

The James Baldwin Lecture

Princeton University, April 20, 2011

Paul Lansky

*A Musical Conversation on Race*

I'd like to thank the Center for African American Studies for inviting me to give the annual James Baldwin Lecture. It's a great honor, and a real challenge. When the invitation came last June from Professor Eddie Glaude I was quite surprised and thought at first that it was some sort of mistake. What could a composer who has spent the major part of his career trying to make dumb computers sing have to say about race? It had never occurred to me that I had anything new to add on the subject and it was even more surprising that an invitation could come from folks who had thought about it a lot. I looked at the list of previous speakers and felt extremely inadequate to the task. Watching the videos of the brilliant lectures by Tony Grafton and Shirley Tilghman only increased my apprehension. Eddie assured me that the committee was interested in a conversation about race as it relates to my music and that the lecture could basically be about my work. This was fine with me, but still I worried that I would not have much to say. He added that they were interested in having non-specialists speak in an attempt to broaden the base of the discussion. I asked for a few weeks to think about it, figuring that this would give me time to come up with a decent reason to decline. So I thought, and I thought, and the more I pondered the question the more interesting it became. I realized that concepts and resonance of race, culture and ethnicity do arise in my music, and, paradoxically, it has been the use of technology that has facilitated this in interesting ways. The more I thought about it the more I realized that I owe a large debt to the music of other cultures, and to the music of African-American culture in particular. In recent years though I have turned to writing for traditional instrumental performers and these matters have receded, they are still present as part of a musical language I forged over a period of forty years.

My talk was originally going to be in two parts. Until a few weeks ago I had planned to begin by discussing racial attitudes that I grew up with and then talk about racial and ethnic influences in my music, but I decided to abbreviate the first part of this talk.

Briefly, my folks were left wing, non-practicing Jews, whose parents had emigrated from eastern Europe in the first decade of the century. My parents were 'children of

the depression'. I was named after Paul Robeson and have distinct memories of being wheeled in a stroller at May Day parades. I was what has come to be known as a 'red diaper baby'.<sup>1</sup> Our attitudes towards race, culture and ethnicity were complicated, ambivalent, confusing, and strongly influenced by left-wing politics, with an added dash of new-American anxiety. A cultural manifestation of these attitudes led, oddly, to a fascination with American folk music (this will be relevant in my talk). When in 1992, at a Princeton conference on popular culture organized by Andrew Ross, Robert Christgau declared that the folk music revival was a plot between the communist party and the MLA, I knew what he was talking about. The role of folk music in left-wing politics is an old story, and it also played a significant part in the labor movement. These attitudes towards race and ethnicity influenced our views on their meaning in cultural and artistic contexts, leading to unease about viewing art through the lens of race. In the worker's paradise if race didn't matter, which was more or less dogma, then neither should cultural difference. Racial difference was considered an unfortunate fact of nature and cultural manifestations of racial difference were therefore, suspect and implicit annoyances. (Perhaps I exaggerate a bit but you get the idea.) I haven't thought long or hard enough to be able to tease out the extent to which these mindsets reflected the complexities of assimilation or disorientation of 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Jews in a new and confusing society. I read the excellent West/Lerner dialogue *Jews and Blacks*<sup>2</sup> and several other books, including Jane Lazarre's sensitive *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons*<sup>3</sup>, but decided that at the end of the day, as interesting as my cultural introspection might seem to me, it was basically too personal, unformed, and would be reflected better in a discussion of my music. Perhaps this just reflects my genetic squeamishness in talking about race, but so be it. What I want to do today, instead, is celebrate racial and ethnic differences as they enrich and enliven our cultural landscape. Basically, what I will do is provide an annotated demonstration of the ways in which I've participated in this exchange.

Let me set the stage by reporting on an experience, lasting perhaps no more than ten seconds that may be partly responsible for today's invitation. Some time in late 1984, probably December, the late Frank Lewin, a good friend and fellow composer,

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1By total coincidence I grew up in the Crotona Park area of the South Bronx, where the blend of Puerto Rican and African-American cultures was to lead to the development of hip hop some years later, well after we left.

2Michael Lerner and Cornel West, *Jews and Blacks, a Dialogue on Race, Religion and Culture in America*, 1996

3Jane Lazarre, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness: Memoir of a White Mother of Black Sons*, 1997

invited me to talk to a class he was teaching at Columbia. Frank lived in Princeton so we drove in together. As we emerged from the Lincoln Tunnel I noticed a group of a half dozen or so black teenagers standing in a circle around a policeman. They were rhythmically bobbing up and down and the cop had a bemused but friendly look on his face. I rolled down the window and was thrilled to hear an exhilarating chorus of hip-hop counterpoint. I haven't any idea what it was about, but the texture and rhythms were wonderful. Unfortunately the light changed and we moved on but not before I made a note-to-self "what a great idea for a piece." (Who knows, if we had taken the GW Bridge I might not be here today.) More on this in a bit.

I believe that music is a form of social intercourse and the metaphor of a musical conversation leads to an interesting set of questions. At its heart is the notion of reference: the way one piece of music may refer to another piece, group of pieces, style or genre. This entails a broad spectrum of possibility, from explicit quotation at one end to subtle influence at the other. And there is a second spectrum that might be said to measure the extent to which a work succeeds or fails to absorb and internalize its references. Does the reference become an integrated part of the fabric? Or does it remain an appendage? T.S. Eliot's famous statement in his article on Philip Massinger in *The Sacred Wood* is appropriate here:

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One of the surest of tests [of success] is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest.<sup>4</sup>

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This is really insider thinking by an artist working at a desk, struggling to invent. While we labor most of us have demons chattering away in our head, and legends peering over our shoulder. As I survey my work I notice that my references to other music occupy many points on the scales of these spectra from implicit to explicit, and from successful to not-so-hot.

There are obvious ways in which music evokes race and culture. We have no trouble thinking of some music as Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Balinese, African,

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<sup>4</sup>T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays*, p. 72

Norwegian, or noticing the cultural and ethnic origins of Bossa Nova, Klezmer, Hip-Hop, Blues, Jazz and so on. (Perhaps this is circular reasoning since we often see these as a way in which cultural and racial identity are manifested.) There are, furthermore, frequent referential crosscurrents in all kinds of music. Ragtime obviously owes a debt to 19<sup>th</sup> century European harmony, and these days hip-hop has global reach as other cultures put their stamp on it. (There are probably few languages and cultures today in which hip-hop artists haven't made their mark.) In some musical cultures such as Indonesian Gamelan there are experimental, and even avant-garde traditions. I bet that the evolution of free jazz from bebop was influenced by experimental American avant-garde traditions. And rap is strongly characterized by borrowing and reference. In American and European "concert music", for want of a better term, while cross cultural references go back hundreds of years, the generation of musicians and composers who came of age in the past half-century, when recording became a dominant form of musical commerce, have felt few constraints to poaching among many different musical cultures. It's commonplace to see a critic rattle off a range of cross-cultural influences in someone's new piece and mean it as a compliment. In terms of the two spectra I've described reference occupies all positions, from implicit to explicit, from successful to fraudulent. Risking the possibility of being called myopic, I'd even assert that it is characteristic of American/European classical music that it feels free to trespass and graze in the meadows of others, near and far, and this has been going on consistently since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, at least. (As in Bach's so called French and Italian music or Mozart's Turkish music.) And, I've often mused that rap's exorbitant and free wheeling use of any available musical sources is a kind of payback for years of this cultural imperialism. When Puff Daddy's tribute to the Notorious B.I.G. quotes the Barber *Adagio for Strings* as the lead in to his rap, which also quotes *Every Breath You Take*, it's hard to object with any kind of conviction.

This is one of two threads in my own work that I want to talk about: my use of other kinds of music such as blues, jazz and folk music. The second, which I'll deal with more extensively, is the use of spoken word. Both threads owe large debts to traditions that are strongly associated with race and culture. The former is familiar, the latter, a bit less so.

An area of pioneering musical work at Princeton since the 1960's has been the development and application of music technology, particularly involving the use of computers. In 1972 I began work on a large computer synthesized piece based on the famous harmonic sequence in Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, that is widely considered the opening salvo in musical modernism. With chutzpah typical of a 28-

year old, I named it after an aria in the opera, *Mild und Leise*. Twenty-eight years later a chord sequence from the piece would be used by the English rock band Radiohead in their 2000 song *Idioteque*, and critics such as Alex Ross were delighted to make a chain of reference from Wagner to Lansky to Radiohead<sup>5</sup>. In the context of this talk I notice that from the very beginning I was using this technology to create music that referred to other music. (Unfortunately I'll probably go to my grave with the Radiohead quote listed as one of my significant accomplishments.) While a large part of early computer music was involved in searching for 'new sounds' I was interested in turning the telescope earthward and finding music closer to home. In the early 80's I wrote a set of computer folk song settings and in 1984 I thought it would be interesting to harness the power of our multi-million dollar mainframe to zoom in on the music made by a \$5 harmonica. (Perhaps there was a bit of wishful thinking involved. My wife sensed this and bought me a book entitled something like *Harmonica for the Musically Hopeless*, but I didn't get very far.)

### [Segment of Guy's Harp](#)<sup>6</sup>

Here I'm partly occupying the role of a producer, creating an abstract accompaniment for a performance by an actual blues harmonica player (Guy DeRosa). This is toward the right end of the spectrum of reference, shall we say. If I was too musically hopeless to play the harmonica at least I could play someone playing the harmonica<sup>7</sup>. But, more seriously, I wanted to draw images of this familiar music on a broader canvas and have a look at it from a different perspective. At the time I was listening to Sonny Boy Williamson and others and specifically thought of the piece as a tribute to these extraordinary musicians who could make such powerful, whining, crying, intense music with a \$5 toy instrument they could carry in their shirt pocket.

A few years later I worked to create my own blues guitar. The ethnic references here are obvious. You'll recognize two thirds of a 12-bar blues progression, in slow motion.

### [Segment of Blue Wine](#)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup><http://www.therestisnoise.com/2008/05/chapter-5-orbiting-part-2.html> 5/26/11

<sup>6</sup> 'Guy's Harp' on *Smalltalk*, New Albion Records 030.

<sup>7</sup> I'm reminded of the *Seinfeld* episode where George exclaims "I always wanted to pretend to be an architect!"

<sup>8</sup> 'Blue Wine', on *Folk Images*, Bridge Records 9060, 1995

On my spectrum of reference I'm moving further away from quotation and more towards integration.

This was backbreaking work on the computer, nursing each note by hand, wondering if it might sound better being played on a \$50 guitar, but I'd like to think is that I've created an abstract image of something familiar and that we gain a richer perspective through this artifice. -Nevertheless, this is at a different point on the spectrum, further to the left, perhaps. A few years later I poached on blues and funk in a piece for solo marimba, *Hop(2)*, as I started the gradual shift to writing music for live performers rather than machines.

### [Opening of Hop\(2\)](#)<sup>9</sup>

In the mid 90's I decided to exercise an old fascination with the melodic curlicues of North African Arab and Andalusian music. Here my keyboard improvisations are a direct response to the quoted music.

### [Segment of Andalusia](#)<sup>10</sup>

But, as I've noted, it is the norm for composers of western classical music to use all kinds of folk music both explicitly and implicitly. It's an old and venerable tradition. One would have to search hard to find composers who haven't looked to folk and ethnic traditions in one way or another.

The second thread I want to talk about today entails the use of spoken language, or 'spoken word' as it's sometimes called. Speech in western musical contexts has existed, perhaps half-heartedly, for centuries; the most notable early examples that I'm aware of are 18-century melodrama as in Mozart's unfinished opera *Zaide* where music and speech alternate in his '*melologos*'. It's also present to a certain extent in the practice of recitative. (The problem in concert halls in the pre-industrial age is that singing is simply much louder than speech.) The idea came alive in the twentieth century, however, in the work of Schoenberg, Janáček, Reich and others. With the advent of amplification and the breakdown of formal proscenia, particularly in experimental, jazz and popular music, speech started to blend seamlessly with song, as in the performance art of Laurie Anderson. I've been

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<sup>9</sup>Three Moves for Marimba', on Nancy Zeltsman, *See You Thursday*, Equilibrium EQ29

<sup>10</sup> 'Andalusia', *Conversation Pieces*, Bridge Records, 9083, 1998

particularly interested in the cross currents of music, spoken-word and poetry in the work of poets and performers such as Sekou Sundiata, a personal favorite. Talking blues, perhaps the closest thing to rap, made a cameo appearance in folk and country music but never really took off. And, of course, rap may be the most significant talking music, ever. Apparently a substantial history can be found in African music, tone languages, talking drums and what is thought to be an intimate relation between African speech and music, in which lines of demarcation are not as rigidly defined as they are in western music. While in English we commonly think of speech and song as apples and oranges, this is not universally so, particularly in cultures with tone languages, of which there are many in Africa. I refer you to my colleague Kofi Agawu's book *Representing African Music*. He wonders if African music might not be "the primary modeling system" of African language.<sup>11</sup> I don't know enough about the subject to be able to make a link between African and African-American speech music, rap, but it is an interesting question. Nevertheless the relation between language and song is surely vast, ancient, and fascinating.

I first became interested in speech and music in the mid 1970's. It was not so much speech itself that attracted me as it was a way to make the sounds I was coaxing from the computer less sterile. In 1978 I created a set of six pieces that processed a reading of a poem by Thomas Campion by my wife Hannah MacKay, a trained actress. The Campion poem I set, *Rose Cheek'd Lawra*, is from his *Observations in the Art of English Poesie* (1602) and was meant to demonstrate that it was possible to write poetry in English using quantitative measure, as in Latin poetry. The resulting poem takes a roller coaster ride around our vowel box. It is almost as if he is playing with our vocal formants like they were keys on an instrument. I was also fascinated by the fact that Campion was a composer and had a musician's ear for vocal timbre. The idea, furthermore, was not so much to set the text, as it was to set a skillful reading of the text and find ways to uncover music within speech. Each movement explores a different aspect of human speech. The first movement attempts to isolate the pitch contours by harmonizing the speech. Here are my talking Andrew sisters.

[Campion fantasies 1 opening](#)<sup>12</sup>

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11 Kofi Agawu, *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions*, 2003, p. 107

12 'Six Fantasies on a Poem by Thomas Campion', *Fantasies and Tableaux*, CRI 683, 1994

(These pieces used a technique known as Linear Predictive Coding developed at Bell Labs and now in common use in cell phones. Auto-tune, a device currently widely used to smooth out singing and sometimes create a robot-like effect, uses a related technology)

Here is the opening phrase of the last movement. The background sounds are made from the vowels of the text

### [Campion 6 opening](#)

I wrote another extended piece based on a reading from *Jane Eyre* that worked well, but I felt I was spinning my wheels. My interest was transformed and galvanized by my eavesdropping experience outside the Lincoln Tunnel in 1984. It was also about this time that I became aware of rap. I'd never heard speech-music like this. I'd been aware of hip-hop for several years and was interested in the ways in which its rhythmic landscape seemed to parallel that of early synthesizer pop, but this was totally new:

While every culture has its own idiosyncratic relation to speech and language, that of African-Americans is central, unique and vibrant. From colloquial to formal, from orators to poets, from politicians to ministers, from sung to spoken, from churches to street corners, intense language is a focal point of the African-American experience and rap is obviously a significant development within this lively language-oriented culture.

Now we return to my experience outside of the Lincoln Tunnel in 1984. A few months later, after a few false starts I came up with this

### [Idle Chatter opening](#)<sup>13</sup>

The piece is called *Idle Chatter*. This is not meant as a criticism of rap, which is anything but idle chatter. It refers, rather, to the inability of the piece to form a coherent English utterance, even though it appears to try. There are a number of things to notice. First, it is impossible to understand the words. This is intentional, and they're not really words, only segments of words. In rap, on the other hand the text has heavy significance. Rappers have something to say and are there to say it, it's part of their job description. Rap is intimately connected to the expression of the

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<sup>13</sup>Paul Lansky, 'Idle Chatter', *More Than Idle Chatter*, Bridge Records 9050, 1994/

black experience in America, and today, even in its many international manifestations rappers use the medium to express strong feelings about the world around them. (I doubt you'll ever hear a rap about kissing on the first date.) Rap is a powerful soapbox, it gives people a voice. Expressing strong views about the world, however, was not something that interested me, it was not part of *my* job description. It was rather the expression of intense speech in a musical context, regardless of content that I found sonically fascinating. Just as in my *Campion* settings I was more interested in the sound of words than in their meaning, so here I wanted my music to be about the physical act of speech rather than the expression of thought. The second thing to notice is the relentless and seemingly arbitrary rhythm. I wanted to capture the rhythmic texture of rap but at the same time I wanted to make it confusing. I noticed that rappers typically throw caution to the wind in fitting their rhymes, and their prosody and rhyme are sometimes delightful roller coaster rides with a lot of dips, turns and swells. Rap's chaotic tumult of iambs and anapests in tetrameter is here replaced by a seemingly regular beat that is based on a harebrained system rigged by overlapping rhythmic templates and random numbers. One has the illusion that there is a regular meter but it's impossible to figure it out. Third, and this only occurred to me recently, it's a woman's voice speaking, while rap seems to be a male dominated sphere. Finally, the word segments are tuned to approximate pitches to give the impression of sing-song speech, or something between speech and song, as in most rap.

I've often wondered whether my relation to words and music was skewed by growing up listening to vocal music in languages I didn't understand. Furthermore, I've never really been comfortable with text setting of the sort where a composer finds a poem and sets it to music. (My *Campion* settings remain just one of very few instances where I've done this.) In western song there is a broad spectrum of possible relations between words and music. In some cases the music enhances the text and in some cases they have a blissful marriage where each nurtures the other. However, a classic problem that composers have in writing vocal music arises when the text, great poetry perhaps, brings along its own musical qualities and the newly composed music has got a lot of work to do to stay relevant.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand it's easy to find instances in which the words are lame without the music. It's an interesting exercise to separate words and music in well-known songs. Either both words and music will suffer, indicating a strong bond, or if neither one nor the other

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<sup>14</sup>T.S. Eliot's advice to Michael Tippett to write his own libretto for *A Child of Our Time* because his words, Eliot's, would already have their own music and 'stick out a mile' are relevant here. K. Gloag, *Tippett: A Child of Our Time*, p.9.

suffers it is a measure of different kinds of intrinsic qualities. While *Embraceable You* is a great song under any circumstances, the marriage between words and music is so remarkable that it's hard to imagine separating the two (although the words alone are far less effective than the music alone.) Chuck Berry's music electrifies his words while Bob Dylan's words often do fine without their music, which usually is not exceptional except in combination with the text. (Maybe that's just my opinion.) Paul Simon's music seems to me to be a much more intimate blend of text and song. Rap is an interesting case in these terms. The music is often minimal and frequently very simple. Rappers think of the compositional process in two stages: create or borrow some music, loop it over a drum track creating so-called beats, and then rap on top of it. On the page rap lyrics don't lose much by being stripped of their music although perhaps they lose something by being stripped of their performer.<sup>15</sup> I think that the structural simplicity of beats is designed to let the language emerge forcefully and unaffected by musical inflection.

So here we have a contradictory situation: a composer uncomfortable in dealing with the projection of text in music but fascinated by a music that is critically about the projection of text. Shorn of meaning, however, rap is still a fascinating texture. I was quite taken by the sound of a music in which speech emerged almost as a percussion solo atop a simple musical accompaniment (and sometimes literally so in the case of beat boxing, where rappers push plosives into microphones at close range). What I wanted to do, furthermore, was create a context in which the listener can't help but attempt to understand the words and perhaps even succeed in some strange way, while at the same time make a coherent and compelling rhythmic and musical package.

Wherever I play the piece people tell me what words they hear. I've played it in places as far flung as Holland, Denmark, Russia and China, and people manage to hear words in their native language. What I found so encouraging was that rather than running for the exit to avoid telling me how much they hated my music, listeners would often make a point of coming up to recount what they heard. I enjoyed doing this piece so much and its reception was so invigorating that it led me to a series of pieces. The second was called *just\_more\_idle\_chatter*, and, not willing to leave well enough alone I wrote *notjustmoreidlechatter*.

[notjustmoreidlechatter opening](#)<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>The recent publication and critical reception of the *Anthology of Rap*, Adam Bradley, ed., and the intelligent debate over the extent to which rap may be considered poetry is worth noticing.

<sup>16</sup>'notjustmoreidlechatter', on *More Than Idle Chatter*

This piece luxuriates in rich harmonies and a more obvious harmonic rhythm. Also notice the girl-group avatars holding microphones and swaying in the background like digital Supremes, blending Motown and the south Bronx. After a breathing space of nine years I wrote *Idle Chatter Junior*. Here the voices speak more than sing. I also allowed myself further poaching to create a barrel-house piano heard at the end of this excerpt.

[Idle Chatter Junior excerpt](#)<sup>17</sup>

Finally, five years later, *Patterns* at quarter equals 93 is much closer to a typical rap tempo, and this time letters and numbers are obviously the words being spoken.

[Patterns' Patterns opening](#)<sup>18</sup>

My Idle Chatter adventure led to twenty years of experimentation with spoken language as a musical instrument and I trace a large part of it to those teenagers. (I'm so glad we didn't take the GW Bridge)

After several iterations of *Idle Chatter* I decided to look more at intonations, inflections and rhythm in spoken language, to try to view these aspects from a musical perspective. *Smalltalk*, from 1987, uses a casual conversation I had with my wife Hannah to trigger notes and rhythms. Again the speech is hard to hear but in this case there are actual words triggering the notes. The music quantizes the rhythms, amplitudes and pitch contours of everyday speech. Once more, it's the everyday physical activity of average conversation that is behind the music.

[Smalltalk opening](#)<sup>19</sup>

After finishing this it occurred to me that these aspects of speech, intonation, rhythm, contour, are themselves cultural artifacts and that different races and cultures would obviously have different implicit music in their spoken language. Easier said than done. Thinking, correctly, that a tone language like Chinese would be a natural choice I got two Chinese graduate students to record a conversation much as Hannah and I did.

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17'Idle Chatter Junior', on *Ride*, Bridge Records 9103, 2001

18'Pattern's Patterns', on *Alphabet Book*, Bridge Records 9126, 2002

19'Smalltalk' on *Smalltalk*, New Albion records

### [Late August opening](#)<sup>20</sup>

I think this piece is an interesting failure. It panders to a cliché of Chinese music and doesn't manage to internalize it. It's on the bad poets side of T.S. Eliot's spectrum. What I should have done is let the speech tell me about the kind of music *it* wants to make. Here I was imposing a view of the musical qualities of English spoken language onto Chinese, thinking that meaningful results would emerge. Perhaps I just didn't work hard enough at it. (A neat project would be to make a suite of pieces about the musical qualities of different spoken languages. In my next life...)

In an attempt to tease out these concepts further I mapped a conversation directly to a piano and eliminated the voices entirely: a talking piano – my version of talking drums perhaps. This again is a conversation between Hannah and me. My rough, jerky, New York City manner of speaking is at first set in Ab mixolydian and Hannah's well-modulated sentences in F minor. Then I barge back in in Ab. I was tickled when it came out sounding a bit like Keith Jarrett.

### [Now That You Mention It, opening](#)<sup>21</sup>

In a way these pieces are all social experiments: they try to find the music in daily aspects of life, such as conversational speech. Writing for the computer allowed me to back away from the concert proscenium, and engage aspects of daily life that are not considered explicitly 'musical'. Hip-hop also does this in some ways. It certainly creates new proscenia.

From a traditional perspective hip hop is really unusual music. A thought experiment I like to do is to time shift back to 1965 and try to imagine a music like this arising. From that vantage point it's almost inconceivable. I really don't know enough about rap to have a more nuanced understanding of its internal musical poetry, but I'm fascinated by the vibrancy of a form that thrives despite its rather formal structural constraints. It can be at once stubbornly rigid and surprisingly lyrical. The thing I constantly notice, however, is how difficult it is to apply traditional metrics of lyricism and nuance.

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<sup>20</sup>'Late August' on *Smalltalk*, New Albion Records

<sup>21</sup>'Now That You Mention It' on *Ride*, Bridge Records

I didn't think much about the musical background in rap, beats, until I saw the wonderful Jim Jarmusch film *Ghost Dog* in which a lot of the score, by a rapper named RZA, largely consists of beats without any accompanying rap. Beats are not intended as standalone music. Shorn of their rap they have a kind of poignant emptiness, as if they're standing alone on a deserted street corner waiting for a bus. In *Ghost Dog* this is an appropriate metaphor for the dismal unpopulated urban landscape that fills much of the film.

Beats are usually looped segments of some sampled music mixed over a drum track. The samples themselves are sometimes significant references, as well as frequent fodder for copyright disputes. Hip-hop artists discovered that it's possible to use almost anything as a source and the fact that rappers talk rather than sing makes it even easier. I'd done enough sampling and was more interested in their relentless rhythmic quality, generally regarded as an unfortunate by-product of machine-made music. So not willing to leave well enough alone I decided to create my own beat, *sans* rap.

#### [Music Box, opening](#)<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the final stop in my journey that began in 1984 at the mouth of the Lincoln Tunnel came in 2006 when Mendi and Keith Obadike invited me to contribute to their CD anthology *Crosstalk*. Their idea was to solicit a group of works that would celebrate the convergence of hip-hop and the American experimental tradition of spoken word music. Quoting their liner notes:

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How did we arrive at this moment where a form of speech music (hip-hop) would dominate our popular radio, films and corporate advertising campaigns while recording studios would produce literature as influential as that produced by our major publishing houses? Some say this is what happens when griots go pop, others blame it on the avant-garde.<sup>23</sup>

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I decided to write a piece that would join the several threads of my rap inspired pieces. I made a few choices: first I would use an actual text in such a way that it would become clearer over time; second, I would choose a text which had a strong

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<sup>22</sup> 'Music Box' on *Music Box*, Bridge Records 9210, 2006

<sup>23</sup>*Crosstalk* Bridge Records 9260, 2009

rhythmic texture, in this case and in the spirit of rap, iambic tetrameter; third, typically, I would chose a text with little social significance (and, of course from the American rural folk tradition); third, I wouldn't tune the voices as I had in *Idle Chatter* but rather let them just speak, and finally I would accompany the text with a beat-like rhythmic texture, kick-drum and all.

So, I dug back into my folk-music toolkit and came up with *Paper of Pins*, about a young man courting a girl with marriage offers of various sorts. I'll end my talk with the last four minutes of the piece.

[Chatter of Pins, end](#)

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