

# Sound of Identity

Performance with Darrell Grant's MJ New Quartet



A Celebration of International Jazz Day—April 30, 2017

# Sound of Identity

## Artist Statement

On viewing the Portland Art Museum's current exhibition *Constructing Identity: Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art*, I was struck by the parallels between the struggle for identity represented by the work in this exhibit, and the journey into self-expression embodied in the history of the Jazz art form. *Sound of Identity* is both the result of reflection and research on the art and the music, and a personal response to this inspiring collection of artworks. I selected 12 artworks from *Constructing Identity* to pair with compositions by African-American jazz composers. It was a fascinating and enriching process, through which I gained a deeper appreciation for the diversity of African-American experience, and the myriad cultural and personal identities that are so often overlooked in discussions of race. I was also impressed by the crossover between visual art and music—from shared thematic material, to the impact of travel, to involvement in social change. It is my hope that this program provides a glimpse into the both variety and commonality of black identity as represented through these creative works.

Thank you.

Darrell Grant

Listen to recordings of today's selections by the original artists on this Spotify playlist:  
<http://bit.ly/darrellgrant>

# Sound of Identity

## Performers and Program

Darrell Grant, Piano

Mike Horsfall, Vibraphone

Carlton Jackson, Drums

Marcus Shelby, Bass

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Duke Ellington, "Drop Me Off in Harlem"

Richmond Barthé, *Come Unto Me*, 1930

②

Fletcher Henderson, "Christopher Columbus"

Hale Woodruff, *Returning Home*, 1935

③

Mary Lou Williams, "Cancer" from *Zodiac Suite*

Laura Wheeler, *Waring After Sunday Service*, 1940

④

Thelonious Monk, "Boo Boo's Birthday"

Tom Malloy, *Red Wagon*, 1949

⑤

John Lewis, "The Jasmin Tree"

Romare Bearden, *Circe*, 1978

⑥

Carlton Jackson, "In Memorium of Max Roach"

Richard Mayhew, *Summation*, 2013

⑦

Ornette Coleman, "When Will the Blues Leave"

Bill Hutson, *EBCO NA*, 1990-91

⑧

Ayub Ogada/Regina Carter, "Kothbiro"

Barbara Bullock, *The Whirling Dance*, 1985  
and *Stories my Grandmother Told Me*, 2012

⑨

John Coltrane, "Naima"

Elizabeth Catlett, *Glory*, 1981

⑩

Darrell Grant, "Daybreak at Fort Rock"

Mickaline Thomas, *Landscape Majestic*, 2011  
Arvie Smith, *Trapeze Artist*, 2014

⑪

Terence Blanchard, "Wading Through"

Radcliffe Bailey, *Storm*, 2012

⑫

Marcus Shelby, "Walls: Man Who Feels Shape"

Donald Camp, *Man who feels shape*, 2006

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### Duke Ellington, “Drop Me Off in Harlem”

Richmond Barthé, *Come Unto Me*, 1930

I'm intrigued by the parallels between Richmond Barthé and pianist/composer/bandleader Duke Ellington (April 29, 1899 – May 24, 1974). Barthé began his professional career in New York at the height of the Harlem Renaissance. One of the seminal artists of the period, as a contemporary of literary figures like Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Barthé was a witness and participant in this critical moment in the establishment of African-American artistic identity. Ellington's band first took up residency at the Cotton Club in Harlem in December 1927 and continued until June 1930. They returned in September and October of 1930 and again in January of 1931. While this particular piece of Barthé's does not resonate jazz-oriented themes, I'm nonetheless intrigued by the idea that Barthé was exposed to Ellington's music, which provided a powerful soundtrack to the Harlem Renaissance era.

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### Fletcher Henderson, “Christopher Columbus”

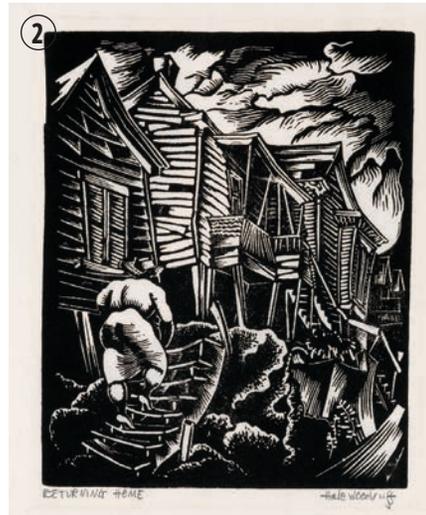
Hale Woodruff, *Returning Home*, 1935

This work reminds me of the proud African-American working class narratives in August Wilson plays, as well as the powerful physicality portrayed in WPA-era art. The directness and simplicity of the imagery masks the underlying complexity of African-American life during this time.

The song “Christopher Columbus” has an interesting history that also reflects the complexity of African-American identity. Recorded in 1936, it provided the last hit for the band of Fletcher Henderson (December 18, 1897 – December 29, 1952), the most influential African-American arranger and bandleader of the swing era. Henderson, whose music expressed a virility and energy that made him one of the most in-demand arrangers of the time, also wrote for Benny Goodman's band, among many others. His own recordings of his work reflected a hard-swinging, vernacular approach that contrasted with the often watered-down versions presented by the more commercial white bands.

“Christopher Columbus” was composed by celebrated swing-era saxophonist Leon Brown “Chu” Berry, (September 13, 1908, – October 30, 1941) who died tragically at age 33, with lyrics by poet and lyricist Andy Razaf (December 16, 1895 – February 3, 1973). A collaborator of James P. Johnson and Fats Waller, Razaf was a noted tin-pan alley musician who also penned lyrics to such classics as “Sweet Georgia Brown” and “Honeysuckle Rose.” Razaf's birth name was Andriamanantena Paul Razafinkarefo. He was the son of Henri Razafinkarefo, nephew of Queen Ranaivalona III of Imerina kingdom in Madagascar, and Jennie (Waller) Razafinkarefo, the daughter of John L. Waller, the first African American consul to Imerina. The French invasion of Madagascar in 1894 left his father dead, and forced his pregnant 15-year-old mother to escape to the United States, where Razaf was born in 1895.

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### Mary Lou Williams, “Cancer” from Zodiac Suite

Laura Wheeler, *Waring After Sunday Service*, 1940

Acclaimed Harlem Renaissance painter Laura Wheeler Waring was famous for her portraiture of notable African-Americans, including W.E.B. Dubois and James Weldon Johnson. She is also remembered as a champion for arts education, having founded and chaired the departments of both Art and Music at the historically black college then known as Cheyney Training School for Teachers (now Cheney University), in Philadelphia. Jazz pianist and composer Mary Lou Williams (May 8, 1910 – May 28, 1981) is one of the most important female voices in jazz history. Her hundreds of compositions and arrangements included collaborations with Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman. She was also a friend, mentor, and teacher to several of the emerging bebop-era musicians, including Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Bud Powell and Dizzy Gillespie. I chose to pair this Waring work with a movement from Williams's *Zodiac Suite*. Composed in 1944-45, *Zodiac Suite* is regarded as Williams' most important work. Each of the piece's twelve segments musically describes one sign of the zodiac. Its premiere at New York's Town Hall on December 30, 1945 featured Williams and her combo accompanied by a small orchestral ensemble. Williams recorded a trio version of the work shortly thereafter. The movement entitled “Cancer” was dedicated to alto saxophonist Lem Davis. While its somber, melancholic mood contrasts with the strikingly colorful image of Waring's work, to my ears, the original performance seamlessly merges classical timbres with swing-era soulfulness. It is this blending of classical and vernacular influences that I believe both the painting—of a dignified yet ordinary woman with a presumably rich spiritual life—and the musical sketch have in common.



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Thelonious Monk, “Boo Boo’s Birthday”

Tom Malloy, *Red Wagon*, 1949

I chose to pair this painting by Tom Malloy with a composition by composer/pianist Thelonious Monk (October 10, 1917 – February 17, 1982). I was struck by the description of Malloy as a self-taught artist who “used his work to tell the story of the African-American community.” Monk too was self-taught, yet his iconoclastic approach to the piano proved the ideal means to express his powerful musical voice. Malloy’s straightforward watercolor representing an everyday scene calls to mind the deceptive simplicity of many of Monk’s compositions. While innocent and playful on the surface, upon deeper examination, his music invariably reveals a strong structural, conceptual, and emotional core. Incidentally, Monk was also famously pictured sitting in child’s red wagon on the cover of his 1957 Riverside album *Monk’s Music*.



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John Lewis, “The Jasmin Tree”

Romare Bearden, *Circe*, 1978

I found choosing a jazz composer to pair with Romare Bearden a difficult assignment. This was due both to Bearden’s stature and influence as an artist and his wide-ranging connections with jazz music. Throughout his life Bearden’s work was influenced by jazz music. His visual language has also inspired numerous jazz artists. An author and a songwriter as well as a champion and mentor to young artists, Bearden was a renaissance man. In this way he is similar to pianist, composer, and educator John Lewis (May 3, 1920 – March 29, 2001). Founder of the Modern Jazz Quartet, head of faculty at the Lenox School of Jazz in the Berkshires, longtime Director of the Monterey Jazz Festival and founder of the Jazz and Classical Society, Lewis, like Bearden was a distinctive figure in African-American culture of the 20th century. A classicist who loved to experiment with formal ideas, Lewis was deeply engaged with the music of Bach. Similarly, Bearden’s studies at the Sorbonne, as well as his encounters with European artists had a profound impact on his work.

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Carlton Jackson, “In Memorium of Max Roach”

Richard Mayhew, *Summation*, 2013

The saturated colors in Mayhew’s work call to mind the expressive tonal palette that jazz drummers have historically drawn on. One of the most diverse and influential of those artists is drummer and composer Max Roach (January 10, 1924 – August 16, 2007). In addition to being one of the foundational voices of the jazz style called bebop, Roach pioneered the exploration of a broader percussive role for the drums in Jazz through his innovative percussion ensemble M’Boom, and his double quartet - which featured a jazz quartet performing alongside a string quartet. As a composer Roach collaborated with choreographer Alvin Ailey, playwright Sam Shepard, and writer Toni Morrison, as well as performing with Japanese taiko drummers and avant-garde instrumentalists. Much as Mayhew did through his early involvement with the Spiral Collective, Roach use his work as an artistic expression of the struggle for civil rights. His seminal work *We Insist: The Freedom Now Suite* is one of the high points in jazz’ role as social protest music. Interestingly, Mayhew and Roach share Afro/Native-American identity.



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Ornette Coleman, "When Will the Blues Leave"

Bill Hutson, *EBCO NA*, 1990-91

Descriptions of abstractionist Bill Hutson's work state that he "creates improvisations in sculpture, painting, drawing." In Jazz, the skill of improvisation is cultivated through both a solid understanding of form and structure, and the development of a robust vocabulary of idiomatic musical language. I was inspired to pair Hutson with one of the most celebrated and innovative jazz improvisers—saxophonist, composer, and bandleader Ornette Coleman (March 9, 1930– June 11, 2015). For Coleman and his ensemble, song melody and structure served primarily as a point of departure for what, for its time, was radical exploration. Like Hutson, Coleman was largely self-taught and developed his core sensibilities into a language of abstraction with improvisation as its centerpiece. Coleman also understood the blues as the heart of jazz musical vocabulary and used it as a canvas for experimentation.



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Ayub Ogada/Regina Carter, "Kothbiro"

Barbara Bullock, *The Whirling Dance*, 1985  
and *Stories my Grandmother Told Me*, 2012

The song "Kothbiro," which translates to "The Rain's Coming," is the only piece in the program not written by an African-American composer. Composed by Kenyan-born singer Ayub Ogada (born 1956), the piece was featured on the 2013 recording by jazz violinist/composer Regina Carter (born August 6, 1966) entitled *Reverse Thread*. In much the same way the artist Barbara Bullock was drawn to Africa as a means of understanding her identity, Carter uses this recording to trace her personal and musical ancestry back to Africa. For these two women the exploration and recontextualization of cultural source material has been an important means of enriching their own creative impulses. For African-American artists through history, walking in the footsteps of the ancestors has allowed us to discover something of the truth about ourselves.



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John Coltrane, "Naima"

Elizabeth Catlett, *Glory*, 1981

Elizabeth Catlett's sculptures express the majesty, beauty and dignity of the African-American woman. I find a musical expression of these characteristics in saxophonist and composer John Coltrane's (September 23, 1926 – July 17, 1967) famous composition "Naima." Composed in 1959 and dedicated to his first wife, Coltrane's work reflects a luminescent spirit, stateliness, as well as evoking a sense of ritual. Like Catlett's sculpture and her prints, Coltrane's work expresses both inner nobility and social conscience. Both of these artists have become synonymous with the African-American aspiration for freedom and transcendence.



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Darrell Grant, "Daybreak at Fort Rock"

Mickaline Thomas, *Landscape Majestic*, 2011  
Arvie Smith, *Trapeze Artist*, 2014

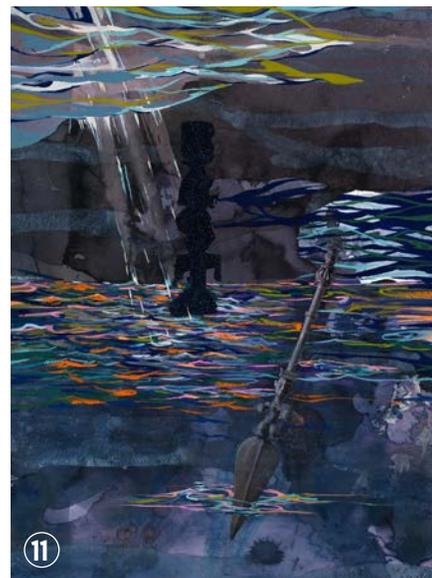
I chose to represent Mickaline Thomas and Arvie Smith's contributions to the exhibit with a movement from my suite *The Territory*. Like myself, both of these artists have been impacted by a time spent in Oregon. Both Thomas' introduction to the photography of Portland artist Carrie Mae Weems as a college student in Portland, and Smith's ongoing cultural commentary on issues of race and injustice in Oregon represent strong responses to their environments. Likewise, my suite *The Territory* represents an effort to address both the physical and the cultural history of my adopted state. While all three of us identify as African-American artists, it is each of our individual histories and identities that have allowed us to have in some way added to the fabric of Oregon's cultural life.

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Terence Blanchard, "Wading Through"

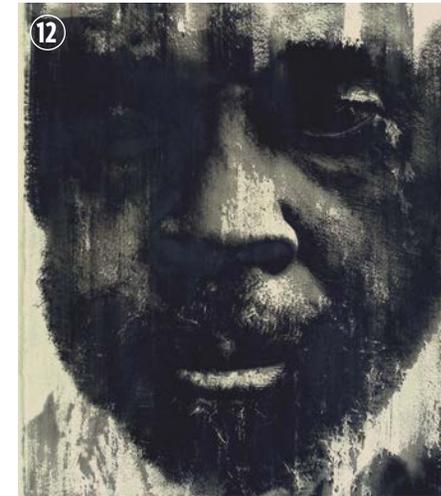
Radcliffe Bailey, *Storm*, 2012

The imagery in Bailey's piece *Storm* strikes me as both primal and poignant. The spear-tipped oar at the center of the work seems both a symbol of defiance and an ineffectual implement with which to battle the vastness of the surrounding water. This piece brought to mind both the devastation and the courage demonstrated by African-American communities in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Jazz trumpeter, composer, and bandleader Terence Blanchard (born March 13, 1962) is a contemporary artist whose work directly addresses the tragedy of Katrina. A native of New Orleans, Blanchard's composition "Wading Through" is featured of his Grammy-winning recording *A Tale of God's Will (A Requiem for Katrina)*. It melds neo-classicism with a strong, afro-centric rhythmic pulse. "Wading Through" is also representative of the cinematic, visual nature of much of Blanchard's music. Bailey is also inspired by musical themes and has stated that music is the "glue" to his work.



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Marcus Shelby, "Walls: Man Who Feels Shape"

Donald Camp, *Man who feels shape*, 2006

On first observation, even before learning about the materials it contained I was struck by the earthiness of Camp's stunning piece. The deep conviction that seemed to speak out from the photograph made me think that it would also resonate with one of my favorite collaborators, bassist, and composer Marcus Shelby (born February 2, 1966) In response to his introduction to the work he writes:

"I love the photo and hope the artist wouldn't mind if I was inspired to address the plight of overly incarcerated black men in America. I went online and looked up as much information as I could regarding the artist's work and background. The photo and prisons are the first thing I thought of regarding shapes, which is the entire prison experience inside a cold cell and whose fate is often "shaped" by the prison environment and how one copes. I wrote a piece for my orchestra [The Marcus Shelby Jazz Orchestra] called "Walls" about the prison industrial complex. The composition is built on 3 harmonic shapes (Am, Bb/A, and Ab/A)... I reduced it down for our quartet and called it "Walls: Man Who Feels Shape."



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**PDX jazz**

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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