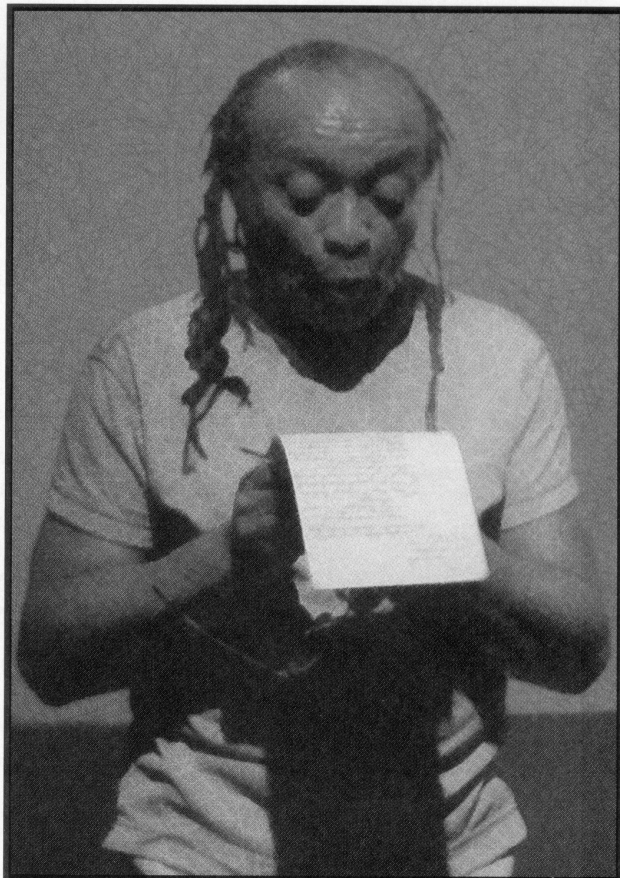
SECONDS: *Is it fraudulent?*

TAYLOR: It's successful and he's being marketed very well.

SECONDS: *Successful because it's simple?*

TAYLOR: It's beyond simple. It's just boring and dull. He was going to

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give a piano solo at The Slave Factory [*The Knitting Factory*], so I said we're going to sit upstairs. The pretension when he's playing — if I'm forced to analyze music when it's being played, I know I'm in trouble. When he began the third number we just got up and left. What Anthony Braxton does in terms of American composers of the European thing — Anthony knows as much about that shit as any living American composer. It is not my way, but the sad thing about it is he's beating his head against a wall, because it's closed.

SECONDS: *Closed in what way?*

TAYLOR: You name me one Black American composer who writes in that fashion that's got the recognition. **Eric Dolphy** told me about a cat, and I met him — Eric told me this guy always said the wrong thing to the powerful people. I mean **George Balanchine** used "Cakewalk" — written by **Ulysses Kay**. In 1950 I was taken up to Sugar Hill to visit this Black American composer who — in those days **The New York State Composers Society** awarded something to the composer of the most significant piece written that year. I think his name was **Hanson**. He won it that year, and it was a short symphony. And I'm taken up there by a guy named **Ree Taylor**, who could write like the great **Dizzy Gillespie** and decided to be commercial. As a matter of fact the first time **Jimmy Lyons** came to a rehearsal of mine Ree came with him. But anyway, he takes me to meet this guy, and above the piano is a picture of a man that I call "Straw" — **Stravinsky** — and we were having a nice conversation and he said, "Well, Ree says that you're talented, so when are you going to get serious?" You see? So I left. Never heard anything about this guy, right?

So I had a gig at the **University of North Hampton** about ten years ago. Sometimes students are very clever. They played a piece for saxophone and piano written by this guy, then the students played a piece by **Ellington** and **Hodges**. He gets no play, you know?

[*Avant-garde composer*] **Bill Dixon**'s uncle is **Jean Dixon** — he wanted to be a conductor. Went to Europe. He made one appearance in Europe when I was there recently. There was a Black brilliant conductor — a young man — who conducted the **Oakland Symphony**. He went out in the bay and mysteriously drowned.

The great **Dizzy Gillespie** band in '47 — **George [Russell]** wrote some of that music. And later on I went to **Cooper Union** and heard an orchestra piece that he did called "All About Rosy" and then that beautiful piece "Aesthetic." But then, you know, he's sort of contemporary with **Miles [Davis]**, you see — and when Miles went into that "confusion" music which he called *Fusion*, George sort of altered things.

I mean that stuff [*Fusion*] — the only one who convinced me was **Gil Evans**, when he changed. When he went into **Sweet Basil's** the first five weeks — by the seventh week I go and I walk in there because I got to know Mr. Evans, you know? The concert begins with him playing music from when he was a young man, twenty-nine. It ends with his rendition of **Jimi Hendrix**. You know, *Birth Of The Cool* — Gil was the one that was doing the arrangements on that. **Steve Lacy** introduced me to Gil Evans.

The effect that Miles Davis had on his contemporaries and younger musicians was devastating. It opened the door for people like **Wynton Marsalis** who essentially don't have a language and are only duplicating what Miles did. The magical thing about Ellington was — I once saw a film and the band was rehearsing and they were playing and Ellington gave these signs. Those cats knew exactly what to do. Other orchestras have tried to play it and it's not the same. The only time I was ever in a space with the Maestro was at the **City Center** and he was getting ready to do his piece "The River." He was six-foot-three and he was getting ready to enter and I saw what he did to prepare before entering —

SECONDS: *What did he do to prepare?*

TAYLOR: That's my secret. You'd have to see it. That's what I learned from him.

SECONDS: *There's this part of me that's like, "Well, it's improvisation, right?" And then I'm like, "No, this is something that he worked on —"*

TAYLOR: There is this maybe philosophical battle about what is composition. What is improvisation? What is development? I think development is possible in closed composition and I think development is obviously possible in improvisation, but beyond all of that it seems to me that the question is: What is a musician? That has to do with how

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one trains oneself to respond to sound — and how one utilizes one’s body to make that sound. And everytime I get into a conversation with academicians, if they’re full of themselves then it’s rather easy — because their knowledge of musics of the world is extraordinarily limited. **Nat Hentoff** wrote an article in the *Voice* around Duke Ellington’s birthday in which he, from my point of view, tried to redeem himself, and he said how important Ellington is. There’s no question about that in my mind, but that’s easy to say. It seems to me that after 1950 the most important musician is **Charlie Parker** and **Dizzy Gillespie** and **Thelonious Monk**. In terms of virtuoso performance — **Bud Powell**, **Elmo Hope**. It changed, and in a strange way also one of the most important musicians was early Miles — the mature Miles Davis, what he learned from **Dizzy Gillespie**’s band. When he formed that band with **Coltrane**, **Paul Chambers**, **Red Garland** and **Philly Joe [Jones]** — you listen to that band. You listen to what Red Garland is playing on that piano: orchestra parts. And Red could play in any tempo. And watching that band — they would play **The Bohemian**; they would go on the road for three months, record and come back. When you went out to hear that band — what he had done to that music — I lost interest in Mr. Davis after *Bitches Brew*, of course, but the odd thing was his control of his trumpet. That’s the question: technique without any muse.

SECONDS: *You lost interest in Miles after he used electric instruments —*

TAYLOR: You heard **James Jamerson**, haven’t you? And the real issue is **James Brown**. That’s the other side of Monk. I’m saying is what James Brown did, the Be-boppers — and they were great — the accent was on two and four. James Brown was on one. So when you hear a man like James Jamerson — for instance, the record that **Marvin [Gaye]** made right after **Tammy [Terrell]** was assassinated, you listen to the line that Jamerson is playing and the rhythm that he’s playing, I mean —

SECONDS: *Why are you in America? There’s a tradition of artists who just said, “That’s it” and split —*

TAYLOR: Well, you know, I considered it — but you know the whole thing about my father’s father was a full-blooded Kiowa; my mother’s mother was a full-blooded Cherokee. The whole thing about the evolution of music itself. Braxton did an interesting thing — he wrote a piece about Native American — [*Cecil is interrupted mid-sentence by Ms. Morse.*] Ah, there she is, Trudy, how are you?

SECONDS: *[after a few moments] I love your poetry. Are the inspirational points similar for your music and your verse?*

SECONDS: I’ll put it this way: I’ve known **Amiri Baraka** since ’67. I went to see *Amen Corner* three times. I was working with **Mia Slavinskow**, who was a ballerina from, I believe, Yugoslavia. And some of the dancers that were there came out of the **Judson Church**. They had a dance company in the mid-Sixties headed by **James Waring**. And James Waring — a lot of people thought that he was going to be the new **Merce Cunningham**. So after the first day, Slavinskow looked at the three ladies from the Judson Church and said, “You people can’t walk. Get out!” The

next day was my turn. She said, “What do you play? Out!” I had seen *Amen Corner* three times because a woman who played the mother — for some reason I can’t remember her name. But, when *Beloved* opened, **Okra [Oprah] Winfrey** had **Danny Glover** on and she showed a scene — I can’t remember this woman’s name. The woman I’m talking about — in *Guess Who’s Coming To Dinner* she played **Sidney Portier**’s mother. Okra showed one scene of this woman and it was like you wanted to cry; you wanted to laugh. I can’t remember her name. [*Beah Richards appeared in Guess Who’s Coming To Dinner and Raisin In The Sun and had a cameo in Winfrey’s Beloved*] **Gloria Foster**, for instance, won an **Obie** — and then I’ve seen, for instance, **Judith Anderson** do *Medea*. I saw Gloria Foster do *Medea*. One doesn’t hear about Gloria Foster. I did see her do an adaption of a **Brecht** play that **Ntozake Shange** manipulated. But, you know, the problem is: Academicians have a very limited conception of knowledge, you know? But when I was working with [*Mikhail*] **Baryshnikov** and I just finished reading this biography of [*Rudolph*] **Nureyev**, they both said that the greatest America dancer was **Fred Astaire**. Ha ha ha — they both said that.

SECONDS: *Who would you put ahead of Astaire? The Nicholas Brothers?*

TAYLOR: Of course — **Step Brothers [The Four Step Brothers a.k.a. The Eight Feet Of Rhythm]** — and **Bojangles [Bill Robinson]**. I would put **Eleanor Powell** above Fred Astaire. Did you ever see Eleanor Powell dance? And did you ever see **Josephine Baker** dance? And the very light-skinned woman who played in the original *Imitation Of Life* — she came out of **The Cotton Club**. You should have seen her dance. But you know, I saw **Katherine Dunham**. I saw **Pearl Pflug** —

SECONDS: *Is there Dance that still catches your attention?*

TAYLOR: **Min Tanaka**. The kabuki or bhuto done by Min. I spent a lot of time with ballet. I’ve spent a lot of time with **Martha [Graham]**, **Paul Taylor**, **Merce Cunningham**. **Sankai Juku** — yeah, I saw them before. Very slick. I saw the man who started butoh, and he was eighty-eight years old. He danced alone until the last number — and the music was by **Ray Charles**. Very interesting. **Maya Plisetskaya** was the greatest ballerina I ever saw, and **Carmen Amaya**. Ballanchine, Broadway and Hollywood — Neoclassicism. You know, **Arthur Mitchell** was not the first Black dancer in that [Ballanchine’s] company. The first was **Louis Johnson** who got into a confrontation with Ballanchine and said, “Neoclassicism! You’re just an arthritic old man.” Now Ballanchine has made the statement that ballet does not — that Black bodies do not — [*make good ballet dancers*] — now, on the other hand I saw **Alicia Alonso**. When I’m at the **Maeght Foundation** in ’69, Alonso’s company came to Nice. I saw six Black dancers in that company. And of course with **Castro**, Alonso couldn’t come to America. But she was perhaps the first non-Russian ballet dancer who danced at the **Bolshoi**. She’s like **Art Tatum**; she was dancing when she was half blind. I learned a lot about the possibility of words and action being music. The musicians — most of them that I really love, when you watch them play, they’re dancing.

SECONDS: *Would it be cool if the audience danced?*

TAYLOR: You just have to do it. When I walked into that place [*Coolidge Auditorium*] I said “This is a very, very stiff place.” I mean, the question is: since I never was allowed to work on the circuit, for several reasons of viability and my temperament, I just wouldn’t do it — and one of the ways you survived is to understand that all art is related. The process of becoming — to me there’s a common denominator. When James Brown was incarcerated and I was talking about that in the kitchen at **The Village Vanguard**, a nice gentlemen said, “Well, James Brown was a thug.” There is a sad commentary about the position that people create because if you think about the emergence of Philip Glass, **Wynton Marsalis**, the **Minimalists** — I spent a lot of years watching **Balanchine**, but mother took me to see **The Step Brothers** and **The Nicholas Brothers**, **Pearl Bailey** and **Bill Bailey** and that great man who was still dancing in ’76, who danced with lover [*an unspecified character*] at the White House. But they met their match that day because lover put this six-year-old tap dancer in the part up against the lead, but then when it was over, **Clintofus [President Clinton?]** goes up to the **River Dancers** and says, “Gee, I wish I could dance like you” — one reason he’s not a favorite of mine. And, of course, **River Dancers** — I mean, jeezus — [*Cecil becomes distracted and the interview ends*] **ST**