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“Her Whimsy and Originality Really Amount to Genius”: New Biographical Research on Johanna Beyer

by Amy C. Beal

Most musicologists I know have never heard of the German-born composer and pianist Johanna Magdalena Beyer (1888-1944), who emigrated to the U.S. in 1923 and spent the rest of her life in New York City. During that period she composed over fifty works, including piano miniatures, instrumental solos, songs, string quartets, and pieces for band, chorus, and orchestra. This body of work allies Beyer with the group known as the “ultramodernists,” and it offers a further perspective on the compositional style known as “dissonant counterpoint.” These terms are associated almost exclusively with Henry Cowell, Ruth Crawford, Carl Ruggles, and Charles Seeger, but Beyer, too, deserves to be placed in their ranks. In addition to her compositional work, she took full advantage of America’s musical capital during a period of determined experimentation and self-conscious nationalism. Her network included American and immigrant composers, conductors, musicians, choreographers, writers, and scholars. Beyer’s friendship with Henry Cowell constituted her most important professional and personal relationship, yet the official account of his biography erases her from his life and from the music of his time. Similarly, histories of twentieth-century music and American music have continued to overlook Beyer’s contributions.

A recent New World Records two-CD release of Beyer’s previously unrecorded music (NWR 80678-2, 2008) allows us to become better acquainted with her little-known oeuvre. Yet the compilation also points to the fact that in the twelve years since the publication of John Kennedy and Larry Polansky’s pioneering research on Beyer in *The Musical Quarterly*, only a handful of people have carried on the work that their biographical sketch, compositional catalog, and source guide called for.¹ Since then, with the assistance of some fifteen volunteer editors, the Frog Peak/Johanna Beyer Project has published sixteen editions of her compositions, all complete with scrupulous editorial notes and facsimiles of the manuscripts. This

editorial flurry has facilitated many performances and first recordings. The most noteworthy recent research on Beyer has been undertaken by Melissa de Graaf, whose work on the New York Composers’ Forum events during the 1930s portrays Beyer’s public persona during the highpoint of her compositional career (see, for example, de Graaf’s spring 2004 article in the *I.S.A.M. Newsletter*). Beyond de Graaf’s work, we have learned little more about Beyer since 1996. Yet it is clear that her compelling biography, as much as her intriguing compositional output, merits further attention.



Johanna Beyer
Courtesy of the National Archives

Beyer’s correspondence with Henry Cowell (held primarily at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts) helps us construct a better picture of her life between February 1935, when her letters to Cowell apparently began, and mid-1941, when their relationship ended. Her letters reveal both mundane and profound details about a composer’s daily routines in Depression-era New York, painting a rich portrait of an intelligent, passionate, humorous, and deeply troubled woman whose reading ranged from Hölderlin’s *Hyperion* to Huxley’s essay “Fashions in Love.” Her correspondence with Cowell, for whom she provided a number of musical and administrative services for approximately five years, mixes dry exchanges (“send me two copies of *Country Set* by Tuesday for Philadelphia”) with painful intimacies (“may friends touch each other?”). Beyond these occasional non-sequiturs, Beyer’s letters offer vivid impressions of a piano teacher’s

exhausting commute between Brooklyn, Manhattan, Staten Island, and New Jersey, and expose her suffering caused by the crippling, degenerative illness ALS (Lou Gehrig’s Disease). Beyer’s life hovered

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Beyer Biography (continued)

both in the gray areas of the immigrant experience and at the edges of Manhattan's new music network.

One of the obstacles to more comprehensive Beyer research and reception is that we simply do not know very much about her. At present, a small selection of administrative materials help fill some gaps in Beyer's early biography. Registry papers in a Leipzig archive describe Beyer as "correspondent, teacher, and music student," and document her living at four different Leipzig addresses between 1905 and 1915. She also lived in Dessau, Elgershausen, and Gießen between 1909 and 1915.² A WPA concert program from 1937 includes a biographical sketch that claims she sang for three years in the Leipziger Singakademie. Beyer's curriculum vitae (held in the Koussevitzky Papers at the Library of Congress) tell us she graduated from a German music conservatory in September 1923.

Ellis Island arrival records confirm Beyer entered the U.S. on at least two occasions. After leaving Gießen, where she lived for approximately two years, she arrived in New York on 24 April 1911. According to the passenger ship manifest, she paid her own second-class passage, and had at least \$50 in her pocket. As her destination she listed an uncle living at 661 Columbus Avenue. Leipzig residency documents record her return to Germany on 21 June 1914; she moved to Dessau about a year later. The second time she sailed to the U.S., she listed the town of Essen as her last place of residence, and arrived at Ellis Island on 14 November 1923. Again she paid her own passage, but now possessed only \$25. She named a friend's home in East Orange, New Jersey as her destination. At this time, Beyer was five-foot-six, had brown hair and brown eyes, and was neither a polygamist nor an anarchist (the ship manifest questionnaire explicitly asked these questions).

According to a 1930 census report from Queens County, Beyer lived at 39-61 43rd Street in Long Island City for the next six years, until she moved to Jane Street in Greenwich Village. She shared the address with her niece, a twenty-five-year old German-born woman named Frieda Kastner, who had entered the U.S. in 1922. The census report lists Beyer's occupation as music teacher. The document also indicates that Beyer was naturalized in Queens County before 1930.³ What Beyer experienced from the mid-1920s on, between finishing school, providing a home for her niece, establishing herself as a piano teacher in New York's German community, and studying composition with modernist American composers, remains cloudy. In the years following her arrival in New York, Beyer earned two degrees from the Mannes School of Music: a "diploma for solfege" (May 1927) and a teacher's certificate (May 1928). She took additional classes at Mannes through 1929. Her resumé tells us she had a scholarship for the New School for Social Research from 1934-35, "taught one year at the Federal Music Project," and studied composition with Cowell, Dane Rudhyar, Ruth Crawford, and Charles Seeger.⁴

Because of the myriad gaps in Beyer's biography, we are left without a clear impression of how or when she might have "stumbled into herself" as a composer, to borrow a description of Ruth Crawford's compositional self-awakening. Her mention of "improvising, just wasting time at the piano" in a December 1935 letter to Cowell may, however, suggest how her stumbling might have begun.⁵ Beyer's earliest extant work, dated 1931, is a 72-bar solo piano piece, the first in a set of four short pieces she would

eventually call *Clusters*. She performed this piece on 20 May 1936, during a WPA Federal Music Project Composers' Forum-Laboratory concert. During the post-concert discussion, Beyer claimed that she was "not influenced by or imitating Henry Cowell at all."⁶ In an uncanny coincidence that would dramatically impact the trajectory of Beyer's career, Cowell was arrested in California on sodomy charges the very next day.

On 19 May 1937 Beyer again played "excerpts from piano suites (1930-36)" in another WPA concert. Her program notes referred to a piece she first called the "Original New York Waltz," which eventually became the third piece in *Clusters*:

A group of chords is gradually interpolated, finally running off in dissonant contrapuntal passages only to be summoned again. Organized rests, rests within the measure, whole measure rests, 1, 2, 3 measure rests, tonally and rhythmically undergo all kinds of crab forms. Throughout, the tone "F" is reiterated. Around it, tones are grouped singly, becoming more substantial; chord clusters part again, to stay on singly but one or two groups of tone clusters get acquainted with a single melody. A struggle for dominance between group and individual seems to overpower the latter; yet there is an amiable ending.⁷

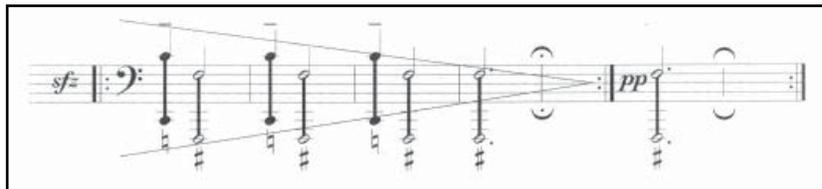
While *Clusters* exhibits traits typical of dissonant counterpoint, it also reveals Beyer's ability to write strong melodies, driving rhythms, and non-thematic material that exploit the power of her instrument. Two of the pieces in the suite are set in triple meter (the 1931 waltz and the "Original New York Waltz"), and these two are also most suggestive of tonality. The second piece in the set is in 9/8; the fourth is in 7/8. The "Original New York Waltz" is almost entirely monophonic and pianissimo; the piece that proceeds it features five- and six-octave clusters played in the fortissimo range. The four short pieces are linked by a five-bar "starting motive," which was meant to be played at the start, between each piece, and at the end, thus lending the suite formal coherence. This "starting motive" consists entirely of two-octave-wide forearm clusters. Throughout the suite, Beyer makes use of fist, wrist, and forearm clusters. Though the manuscript of *Clusters* bears no named dedicatee, it suggests an homage to the inventor of the cluster technique: Henry Cowell.

Beyer's public appearances like these might have helped promote her as a composer/performer in the ultramodernist tradition, but they apparently raised little interest in her music. Why were Beyer's works not embraced by other performers, audiences, and critics? Did her earnest, enigmatic persona serve only to alienate her audiences, and perhaps also her potential colleagues? Did her reputation suffer because of her German heritage during a time of swaggering patriotism in the U.S.? Perhaps during the second half of the 1930s, her music was viewed as at odds with the mass political shift to the left, as Cowell, the Seegers, Blitzstein, Harris, Copland, and others became concerned with the "common man," proletarian music, revolutionary songs, and socialist ideology.

Perhaps her music suffered from an underlying assumption that her style of abstract modernism was irrelevant to the American public, and was not useful for their extra-musical concerns. In her biography of Ruth Crawford Seeger, Judith Tick reports: "As for the cause of 'dissonant music,' [Ruth] and Charles [Seeger] believed that by 1933, it was virtually dead."⁸ This attitude on the part of two leaders in Beyer's circle—the very composers who, along with Cowell, had led her down the path of dissonant counterpoint so self-consciously expressed in *Clusters*—might have isolated her compositionally to a point of no return. During her lifetime only one of her works was published and only one recorded. Yet she composed steadily, even in the large forms. During the summer of 1937, she wrote to Koussevitzky of the completion of her first symphony, and proudly listed seven public performances of her own work. All evidence indicates that this modest list had not grown by the time of her death—six and a half years later. Yet in 1941, Beyer had written in a letter to Cowell that she had composed over one hundred works, including six symphonic scores.⁹

Beyer and Cowell's six-year correspondence—some 115 extant letters—helps fill in details of her life and work, and also reveals

an operatically tragic love story. Where and when they first met remains unclear. (We might speculate that she heard him perform in Germany during his first European tour, before she left the country in early November 1923, but no



Johanna Beyer's "starting motive," from *Clusters*

evidence exists to confirm this.) Cowell's 1933 pocket calendar mentions Beyer's name twice. The first instance is on 25 October, where Cowell writes "class 5:30/come early Beyer rehearse." The second entry is simply Beyer's Long Island City address and phone number, at the back of the pocket calendar. We know that by early 1934 Cowell acknowledged Beyer as a composer, since part of her *Suite for Clarinet and Bassoon* had been included in a New Music Society concert in San Francisco on 15 February. In October 1934, Beyer enrolled in Cowell's New School class called "Creative Music Today." Sidney Cowell recalled first meeting Beyer "in the course of that course, "Theory and Practice of Rhythm," taught in fall 1935, listed "Mrs. Sidney H. Robertson" as a registered student—but not Beyer, who might have audited that and other courses of Cowell's. The earliest extant letter from Beyer to Cowell was written during this period, on 12 February 1935; in it, she told him about her current compositional project, a pedagogical piano method she called the "Piano-Book"—and she also flirtatiously invited him to breakfast. The next letter included an explicitly romantic love poem; the following letter outlined her spirited impressions upon first hearing Cowell perform at The New School.

The relationship that developed, and eventually collapsed, is difficult to summarize briefly. Beyer adored Cowell, and was awed by his gifts as a composer. He soon embodied for her the roles of teacher, mentor, friend, collaborator, object of desire, and occasionally a source of employment. Their relationship seems to have taken

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Beyer Biography (continued)

a serious romantic turn before Cowell's imprisonment in 1936. During his years in San Quentin she managed his mail and devoted nearly all of her time to maintaining his professional reputation and compositional career. She solicited letters from prominent figures in musical and academic circles to petition the warden for an early parole. When he was released in 1940, she was the only person besides his parents and the Percy Graingers—"a very few trusted friends," Cowell wrote to Grainger—who was kept informed of his travel plans and his whereabouts. Beyer was already seriously ill by this time, but according to Cowell, "she [was] quite willing to act as a buffer in receiving letters and calls, etc., instead of their going to [the Grainger residence in] White Plains."¹¹ It is worth noting that during Cowell's four years in prison, Beyer completed something close to thirty new compositions.

Beyer continually urged conductors to program Cowell's work, especially after his release from prison—conductors including Carlos Chavez, Eugene Goossens, Howard Hanson, Otto Klemperer, Serge Koussevitzky, Karl Krueger, Hans Lange, Fritz Mahler (nephew of Gustav), Pierre Monteux, and Artur Rodzinski.

Cowell clearly trusted Beyer, and appreciated her efforts, but from the moment he was released he began making attempts to separate himself from his most devoted supporter. Perhaps due to Beyer's escalating dependence on him for support and companionship, her frustration at having helped him so tirelessly and receiving so little in

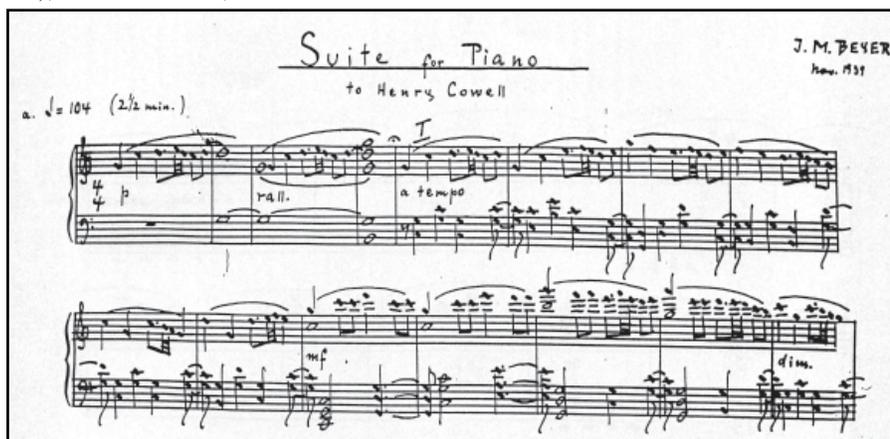
return, and his increasing distance due perhaps to his budding relationship with Sidney Robertson, the terms of their relationship changed dramatically. Tragically for Beyer, this coincided with a decline in her health. Soon thereafter, in January 1941, Cowell wrote Beyer a letter that outlined a revised business arrangement between them. He suggested two courses of action for streamlining their professional contact. First, he would pay her union rates for all the copying work she had done on his compositions, and thereby would have no further financial obligation toward her for work she had done in the past. Second, he suggested that they split Cowell's lecture/performance/recording fees for engagements that resulted directly from her work on his behalf. Upon his insistence, in early February, Beyer reluctantly sent Cowell a "bill" listing page amounts for the scores she had copied for him. Cowell sent her a check for \$12.50 in January 1941 (half the fee for a lecture she arranged for him at Columbia University), and another check for \$58 in February, for music copying. Soon after, he broke off all contact.

The last available dated correspondence from Beyer to Cowell, written on 8 June 1941, is a postcard regarding a check from the Kansas City Philharmonic Orchestra. Less than a month later, Cowell's

civil rights (suspended during his incarceration and parole) were restored, and on 27 September he and Sidney married. It is uncertain whether Cowell and Beyer had any contact after that point. Sidney later wrote (inaccurately) that due to Cowell's rejection, Beyer "had some sort of a breakdown, following which she killed herself."¹²

After her friendship with Cowell ended, Beyer disappeared almost completely from the historical record. For a biographer, this is the frustrating moment when nearly all threads are lost. At some point between June 1941 and June 1943 she moved from Jane Street to 303 West 11th Street, just three blocks to the south, where she composed the *Sonatina in C*, one of her last works. In mid-1943 she entered the House of the Holy Comforter in the Bronx. Five days after Beyer's death on 9 January 1944, her niece Frieda informed Arthur Cohn at the Philadelphia Free Library of her aunt's passing.¹³ No other records of anyone taking note of her death have been located.

Beyer's epistolary trail of crumbs reveals that she spent a good portion of her days writing letters. When one considers the extent of her professional correspondence, it is baffling to realize how



Excerpt from the manuscript of Beyer's *Suite for Piano* (1939), dedicated to Henry Cowell

thoroughly she disappeared from history. The breadth and diversity of the personalities with whom Beyer was associated not only exposes the dominance of emigrant personalities on New York's musical life, but demonstrates her myriad connections within and between cultural and intellectual institutions. Just a partial list of the many important figures with whom she corresponded during the period in question would include Aaron Copland, Ruth Crawford, Martha Graham, Percy Grainger, Otto Luening, Joseph Schillinger, Charles Seeger, Nicolas Slonimsky, and Leopold Stokowski. She also communicated with radio pioneer and conductor Howard Barlow (music director at CBS from 1927-43), Arthur Cohn (organizer of the Philadelphia Free Library's Music Copying Project), Walter Fischer (director of Carl Fischer Music Publishing after 1923), Hanya Holm (German dancer who immigrated to the U.S. in 1931), choreographer Doris Humphrey, Alvin Johnson (director of the New School for Social Research since 1922), Hedi Katz (Hungarian immigrant who founded the Henry Street Settlement School), conductor Hans Kindler (founder of the National Symphony Orchestra in 1931), NYPL music librarian Dorothy Lawton, clarinetist Rosario Mazzeo, Harry Allen Overstreet (Chair of Philosophy at the City College of New York), Bertha Reynolds (psychiatrist on the faculty at Smith College), pianist and composer Carol Robinson, Russian-Jewish composer Lazare Saminsky, Fabien Sevitzky (Koussevitzky's nephew and one-time principle bassist for Stokowski as well as conductor of the Indianapolis orchestra from 1937-56), Hungarian violinist and Bartók collaborator Joseph Szigeti, conductor and cellist Alfred Wallenstein, patron Blanche Walton, and many more. Beyer counted

several of these people—including Reynolds, Robinson, the Overstreets, and the Seegers—as close personal friends.

An independent document dating from 1938 suggests the contradictory impression Beyer made on her peers. In that year, she applied for a Guggenheim grant for the creation of a (never-completed) opera called *Status Quo*. Her application was unsuccessful, as the committee concluded: “At age fifty she doesn’t appear to be a good risk as a composer.” Yet her file offers quotes from thirteen prominent referees, who characterized her and her music in both positive terms—“an honest soul with serious musical pretensions” (Aaron Copland); “interesting and original” (Gerald Strang); “a worthy thing for the Foundation to sponsor” (Wallingford Riegger); “unquestionably a first-rater” (Bonaro Wilkinson Overstreet); “excellent training and background . . . musical innovation and her untrammled, adventurous spirit” (Ashley Pettis)—and in negative terms—“eclectic rather than synthetic, . . . diffuse and intellectual” (Strang); “not convincing” (Serge Koussevitzky); “both Miss Beyer and her project are a little mad” (Alvin Johnson); “emphatically . . . not endorse” (David Mannes). The most striking assessment came from Cowell himself. In comparing her to other Guggenheim applicants he wrote that “she has the greatest natural talent, and also the least steadiness of temperament.” He added that she had “a flare for whimsical and original ideas, and she developed a fine technique in the modern manner for carrying out her ideas. . . . *Her whimsy and originality really amount to genius*. Whether she is steady enough to carry out such a huge and difficult (although interesting) project one cannot say, but . . . she has better equipment than most.”¹⁴

Was the face Beyer showed the world different from the voice she cultivated in her letter-writing? In the end, it would appear that those who remembered her as “extremely quiet, almost painfully shy,” “not close to many in the New York City music scene,” having “no family” and “not maintain[ing] ties to relatives in Germany” fell short of an accurate characterization of this apparently social and family-oriented woman.¹⁵ Though she moved comfortably in immigrant circles, Beyer identified herself as American—“my forefathers fought in the Civil War of America!” she declared—during a time when asserting patriotism topped many artists’ agenda.¹⁶ She spoke poetically about music (perhaps downplaying her fluency with theoretical issues), but her musicality was apparently never questioned. Speaking of Beyer’s superb pianism, Cowell once remarked: “I remember Beyer’s playing as having the composer’s intelligence behind it.”¹⁷ Did this “composer’s intelligence” divulge, as Cowell claimed, a “whimsical and original” genius?

From Beyer’s letters we ultimately learn that amidst the many social, professional, and personal territories she navigated, she lived in the practical spaces of everyday life—inviting Cowell for a traditional German Christmas roast goose, for example, or planning meals for his Jane Street visits: “If it is hot, perhaps just berries and milk, some crackers; if it should be cool, I could make some chops and vegetables.”¹⁸ In these daily human details, and in the compositional struggles through which she created some of the most bafflingly original works of the early twentieth century, Beyer lived a life precariously balanced between radiance and “total eclipse.” This is the stuff—the fundamentals and isorhythms—of great biography.

—University of California, Santa Cruz

Notes

¹ For a descriptive discussion of Beyer’s music, see Kennedy and Polansky, “Total Eclipse: The Music of Johanna Magdalena Beyer: An Introduction and Preliminary Annotated Checklist,” *The Musical Quarterly* 80/4 (winter 1996), 719-78; and Polansky’s extensive, analytical liner notes for the New World Records summer 2008 release of John McCaughey and the Astra Chamber Music Society’s *Johanna Beyer: Sticky Melodies*. For information on scores available through the Frog Peak/Johanna Beyer Project, see <http://www.frogpeak.org/fpartists/beyer.lists.html>.

² Letter from Anett Müller, Stadtarchiv, Stadt Leipzig to Cordula Jasper (Berlin), 19 August 1997.

³ The Naturalization Records department in the Queens County Clerk’s Office holds no record, however, of Beyer’s naturalization having occurred between 1906 and 1941.

⁴ Koussevitzky papers, Library of Congress.

⁵ See Judith Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer’s Search for American Music* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 22-23.

⁶ Composers’ Forum transcripts, 20 May, 1936.

⁷ Beyer, program notes for Composers’ Forum concert on 19 May 1937.

⁸ Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 198.

⁹ Kennedy and Polansky’s catalog lists only fifty-three extant compositions, all written between 1931 and 1941.

¹⁰ On typed page marked 7/11 -5-a—, “footnote 7; Johanna Beyer”; in folder labeled “Sidney Cowell book on Henry Cowell [1944] chapter headings, footnotes [12/19/1975]”; NYPL.

¹¹ Cowell to Grainger, 5 June 1940; NYPL.

¹² Sidney Cowell on Henry Cowell, 1944.

¹³ Letter from Frieda Kastner to Arthur Cohn, 14 January 1944; Arthur Cohn Papers, Philadelphia Free Library. I am grateful to Christopher Shultis for bringing this letter to my attention.

¹⁴ All quotations in this paragraph are from Beyer’s Guggenheim application file. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵ See Kennedy and Polansky, “Total Eclipse,” 72.

¹⁶ Letter from Beyer to Alvin Johnson, 30 August 1936; NYPL.

¹⁷ Letter from Cowell to Olive and Harry Cowell, 9 March 1938; NYPL.

¹⁸ Letters from Beyer to Cowell, 22 July 1940 and 10 December 1940; NYPL.

Institute News (continued)

panel on “Inclusion and Access in the Music Classroom” at a joint meeting of the American Musicological Society and the Society for Music Theory in Nashville. She is also currently working on editions of operas by Miriam Gideon and Julia Perry, and continuing her research on intersections of American opera and disability. **Jeffrey Taylor** recently published an article on early jazz pianists Lil Hardin Armstrong and Lovie Austin in Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker, eds., *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* (Duke University Press, 2008), and continues work on his book *Earl Hines and Chicago Jazz*, about the early years of the great pianist and band leader. On 27 October **Carl Clements** presented “Tradition and Innovation in the *Bansuri* Compositions of Pannalal Ghosh” for the annual meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology at Wesleyan University. Also in October **Ray Allen** chaired a panel, titled “The New Lost Ramblers at 50,” at the annual meeting of American Folklore Society in Louisville. This January **Michael Salim Washington** heads to South Africa where he will be teaching jazz courses at the University of KwaZulu Natal and pursuing his own research on the social valences of South African jazz. As he puts it, “I am interested in whether the narrative surrounding jazz in the post-apartheid era has become more liberal or if it has retained its revolutionary overtones.”