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Timbral Virtuosity: Pharoah Sanders, Sonic Heterogeneity, and the Jazz Avant-garde in the 1960s and 70s

Gabriel Solis

Saxophonist, composer, and bandleader Pharoah Sanders is best known for recording a handful of meditative, cosmologically-inclined free jazz classics, including "The Creator Has a Master Plan," released as the 1960s rolled over into the 1970s. These recordings were broadly appealing, finding an audience in the jazz cognoscenti, among the era's youth counter culture, and among the mainstream African American community, judging by later R&B covers and hip hop samples of his work from the time. In this article I look at Sanders's work from this period, roughly 1969–1974, arguing for the importance of a combination of what I call "timbral virtuosity" and funky, accessible grooves in its artistry and success. As I see it, the importance of timbre to these recordings is two-fold: on the one hand, it can be heard specifically in Sanders's approach to the tenor and soprano saxophones; and on the other, it can be heard in the make-up of his bands and the arrangements of the tunes on his recordings from the time. Timbre in Sanders's hands, more than melodic and harmonic dissonance, and more than rhythmic complexity, becomes a tool for getting "outside," and for developing musical interest over the course of pieces lasting fifteen minutes or more. At the same time, a continued prioritization of groove-based playing in particular on these recordings makes them easier to grasp for listeners who may not have been devoted to experimental music than, say, the "energy music" recordings of the 1960s.

I am hardly the first person to notice the importance of timbre (often glossed as "sound") in Sanders's work, and Sanders was by no means the only musician experimenting at the time with timbre as a parameter for musical creation.[1] For instance, in

[1]The term "sound" is somewhat nebulous, but it does a considerable amount of work in informal jazz discourse and in more formal jazz writing by scholars, critics, and musicians. For instance, in an extended analysis of the ways drummers think about their role in a modern jazz combo from Ingrid Monson's *Saying Something*, both Michael Carvin and Billy Higgins use "sound" interchangeably with "color" to describe the particular timbres of their cymbal work (62–63). Even more broadly, Olly Wilson's classic work on "The Heterogeneous Sound Ideal" identifies a number of parameters of heterogeneity in African American music, but focuses particularly on timbre. That said, even though "sound" routinely encompasses timbre, it is often more capacious. Where it is used interchangeably with "voice," it can mean the distinctive, recognizable gestalt of a musician's playing. An approach to timbre is clearly central to what makes such a sound or voice recognizable, but so is a rhythmic feel, favorite licks, harmonic approach, and so forth. (This, for instance, is what is meant, I think, by the title of the 1964 album *Coltrane's Sound*). I do not use "sound" as an analytical term in this article. See Ingrid Monson, *Saying*

the liner notes to the album *Om*, Nat Hentoff explained the addition of Sanders to Coltrane's band this way: "As Coltrane plunged more and more deeply into the foundations of being, he also kept exploring new and different textures, shapes of sound and time … Sanders added a particularity of both sound … and precedent-breaking ideas, thereby stimulating Coltrane even more to ways of hearing and expression that continued to develop and surprise."[2] Similarly, in a review of the album *Shukuru*,[3] Amiri Baraka said, "The sound of Sanders's horn is distinctive and completely his own … ," and again, "The incredible palette of colors in the Sanders sound, his exquisite omni-timbred tone are his *exclusively*."[4] This rhetorical doubling, and emphasis on a discourse of identity reflects not only the strength of Baraka's response to timbral virtuosity in Sanders's work, but also the significance of having a unique "voice" as an aesthetic value in jazz—a topic treated extensively by Paul Berliner and Ingrid Monson, among others.[5]

I propose here that in spite of a general recognition of the importance of timbral playing as an aspect of avant-garde jazz practice, of which Sanders was at the forefront, it remains undertheorized. I begin the process of offering an analytical perspective on timbral virtuosity in this music here, though it is a project that well exceeds the scope of a single article, and I offer some reflections on why I believe more attention to this aspect of Sanders's and other jazz musicians' work is warranted. After looking at a small sample of Sanders's recordings as a leader from the late 1960s and early 1970s, I argue that such an analytical project can offer compelling evidence for an analysis of the historical relationship between the jazz avant-garde, Fusion jazz, and popular music more generally in America. Finally, I suggest this aspect of Sanders's work is notable in giving flesh to our understanding of the relationships at the time between avant-garde jazz and the Soul/Funk/R&B continuum, which Amiri Baraka first described in his seminal article on the "changing same" in Black music.[6]

Scholarly Approaches to the Avant-garde and Timbre

As I noted in a review essay in the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* a number of years ago, the 1960s jazz avant-garde has received what I think can reasonably be described as more than its fair share of scholarly attention—at least when compared with its popularity and visibility with non-scholarly audiences.[7] Most of this

Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 62–63; Olly Wilson, "Black Music as an Art Form," *Black Music Research Journal* 3 (1983).

[2]John Coltrane, *OM,* Impluse! A-9140, 1968, LP. Liner notes by Nat Hentoff.

[3]Pharoah Sanders, *Shukuru*, Theresa TR 121, 1985, LP.

[4]Amiri Baraka, *Digging: the Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009 [1991], 341). Emphasis in original.

[5]See Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something.*

[6]Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones], "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)," in *Black Music* (New York: Akashic Books, 2010 [1968]), 205–241.

[7]Gabriel Solis, "Jazz Historiography and the Sixties Avant-garde: A Review Essay," *Royal Musical Association Journal* 131, no.2 (2006): 332.

scholarship has been historical and ethnographic, establishing either the role of the avant-garde in relation to jazz and global American music at large or discussing avant-gardists' engagement with extramusical aesthetic and political movements—black arts, for instance, and the movement for black liberation in the 1960s and 70s; often both. These studies have added considerably to our understanding of the emergence of the avant-garde out of the 1950s–60s mainstream; and in studies such as Ben Looker's book on the BAG, Steven Isoardi and Horace Tapscott's on the UGMAA, and George Lewis's on the AACM, these scholars have provided a clear vision of the music's ongoing vitality after the heady years of the late 1960s to early 1970s and up to the present.[8] There is room for further historical study, however, and one important goal is accounting for the avant-garde's influence feeding into other, more popular jazz styles. As I will argue later in this article, the avant-gardists' work with "sound as form" and timbral virtuosity—seen compellingly in, though not limited to, Sanders's work—is one such influence, providing musical ideas that were highly influential; more influential, in fact, for many musicians than were experiments with dissonance, rhythmic complexity, or collective improvisation. A timbral orientation to virtuosity was not new to jazz in the 1960s. Brass players of the swing era like Bubber Miley and Joe "Tricky Sam" Nanton had made a specialization of work with various mutes to produce extensive timbral manipulation in solo work. Singers, most spectacularly including Billie Holiday, had long been a model for using timbral control as the key to emotional expressivity. Moreover, as I will discuss at more length below, tenor sax players who straddled the line between jazz and R&B such as Illinois Jacquet and Junior Walker, or who were decidedly within R&B such as Red Prysock or Sil Austin, had a set a clear precedent for exploiting the instrument's timbral capacities. But Sanders, along with such saxophonists as Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp, and post-1963 John Coltrane, was at the forefront of a shift in balance in which timbre came to play a more dominant role in defining the overall drama of a performance or recording's form.

Theoretical and analytical studies of avant-garde jazz have been considerably less common than historical and ethnographic ones. Some of the scholarship noted above has incorporated close musical analysis into its arguments—Ingrid Monson's *Freedom Sounds* stands as a notable example.[9] But avant-garde musical processes have proven remarkably problematic for theoretically-inclined scholarship. The music's *sui generis* qualities have meant that theoretical tools derived from common practice jazz or post-tonal concert music have fallen somewhat short of producing really compelling readings. Lynette Westendorf's approach, which relies less heavily

[8]See Steven Isoardi, *The Dark Tree: Jazz and the Community Arts in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); George Lewis, 2008. *A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Benjamin Looker, *"Point from which Creation Begins": The Black Artists' Group of St. Louis* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 2004); Horace Tapscott, *Songs of the Unsung: The Musical and Social Journey of Horace Tapscott*, ed. Steven Isoardi (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001).

[9]Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

on analytical models that privilege pitch, offers a helpful point of departure. In Cecil Taylor's "Second Layer—Indent," as she shows, a number of the sections (she calls them "topics") are characterized not so much by their pitch content as by texture and timbre.[10] In these sections she turns to graphic notation, which captures, if in a metaphorical way, something compelling about the piece.[11] Paul Steinbeck's "social practice" modeling of the Art Ensemble of Chicago's work has also been important, inasmuch as it accounts not only for musical sound, but the principles that structure the group's approach to co-creating form in real time. As in Westendorf's analysis, Steinbeck identifies texture and timbre as a formally relevant domain.[12]

I would note that jazz is not the only genre in which timbre has been very difficult to address systematically or analytically. In fact, there is a relative dearth of theoretical writing on timbre in all music, in part because it *is* so difficult. First, timbre is not simply a matter of overtone composition, but rather a complex domain that has been called "the psychoacoustician's multidimensional waste-basket category for everything that cannot be labeled pitch or loudness."[13] The specific features that produce our experience of timbre include at a minimum the overtone spectrum (so called "tone color"), sound envelope, articulation, and pitch-to-non-pitched-sound ratio. Second, there is essentially no received system of timbral gradation within most musical traditions or in Western music theory, as there is for pitch and rhythm—common practice engagement with timbre is generally metaphorical and idiosyncratic. This does not preclude analytical study, of course, but does impose certain limitations. Writing about timbre in Indie Rock, David Blake argues that an approach based on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and Edward Casey's theories of embodiment in perception can allow us to use subjective, adjectival descriptions of timbral experience analytically.[14]

All of the above studies understand the interpretive analysis of musical works as a relationship between an ideal listener (the author as avatar) and an imagined authorial identity. There is much to be gained from this, but I want to take a somewhat different approach, one informed by ethnography and the experience of playing saxophone. The fantasy this analytical model relies on relates to embodiment in a way that is unlike Blake's, but bears some relation to Timothy Rice's descriptions of learning to perceive Balkan music by learning to play it.[15] In this article I look at the production of timbre on the saxophone through the lens of the use of the mouth, tongue, throat, and facial muscles, relying on my own experience as a saxophonist to guide my

[10]Lynette Westendorff, "Cecil Taylor: Indent—Second Layer," *Perspectives of New Music* 33, no.1–2m (1995): 300–307.
[11]Ibid., 312–315.
[12]Paul Steinbeck, "'Area by Area the Machine Unfolds': The Improvisational Performance Practice of the Art Ensemble of Chicago," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, no.3 (2008): 400–411.
[13]Stephen McAdams and Albert Bregman. "Hearing Musical Streams," *Computer Music Journal* 3, no.4 (1979): 34.
[14]David K. Blake, "Timbre as Differentiation in Indie Music," *Music Theory Online* 18, no.22 (2012): 4.4–4.5.
[15]Timothy Rice, "Toward a Mediation of Field Methods and Field Experience in Ethnomusicology," in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory Barz and Timothy Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 50.

empathetic ear.[16] This is hardly foolproof, but I believe it offers some real methodological value. There is good precedent for looking at instrumental technique as a tool for musical analysis, such as in Benjamin Givan's work on Django Reinhardt[17] and David Feurzeig's article on Thelonious Monk in a previous issue of this journal.[18] It is no accident that this work typically clusters around instruments such as guitar and piano where sound production techniques are generally visible. It is trickier, but no less valuable for saxophone, since much of the production of timbral manipulation on the instrument takes place inside the player's body, in the embouchure, facial cavity, and larynx, and thus is largely invisible (literally as well as figuratively) from the outside. In this regard the challenges are closely related to voice studies, which deals with the social, cultural, and musical impact of sound production that happens within the body, for the most part.[19]

Pharoah Sanders and the Making of Accessible Jazz Avant-Gardism

Because there is no authoritative scholarly biography of Sanders, it will be useful to outline some aspects of his career before moving to analytical and historiographical discussions of his work. It is beyond the scope of an article such as this to delve deeply into the biographical domain, but certain elements of Sanders's musical life have a bearing and help explain his considerable musical contribution to jazz as well as its broad appeal to audiences at the time.

Sanders began playing saxophone in Little Rock, Arkansas, when he was in high school in the mid-1950s, after briefly playing other instruments. Little Rock, like most small cities in the U.S. at the time, had a thriving live music scene, centered around the West Ninth St. district known at the time as "Little Harlem." Bookended by the Mosaic Templars National Grand Temple and the Dreamland Ballroom, West Ninth St. housed many of the city's jazz venues. The Dreamland was a regular stop for nationally-touring Black entertainers, but the local music scene that West Ninth St. supported was equally important to Sanders's early professional experience. While there is no documentation of Sanders's playing from the time, it is possible to infer from the Little Rock oral history that he would have played a mix of bluesy hard bop and R&B of the sort that was popular in the Black community at the time.[20]

[16]There is a larger body of writing on the connection between playing musical instruments and a kind of embodied, empathetic knowledge in ethnomusicology, beyond Rice's influential article on the subject. One clearly relevant recent study is Eitan Wilf's book, *School for Cool The Academic Jazz Program and the Paradox of Institutionalized Creativity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), which details the embodied processes involved in learning to play jazz at Berklee College of Music and the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music.

[17]Benjamin Givan, *The Music of Django Reinhardt* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009).

[18]David Feurzeig, "The Right Mistakes: Confronting the 'Old Question' of Thelonious Monk's Chops," *Jazz Perspectives* 5, no.1 (2011): 29–59.

[19]See, for instance, essays by Eisdsheim, Järivö, Kjeldsen, and Macpherson, in Konstantinos Thomaidis, Ben Macpherson, and Paul Barker, *Voice Studies: Critical Approaches to Process, Performance and Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

[20]David Prater, "Pharoah Sanders (1940—)," *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, last modified 26 October 2015, http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=3614.

After graduating from North Little Rock's Scipio Jones High School, in 1959 Sanders moved to San Francisco. The city by that time had an active jazz scene, in part because it had become the center of the Beatnik subculture in the 1950s, but also because of a sizeable Black community that had coalesced there over the course of the twentieth century's migrations out of the South. North Beach, San Francisco's historically Italian neighborhood is now known as the center of Beat culture—in part for Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights bookstore and the working-class taverns that surround it, such as Specs, Vesuvio, and Gino and Carlo a few blocks away; but in fact in the 1950s the jazz scene was largely clustered along Fillmore St., which cut through the predominantly-Black Fillmore neighborhood. Rebecca Solnit describes the few blocks of Fillmore St. around Geary Blvd. this way:

> almost everyone in jazz paraded through the neighborhood at one point or another. Charlie Parker played at Bop City, just off Fillmore at 1690 Post. So did Duke Ellington, Armstrong, and Ella Fitzgerald. Chet Baker came to listen there. In the post-World War II years, Minnie's Can-Do Club at 1915 Fillmore, the Encore at 1805, the Havana Club at 1718, the Club Alabam around the corner at 1820A Post, the Long Bar at 1633 Fillmore, the New Orleans Swing Club (later the Champagne Supper Club) at 1849 Post, the Plantation Club at 1628 Post, the Bird Cage at 1505 Fillmore, the Aloha Club at 1345 Fillmore … all made the neighborhood sing.[21]

This is not just a list of names, but rather a description of a thriving entertainment district in a working-class, predominantly African American neighborhood. In an informal interview with me in March 2013, Sanders reminisced about his brief time in San Francisco, from 1959 to 1961. He described a city bursting with jazz activity, and with a growing new rock subculture that would eventually become the hippie movement. Sanders described being pushed by the creative energy of the scene, and also being celebrated there as a recent Southern transplant. In our conversation he related acquiring the nickname "Little Rock" there, a marker of his Southern identity in the eyes of locals, and recalled with pleasure the matrix of clubs hosting evening shows, late shows, and after-hours jam sessions.[22]

Sanders moved to New York in 1962, and his career from this point on is much more extensively documented. He worked with a cross-section of avant-garde musicians in the New York scene, including Don Cherry and Billy Higgins, among others, and was part of John Coltrane's bands from 1965–1967, appearing on such albums as *Ascension*, *Om*, and *Kulu Sé Mama*, all recorded in 1965. After Coltrane's death in 1967, Sanders remained with Alice Coltrane briefly, and then established himself as a bandleader, working with vocalist Leon Thomas, among others.[23] The works he produced at this point, from 1969–1973, including *Karma*, *Thembi*, *Black Unity*, *Village of*

[21]Rebecca Solnit, *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 71.
[22]Personal communication with the author, 8 March 2013.
[23]*Grove Music Online*, "Sanders, Pharoah," by Barry Kernfeld, accessed 15 May 2014, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/.

the Pharoahs, and *Live at the East* represent his most influential work, and a fairly cohesive, mature artistic statement.[24]

Sanders, Timbre, and the Journey to a Mature Style

The extent to which timbral elaboration was a distinct technique for the expression of virtuosity in Sanders's work even before he became known as a leader can be heard in a comparison of Coltrane's and Sanders's solos on the first take of the seminal free improvisation, "Ascension." The two tenor players' work in this performance was notably different, and as I see it shows as much the distinction between players from two different "generations" in jazz as between simply two different individual voices. Ekkehard Jost describes this distinction, though without ascribing a historical or generational quality to it, in his text *Free Jazz*. He interprets the difference between the two approaches as a dualistic dynamic in free jazz aesthetics: the opposition of "melody-plus motives on the one hand; tone-color structures on the other."[25]

Coltrane's playing on *Ascension*, while indisputably brilliant and certainly influential, is tied to his innovative work from the late 1950s. The continued importance of passagework, much of which can be heard in terms of four-note patterns, particularly derives from a dedication to expanding the language of Hard Bop (itself predicated on Bebop, and through it to the practices of Swing and Early Jazz). Sanders's playing on this piece, by contrast, shows less connection to the older languages of jazz in at least this sense.[26] Elsewhere Sanders had played in ways that incorporate melodic and harmonic complexity that reflects his deep knowledge of mainstream modern jazz logics, but given this opportunity to play something else on *Ascension*, he fully embraced the chance to make a new logic of sound. While tessitura is a considerable part of the way Sanders creates an emergent form in this performance, melody, and the play of tension and release it allows in relation to the harmonic support offered by pianist McCoy Tyner and bassists Jimmy Garrison and Art Davis is not, for the most part. Neither is rhythm in the conventional sense, in which syncopations and other metric displacements create a sense of counterpoint between soloist and rhythm section. Instead Sanders reacts to the massive waves of sound from the rhythm section by offering his own complex language in which rhythm and pitch become subsumed within and contributors to a primarily timbral virtuosity. As

[24]The recordings that made up this period are the core of a canon of Sanders's work but they also represent the crystallization of a style that he moved away from relatively quickly. By at least his 1978 release, *Love Will Find a Way*, Sanders was working in a more conventional Fusion style, and his recordings from the 1980s, such as the album *Africa* from 1987, include moments of timbrally-oriented playing, but within a predominantly "straight-ahead" context.

[25]Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1994 [1974]), 90.

[26]To be sure, older jazz languages also incorporated a concern with timbre. Timbral distinction is one way that instrumentalists and vocalists have been able to craft recognizable "voices" in the music (literally and figuratively) since at least the 1910s, when jazz was first recorded; and moreover, timbral micro-variation has always been one of the main ways of creating interest in musical lines in jazz. Nonetheless, it is exactly that dynamic—creating interest in lines defined by their melodic and harmonic properties—that earlier forms shared, and that Sanders and other avant-gardists of his generation were in the process of leaving behind.

Jost puts it, "Sanders … hardly plays any lines that have a recognizable melodic context."[27] He does, of course, play some distinct pitches, but the point is that even then their significance is not so much melodic as more generally sonic or timbral.

This timbral orientation was not Sanders's alone—much of Archie Shepp's early work built on timbre in a similar sense—but it was crucial to his place in Coltrane's band. I suggest here that Sanders's journey to a mature style involved placing this "tone-color structures" approach into contexts as a leader where it would be heard as accessible and appealing to a wider audience. Though I gloss this as "timbral virtuosity" in this paper, it is more than just technical skill. It is also, indeed perhaps more so, the development of timbral ideas, the creation of intensity and repose through timbral means. In order to hear this it is useful to look more closely at three contrasting recordings from the 1970s—after his work with Coltrane: "Village of the Pharoahs," "Hum-Allah-Hum-Allah-Hum-Allah," and "Red, Black, and Green." I do not discuss "The Creator Has a Master Plan" at length, even though it is surely his most popular piece from the period, primarily because the three I have chosen make for an analytically useful set. They represent in some ways distinct approaches to working out a mature improvisational and compositional voice —a "comprovisational" voice, so to speak. I am not alone in singling out Sanders's work from this period. Amiri Baraka called this body of recordings "dazzling," "historic," and "*classic*," and described it, looking back from a vantage point in the early 1980s as "some of the most significant and moving, beautiful music identified by the name jazz."[28] Not only does each have moments in which timbre and texture significantly outweigh pitch or rhythm as a primary structuring device, but further, each of them incorporates the experimentation with timbral variation so characteristic of Sanders's work with Coltrane into a context in which it becomes a virtuoso tool within a larger formal context.

"Village of the Pharoahs"

I begin this consideration of Sanders's work with "Village of the Pharoahs." Originally released in three tracks on an album of the same title[29] in 1973, it is an extended modal piece with a sectionalized form. The personnel on the recording include Joe Bonner (credited with shakuhachi and piano, among other things), Calvin Hill (bass), Kylo Kylo (credited with tambora and percussion), Lawrence Killian (percussion), Jimmy Hops (drums), Kenneth Nash (sakara), and Sedatrius Brown (vocals). Running just over eighteen minutes in all, the piece is firmly rooted in D-Phrygian. Indeed, its primary motivic content, introduced by Sanders around 1:28, following a long introduction by the rhythm section, bears some debt to classic modal conceptions, being composed of two distinct tetrachordal units (which in Phrygian are intervallically

[27]Jost, *Free Jazz*, 90.
[28]Baraka, *Digging*, 340.
[29]Pharoah Sanders, *Village of the Pharoahs*, Impluse! AS-9254, 1973, LP.

identical: ascending H–W–W).[30] The first descends from D to A, with a lower neighbor G, and the second explores the space between G and D with its lower neighbor C. Sanders further elaborates these two tetrachordal areas, introducing E[natural] and C♯, tonal extensions that further orient the ear to D as the center of gravity. From this point the piece divides into sections that are distinguished largely by approach to timbre: both individual timbre of the soprano sax and collective timbre wrought through textural variation.

The first section builds on the full texture of the group, which is characterized by a ringing piano played in open octaves, material reminiscent of a 12/8 bell pattern on the ride cymbal, dense drum cross rhythms on toms, congas, and sakara (a Yoruba instrument), bass hitting the tonic D on nearly every downbeat, the Indian tanpura playing a drone, and intermittent, held notes on the shakuhachi in the background of the recording. This lasts through the whole of "Part 1," and within that Sanders subdivides time through a combination of tonal and timbral variation. Tonally the biggest distinction is between rapid figuration and relatively static pitches. When he plays passagework, Sanders tends to shift between a timbre I describe as "open," or "broad," produced by a relatively loose embouchure, and a timbre I describe as "focused" or "narrow," produced by a firmer embouchure. Held notes may be tonally static, but Sanders produces a sense of tension and release through timbral manipulation, moving between more and less "focused" sounds and through the introduction of multiphonic growls such as, for instance, at 4:48. Here Sanders plays a series of high long tones, alternating between the tonic D and its upper neighbor, E♭. The held notes come at the end of (and serve as a climax for) a passage in which Sanders covers most of the soprano's primary two-and-a-bit octave range. Rather than simply playing the two pitches, though, Sanders alters each, making them as musically "active" a section as the passagework that precedes it, and making it push forward into the passagework that comes after.

The importance of articulation as not only a rhythmic, but also a timbral tool, is clear in a subsection that Sanders initiates around 5:55. Here, the move from a language made up principally of slurs to one including articulation produces new sounds as Sanders drops his tongue from an arched form near his hard palate to a concave shape closer to his lower jaw, immediately opening the sound further. The effect is a polyrhythmic tremolo, Sanders's characteristic sound for a roughly 30-measure section. The band here plays complexly patterned material, anchored by a clear 12/8 drum groove and strong bass articulations marking beats 1 and 3 of most measures.

[30]That is: even though in the era of Jamey Aebersold's pedagogical materials mode is generally taught as synonymous with scale, in most modal musical traditions (the Catholic church tradition, for instance, from which contemporary jazz modes derive their names, the Middle Eastern Maqam traditions, or North and South Indian traditions) modes are not so much based on octave-length scales as they are built of concatenated patterns with narrower ambit, typically tetrachords and pentachords. Whether Sanders and his contemporaries would have known this is a matter of conjecture at this point, but I note that George Russell's *Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization* does briefly discuss tetrachordal and pentachordal organization. Certainly the tetrachordal invariance (and thus, transposability of motives) in Phrygian would have been obvious (and useful) to Sanders. See George Russell, *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization* (Brookline, MA: Concept, 2001 [originally published in 1959]), 5–6.

Sanders begins the section with a series of low pitches with the characteristic open timbre derived from the lowered tongue position. He then alternates these with the seventh scale-degree, C[natural], in the higher octave and with a more focused tone. Highlighting the timbral shift, Sanders plays the high C's with an initially open embouchure which he quickly narrows, effectively what I would call a timbral glissando or slide.

Without going into as much detail regarding Sanders's playing as the piece goes on, I note that the overarching timbre changes dramatically, as a way of differentiating the larger form of the overall piece. "Part Two" moves, over the course of its first minute-and-a-half from the bright, dense, noisy sound of the end of "Part One" to a more open texture, highlighting the tanpura, bass, and shakuhachis. The absence of ride cymbal for much of the section significantly "darkens" the overall timbre, though the tanpura's metallic resonance provides some treble in the mix. Sanders enters along with Brown and the timbre gradually becomes brighter as the texture becomes more dense. The third section is marked by the return of the ride cymbal and, among other things, vocal interplay between Brown and Sanders. Both vocalists here explore a range of timbres, but notable among them is yodeling. This is worth considering specifically because while yodeling does involve a change in pitch, the thing that characterizes it as a yodel (instead of some other big melodic leap) is the timbral distinction between head and chest voice, and the glottal semi-articulation between registers. This musical section gradually diffuses around 3:30 into the "Part 3" track, and yet another timbral/textural combination dominates. This passage, which is the sparsest of the whole performance, includes breathy vocalizations along with tanpura and percussion. The breathy vocals continue into the start of the following track on the album, the very short piece, "Myth."

"Hum-Allah-Hum-Allah-Hum-Allah"

Rather than undertake a complete analysis of the further segmentation of each part by timbral and textural means, which would become redundant, I would move on briefly to two other pieces from the same period in Sanders's career to examine different facets of his use of timbral virtuosity. "Hum-Allah-Hum-Allah-Hum-Allah," which makes up the bulk of the album *Jewels of Thought* from 1969[31] is a funky jam. It is less dense than "Village of the Pharoahs," and more oriented toward an R&B sensibility. At fifteen minutes, the piece would still have been a stiff challenge for radio airplay, but the less-dense textures, simpler rhythm section parts, harmonic language of horizontally shifting parallel major seventh chords, and tuneful, appoggiatura-laden melody in the sax all suggest a potential for FM crossover success.[32] The lineup for this recording drew on stalwart artists from the Impulse! record label scene, including a number who

[31]Pharoah Sanders, *Jewels of Thought*, Impluse! AS-9190, 1969, LP.

[32]Radio play for a piece like this was not out of the question, but it is worth noting that Sanders's more famous piece in this vein, "The Creator Has a Master Plan" (which runs to a bit over thirty minutes in its full version) was released in a slightly better than ten minute radio edit.

had played on his previous recordings as a leader or with Coltrane, such as Lonnie Liston Smith on piano, Cecil McBee on bass, Idris Muhammad on percussion, and Roy Haynes on drums. Both Sanders and Smith are credited with playing an "African thumb piano." Leon Thomas is credited with both playing percussion and with the piece's vocals. He delivers a yodeled melody to timbrally define the "universal prayer for peace," from which the song gets its title, much as he had on "The Creator Has a Master Plan," recorded earlier in the same year. Over the course of the piece the band wends its way through an introduction, "head," series of solos, and a repeat of the head, mostly separated by and interspersed with brief interludes, all over a four-measure parallel major seventh chord vamp that moves in whole steps, F♯M7–E♯M7–DM7–EM7.

The opening section, which I have called the "head," begins with Sanders introducing the main melody, a riff made up of two motives, a rising interval and a more extended figure that includes an upper neighbor motion and a repeat of the rising interval, now a step down from the initial position. This riff takes up two measures, and the whole thing is then repeated a step below in the second half of the four-measure vamp, creating an overall four-note descent. This figure becomes a kind of schema or matrix out of which Thomas's presentation of the main vocal line emerges. Once Thomas begins to sing, Sanders interweaves with him, playing long tones, a counter-melody, and flutter-tongued runs in a high register. During Thomas's extended solo, Sanders continues to work with related musical gestures. Given limited motivic and harmonic material to work with, both in backing Thomas and during his own solos, timbre becomes a primary mode of improvisational variation for Sanders. I note here as one example the way that a two-pitch tremolo in Sanders's playing from roughly 3:20–3:46 serves more a timbral function than a harmonic or melodic one. It allows him to capture something like the sound of the vocal yodel, and contrasts strikingly with the full-throated sound of his primary melodic gestures in this piece. Another is a use of a flutter-tongue tremolo in alternation with the two-note figure, such as from 5:30–5:40 or at 10:30.

Attention to timbre here is, ultimately, what keeps the piece interesting over its considerable length. The order of the solos is: Thomas (roughly 3:19–4:52), Sanders (with significant overlap where the two are playing something that might better be described as a duet than a solo, 4:52–5:55), Smith (5:59–8:35), a collective interlude (8:35–10:29), Sanders (10:20–12:10), and Sanders and Thomas together (12:10–13:05). The difference between Sanders's first solo and his second is particularly telling. In the first he plays material that is primarily melodically and harmonically based on extensions of the head riff. As described above, this is varied as much through timbral means (flutter tonguing and an imitation of yodeling). Still, the primary character of the timbre in this first solo is a fairly normative saxophone sound—more tone than noise. Sanders's second solo, which comes after a long piano solo and a period of collective playing without a recognizable lead line, moves out of standard, melodic material embellished by timbral variation and into something more like the "energy music" of his 1960s work. Here there is pitched melodic content, but the emphasis is on timbral intensity, achieved through a virtuosic collection of techniques, including

multiphonics, altissimo, flutter tonguing, and vocalizing into the sax behind the pitched sound. The solo gradually builds, and ends with fast runs that give way to a more standard-timbred long tone. This serves as a kind of transition, as Sanders comes out of the long tone into the head motive.

"Red, Black and Green"

The album *Thembi* from 1971[33] represents a departure for Sanders from the extended-form pieces for which he was known in this period, such as "Hum-Allah-Hum-Allah-Hum-Allah," "Village of the Pharoahs," or "The Creator Has a Master Plan." Instead it involves a sequence of five to nine minute tracks, each with a distinct texture, sound, and approach. Here more than variation within a piece, Sanders uses variation between pieces to structure the album as a super-form.

"Astral Traveling," which opens the album, is a soft-textured piece with a major-seventh-dominated harmonic language, over which Sanders plays a gentle-sounding soprano sax line. In R&B terminology from a few decades later, it might (anachronistically) be called a slow jam. Sanders constantly shifts the timbre of his sax, especially on long tones. This involves moving through vowel shapes with his mouth to produce a range from more open, "O" sounds to more narrow, "I" sounds, at the same time as he shifts his larynx between higher and lower position (and between more or less constricted airway). At moments he also uses an octave multiphonic, splitting the audible sound between the fundamental and the first overtone. The most distinctive manipulation of sound here, however, (and the most unusual for a jazz recording) is in the panning of Sanders's saxophone across the stereo spectrum, from left to right.

"Red, Black, and Green," which follows, starts as an energy piece which relies on the use of timbrally noisy saxophone playing. These are overdubbed in three parts, which are located on the left, right, and center of the stereo field. The sound he uses at the start of the piece is produced by a very loose embouchure, which allows the reed to vibrate more freely, in effect producing a brighter timbre and giving the sound more buzz. He moves, around 1:35, first in the part placed at the far right of the stereo field, and then in the other two, to a more focused tone and more pitch-oriented language. By roughly 3:14, he moves back toward the original tone (again first in the line at stereo right), setting up a wave-like alternation between the two sounds over the course of the rest of the piece. The use of overdubbing and sound panning in these opening pieces is significant in a way I will return to.

"Thembi," the title cut, is another modal, groove-oriented piece, with a planing major-seventh language. "Love" is a piece for solo bass, and "Morning Prayer" indulges in a kind of zither and percussion-dominated sound that has "world music" overtones for its opening.[34] The main body of the piece uses bamboo flutes, a timbre that

[33]Pharoah Sanders. *Thembi*, Impulse! AS-9206, 1971, LP.

[34]The sonic exoticism Sanders and his band use here and elsewhere in his work from the 1970s are certainly broadly related to both his search for new timbres, his music's accessibility, and its sense of spirituality, to be sure. A broader critique of the orientalist tropes in this work's sound and sentiment would be valuable, but is a large enough matter to really be a separate article in itself.

reinforces an Asian-influenced sound concept of the opening. "Bailophone Dance" once again features the unfocused, noisy saxophone timbre with which Sanders opened "Red, Black, and Green," and brings back a bamboo flute, but now places them in the context of an African-derived 12/8 polyphonic percussion groove, featuring a bell playing an additive timeline pattern and hand drums in addition to the drum set heard throughout the rest of the recording.

Sax, Timbre, and the "Changing Same"

In general I believe attention to timbre gives us something in the analysis of Sanders's music that we can't get from a discussion of other technical elements of the music without it. It is not secondary to the musical conception of these pieces and their performance, but in fact central. At this point I want to trace out two ways I think it is useful to listen analytically to Sanders's work with timbre in mind for thinking historiographically about jazz. Both have to do with envisioning the relationship between his work (and those of his avant-garde jazz compatriots) and other genres in American music. In this section I want to accomplish two things: the first is straightforwardly historical and limited to a jazz frame of reference. In this regard I want to sketch out a genealogy of 1970s-era Fusion that highlights similarities between the work of Weather Report, for instance, and Sanders's recordings. The second is also historical, but looks outside the generic frame of jazz to offer an alternate narrative that connects Sanders's work to R&B both before and after the recordings discussed above. Here I draw on Amiri Baraka's classic formulation of the "changing same" as an aesthetic theory; but instead of engaging its cosmological implications, I take a more mundane approach, placing Sanders's combination of funky grooves and timbral virtuosity in a lineage that includes such figures as Sil Austin and Red Prysock before, and bands like Earth, Wind, and Fire or War after.

As an aid in thinking about both of these historiographical points, I start with Albin Zak's work on "sound as form," from *The Poetics of Rock* .[35] In short, Zak focuses on the recording as musical work, describing a rise in the importance of sonic dimensions apart from rhythm and pitch (such as echo, reverb, distortion, overdubbing, and so on) in defining form as a—perhaps *the*—fundamental aesthetic feature of rock as a

[35]Albin Zak, *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). There is a considerable literature on the ontology of rock and in particular the relationship between phonography—the making of recordings—and the nature of the musical work in rock. Perhaps the first is Theodore Gracyk's *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock*, which identifies rock recordings as "autographic" works, in which only copies (LPs, CDs, sound files, etc.) derived from the original master recording count as authentic iterations of the work. Others in aesthetic philosophy, notably Lee B. Brown and Andrew Kania have followed this work, complicating some of its premises, but largely agreeing on the centrality of the recording to the ontology of rock. Zack takes a more musicological approach, focusing particularly on the historical and analytical implications of rock's phonographic orientation, which is why I focus on his work here. See Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996); Lee B. Brown, "Phonography, Rock Records, and the Ontology of Recorded Music," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58, no.44 (2000): 361–372; Andrew Kania, "Making Tracks: The Ontology of Rock Music," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64, no.4 (2006): 401–414.

genre. I suggest that this aesthetic shift, that happened largely in the 1950s and 60s, and which was facilitated by new recording technologies, as Zak elaborates in *I Don't Sound Like Nobody*,[36] is useful not only for thinking about rock, but indeed for the wider range of recorded genres popular since the 1950s. It is clear that the recording studio and the work of engineers and producers radically expanded the opportunities to make sound definitive of form for rock musicians, but they also did for jazz musicians like Sanders, at least in the pieces on *Thembi*. I would hesitate to offer a capsule history of the process whereby jazz musicians became interested in sound, in Zak's sense, or timbre, as I've been using it above, as a formal element, and drawing out the full history would be beyond the scope of this article. If nothing else, Olly Wilson's formulation of the "heterogeneous sound ideal" as a basic component of African American musical aesthetics indicates the view that in black music the recording studio, and in particular mid-century developments in recording technology such as magnetic tape, full-frequency range recording, microgroove LPs, and stereo playback, all facilitated new applications of an underlying musical conception, rather than producing an entirely new approach to music-making.[37] Put more simply, in jazz, particularly its avant-garde wing, recording tended to enhance an aesthetic concern with sound as form that characterized acoustic performance as well, and which had a significant history in Black music at large. That said, even the 1960s and 1970s jazz avant-garde never entirely abandoned conventional approaches to melody and rhythm as form-defining elements, even when musicians tended to prioritize harmonic stasis. As in rock, timbral and textural variety has given shape and drama to performances that retain elements of harmonic form. Unlike "new music," particularly its electroacoustic branch, in which timbre is often the only form-generating element, Sanders and others like him remain closely connected to older jazz conventions.

The interest in "sound as form"—that is, the heterogeneous sound ideal not only being central to the elaboration of basically harmonic forms, but actually determining the large-scale form of whole performances—can perhaps most clearly be seen as bearing fruit in the 1970s avant-garde, with its expanded timbral palette, as in Sanders's work. But equally important, I think, is the way in which 1970s Fusion can be heard as developing this concept, one of the significant ways in which its connections with the avant-garde can be heard. Naturally Miles Davis's influence was definitive in the early work of such bands as Weather Report or Return to Forever, but as Kevin Fellezs's recent book has shown, it is important to look at potential influences more broadly.[38] Fellezs does not address in any detail the possible connections in sound, creative process, or aesthetics between the avant-garde and fusion, instead treating the two as a pair of reactions (perhaps even diametrically opposed reactions) against the mainstream. Both, he says for instance, were socially progressive in some sense,

[36]Albin Zak, *I Don't Sound Like Nobody: Remaking Music in 1950s America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).
[37]Olly Wilson, "Black Music," 3.
[38]Kevin Fellezs, *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk and the Creation of Fusion* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011).

though only free jazz has been recognized in this way. Free jazz, famously, was connected with the Black Power phase of the Black Liberation movement, and fusion, through its players' interest in exotic spirituality, advocated personal and social transformation, but this placed them "in the countercultural rather than the politically radical currents of the era."[39]

I would suggest that in rhythmic conception, dissonance treatment, and especially the approach to "sound as form" (timbral virtuosity, as it were), Weather Report's early work in particular very clearly bears the imprint of the late-1960s avant-garde, perhaps unsurprisingly, since, as Fellezs says, "their stylistic outlook was extremely broad, perhaps the most inclusive in jazz."[40] I point, for instance, to the piece "Crystal" from *I Sing the Body Electric*.[41] The piece opens with a highly distorted synthesizer playing gradually shifting tone clusters along with a hand drum playing a pattern of open tones on pitches a half-step apart. When Wayne Shorter's soprano sax enters, at about 0:42, Joe Zawinul shifts to a bell-like synth tone without distortion and plays single pitches instead of clusters. Zawinul modulates the synthesizer with wah-wah, throughout this section, and Dom Um Romão eventually switches from the hand drum to an Agogô bell. As the piece continues, sections are marked off by shifts in overall timbre (produced, for instance, by how many of the band's instruments are playing, and in particular by the presence or absence of bass, percussion, and hand drums), as well as being marked by changes in specific instruments' timbres. These elements of orchestration have textural effects—that is, how many parts, how much sound there are at a given moment, and in what registers—but they also have timbral effects. They contribute to the question of how bright or dark the sound is at any given moment, and to the overall ratio of pitched sound to non-pitched sound. Here timbral features in performance are enhanced by a sophisticated approach to the recorded artifact. Hearing the ways this recording might be similar not only to rock and funk but also to the sounds an avant-gardist like Pharoah Sanders was experimenting with at roughly the same time is important, not only for understanding fusion, but also for understanding the legacy of the 1960s avant-garde.

Second, continued attention to Sanders's recordings, some of which were critical successes in their day and others which were not, offers the opportunity to reassess Amiri Baraka's notion of "the changing same" in black music. Baraka's argument for a close relationship between the Soul/Funk/R&B continuum and avant-garde jazz is couched in esoteric, spiritual terms, and is easy to dismiss as essentialist. His opening lines set the poetic tone: "The blues impulse transferred … containing a race, and its expression. *Primal* (mixtures … transfers and imitations). Through its many changes, it remained the exact replication of The Black Man In The West."[42] This idea, that the blues is an impulse, and one that is definitive of Black culture has been widely discussed, embraced in certain respects, and rejected in

[39]Ibid., 43.
[40]Ibid., 71.
[41]Weather Report, *I Sing the Body Electric*, Columbia KC 31352, 1972, LP.
[42]Baraka, "Changing," 180.

others.[43] But Baraka's more specific reason for deploying the notion of the blues impulse in this article, namely to draw together R&B and the jazz avant-garde (the New Black Music, as he calls it here) on some fundamental level and explain that "the differences between rhythm and blues and the so-called new music or art jazz … are artificial," has received less specific attention.

Yet when looked at concretely, Baraka's argument is useful for explaining a range of recordings from the period. Beyond the spiritual, social dimension (which is interesting, but beyond the scope of this article), there are good reasons in the music of Pharoah Sanders as discussed above, to hear a meaningful relationship with R&B. It is notable that soul-jazz tenor sax player Houston Person, much of whose work over the years could be thought of as instrumental R&B, pointed to Sanders as a model for connecting the new thing with the blues continuum in an interview in *Down Beat* in 1972, saying, "You're defeating your own purpose if you're just going to have an avant-garde concert up at Wesleyan University before a bunch of pseudo-intellectuals who haven't been brought up in the environment. I think that is why Pharoah Sanders sells in the black and white community. He is conducting himself as a band leader and he's trying to put his music in a perspective where it will sell."[44] The precedent for Sanders's use of timbre as a principal formal element in his tunes, and indeed for using a tenor sax tone that includes multi-phonics, growls, and a generally high noise-to-signal ratio, can be traced directly to the generation of R&B tenor players who recorded as leaders in the 1950s, such as Red Prysock, King Curtis, and especially Sil Austin. There is surely a broader resonance of the gritty vocalizing of blues singers in the lineage of Charley Patton, Son House, and Howlin' Wolf here, but the saxophonists above offered a model for this sound specifically on the tenor sax, and for the sound as a broadly popular one. As just one example, Austin's recording "Train Whistle," an up-tempo riff-based blues, showcases the expressive capacity of noise as a way of generating intensity while remaining funky and danceable.

The relationship between avant-garde jazz of the type Sanders played in the late-1960s and early 1970s and the R&B/Funk/Soul continuum went both directions. For instance, Earth, Wind, and Fire's first album, *The Need of Love*,[45] includes not only funky, five minute pop tunes, but also moments of what sounds like free improvisation, and "outside" playing over rhythmic grooves, such as in the song "Energy"; War recorded pop hits like "Slippin' into Darkness," but also played features where the searing, R&B tenorist, Charles Miller could go into "outside" territory, such as the performance of "Sun oh Son" from their live album of 1973; and of course Albert Ayler and Archie Shepp recorded Soul pieces. These last items are not always regarded highly by their fans—Ayler's *New Grass*,[46] for instance, was a critical disaster—but

[43]See, for example, Travis Jackson, *Blowin' the Blues Away: Performance and Meaning on the New York Jazz Scene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Guthrie Ramsey Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Monson, *Saying Something*.

[44]Dan Morgenstern, "Perceptive Person: Houston Person," *Down Beat* [website], accessed 15 May 2014, http://www.downbeat.com/default.asp?sect=stories&subsect=story_detail&sid=1198. Originally published in print 6 June 1972.

[45]Earth, Wind, and Fire, *The Need for Love*, Warner Bros. WS 1958, 1971, LP.

[46]Albert Ayler, *New Grass*, Impluse! AS-9175, 1969, LP.

might provide, if nothing else, a window onto the aesthetic importance of timbre (of "sound as form") in the avant-garde at large, and in the work of sax players in particular. An evaluation of why *New Grass* failed critically and commercially, while Sanders's work succeeded is beyond the scope of this article, but warrants further research.

Conclusion

What, ultimately, is the larger story we might draw from looking at Pharoah Sanders's attention to timbre, and its implications for the relationship between the jazz avant-garde and other genres, both within jazz and outside of it? It is surely about saxophonism, for one thing. The instrument is well-suited to timbral variation. Like the electric guitar, which largely replaced it as the principal lead melody instrument in Rock and Roll, the saxophone is capable of a wide range of overall timbres, determined in part by the musician's "setup" (the choice of mouthpiece, reed, and to a lesser degree, ligature). And it is capable, purely on the basis of alterations to the embouchure, oral cavity, and larynx, of a huge range of alterations to that overall timbre in the course of performance. In this regard, Sanders is in a lineage, albeit one that has been to some degree marginal in the way we narrate jazz history. Moreover, his playing represents a step forward in that lineage. It is an advance both in technical virtuosity and in conception. This is the importance of recognizing the ways that Sanders's playing relates to a musician like Sil Austin, who is otherwise not usually cited in jazz scholarship.

It also tells us something about the shifting ground of formal conceptualization in jazz. Much has been said about the impact of gradually widening expectations around dissonance and atonality in jazz from the 1940s to the 1970s, something that happened at the same time as a considerable space opened up for rhythmic exploration, and the performance of music less tied to the regular repetitions of a dance beat. Sanders's work is, in a sense, a lateral move in relation to these concerns. Rather than offer a significant new paradigm in harmonic and melodic dissonance or in rhythmic complexity, his music carried timbre forward as an element that could offer developmental, formal trajectories over the long time spans of his extended pieces. His signal contribution, having taken this route, was to produce a body of recordings in the late 1960s and early 1970s that were characterized by the combination of avant-garde exploration and funky accessibility.

Abstract

Saxophonist, composer, and bandleader Pharoah Sanders is best known for recording a handful of meditative, cosmologically-inclined free jazz classics from the 1960s and 1970s, including "The Creator Has a Master Plan." This article looks at the reasons for these recordings' popularity at the time, arguing that the key to understanding these works can be found in Sanders's use of timbral variation as a formal element. In considering what I call "timbral virtuosity" in Sanders's work, this article discusses the relationships that such a focus allows us to more clearly see between avant-garde jazz, fusion, and contemporaneous popular music from rock to soul.