

Sound Expertise – Episode 7

TRANSCRIPT prepared by Andrew Dell'Antonio

SPEAKERS

George Lewis, Will Robin

George Lewis 00:00

musicology for me looks like a zone... even though musicology, the demographics is 95% White, you know, but it's still a zone where there are significant possibilities for change.

00:12

[Music]

Will Robin 00:33

Welcome back to Sound Expertise. I'm your host Will Robin. If you're an avid listener to our podcast, and I hope that you are, you'll recall my conversation with Loren Kajikawa a few weeks back, about the degree to which race and musical genre are intertwined, how the exclusion of popular music from music schools also implies the exclusion of African American music from those same schools. This problem goes back to the early history of popular music in the United States, but it's also one that has significant implications for non-popular music. Back in 1996, the composer George Lewis wrote a groundbreaking article titled "Improvised music after 1950." In it, Lewis examined how two worlds of American radical musicians emerged in the post war years, both of which centered around improvisation. Musicians in the tradition of John Cage, who engaged with indeterminacy and the realization of graphic scores in real time, and musicians in the tradition of Charlie Parker, who engaged with bebop and the realization of complex harmonic structures or chord changes in real time. It was not a coincidence, Lewis argued, that these worlds were separated not just by genre, but by race. Despite the commonalities that they shared, the post Parker lineage of Black experimentalists were labeled commercial jazz, and the post Cagean lineage of white experimentalists were seen as inheritors to the tradition of Western art music. This separation, this segregation, has had a profound effect on how we understand the history of American music, and how contemporary musicians understand themselves. And Lewis witnessed these developments firsthand as a longtime member of the AACM, or the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, a pioneering collective of Black experimental composers that arose on the Southside of Chicago in the 1960s. His history of the AACM *A Power Stronger than Itself*, is one of my absolute favorite books about music. Lewis's musicological work has been profoundly influential on my own research and writing. He's also one of my favorite living composers. And I'm very lucky to be hosting him for this conversation, where we'll be talking about his recent work as a musician and scholar and how it fits into his broader ways of thinking about music over many decades.

02:42

[Music]

Will Robin 02:54

So, I wanted to start with a recent essay that you wrote about curation, and a project in which you kind of curated this exhibit of Afro-diasporic music at Darmstadt. Can you talk a little bit about what that project was and kind of what impelled you to work on it?

George Lewis 03:13

Well, I was invited by the Defragmentation Group, which was composed of four curators of contemporary music events and festivals. I thought that one useful thing would be to develop, I call a listening room, a couple of listening rooms. And because it did seem to me... it didn't take much research to find out that Afro-diasporic composers were not really very well represented. I think there was a percentage that they came up with at Darmstadt in 2016 with the GRID group, the gender relations in Darmstadt group, where they ascertain that about seven... commissions about of the... all the commissions given to composers about 7% of them were women in terms of being commissioned or performed. I mean, the corresponding number for Black / Afro-Diasporic composer would be like, I forget what it was point 5% or something...

Will Robin 04:18

I think you said point 04% of the total amount of composers performed at Darmstadt.

George Lewis 04:25

Yeah, which amounted to two people before 2018.

Will Robin 04:30

Right. And it's worth saying this is obviously like one of the most premier festivals for contemporary music in Europe, too. Right. This is not just some rinky dink thing.

George Lewis 04:39

It's known around the world. And I don't think that the numbers, if you're judging from that, are any different for other festivals. So I think it's to their credit that they decided to really think about it and take some steps. But um... and then I think I might have been number three after Alvin Singleton in 1973 and Andile Kumalo in 2008, I think in 2018 they did a piece of mine, they had a piece of Lester St Louis's and one other, so that there might be up to five now. I don't think Donaueschingen has done any. So what we're looking at are very low numbers. And so in a way, and now it can be told really, I developed a listening and viewing room, which ran all day during the conference, for four straight days, where people could just listen to some of the people that *could* have been programmed on some of these festivals, you know`. amazing people, the lacunae, some very famous people who like, you know, Olly Wilson, or Anthony Braxton, or Tania Léon, or you know, some very well-known people were never even considered for this. And so we just had this ... had examples of the scores and yeah, videos were available, and people could just sit and listen and watch. And there was a list of who was on, who was being presented. So the list I wouldn't say it went viral, I don't really know, because I don't ... I don't use Facebook or anything. And so basically, people started asking me about it. And I mean, I don't know, maybe like that's for something else. But that was the basic of... the basics of it, to try to get more awareness for this obvious lacuna in the historiography, the programming, in other words, a whole set

of people, a whole sort of large thrust in classical music was kind of left out for a very long period of time. And in my view, that contributes to the impoverishment of the field and since this is my field, I'm not interested in it being impoverished. And so this is a step we've taken and it's gone further since then we can talk about that if you like.

Will Robin 06:57

Yeah, I mean, one of the things you point out in the essay is that some of these kind of new music festivals like Donaueschingen, which has I guess yet to program any Afro-diasporic composers, they do program Black music, but on these kind of jazz nights, right, and you mentioned the word, the phrase classical music, and it seems like this is a kind of fundamental issue in a lot of your work as a musician and scholar, the way that the work of Black composers is either sequestered into this category of jazz or the category of jazz seems to override the concerns of Afro diasporic composers or...

George Lewis 07:30

You know, I don't think that's the main issue now. First of all, a lot of the people who we programmed on this festival, you know, they're not jazz musicians. I mean, Gorge Walker wasn't, Olly Wilson really wasn't. I mean, Hale Smith, I mean, he had some connections with it, but a lot of them were... they're classically trained and they were literate artists in the tradition of contemporary classical music and its forerunners. So it seemed to me that the sequestering wasn't really the issue. It's more that... although that might have been an issue, but I don't think anybody who was making these kinds of decisions really thought, Oh, this is the jazz night or something. I think there is more to it than that. It's the way I look at it, it's sort of like those histories. You're just not a subject in the discourse. And so when you are not seen as a subject, then there's no reason to include you. It says there's a myth of absence. So I felt as my... as I think is the term that my former student, the musicologist and pianist-composer Dana Reason created. And in her context, it was about contemporary women improvisers. But it's certainly applicable to half of the sport, classical composers as well and that myth of absence is not just festivals in Europe. It also is part of the presence of those people in the United States, their home country. And then we have to look also, that's just the African American side of it. So I meant to say home country, but it's not really because we're talking about a worldwide movement. I included people from Brazil, I included people from Cuba, I included people from South Africa, included people from Cameroon, Nigeria. So that's why I said it was Afro-diasporic, and not just African-American, which I could have. But it turned out to be a worldwide issue. And so it brought up ideas about Pan-Africanism. And imagine a discussion of Pan-Africanism in terms of what contemporary music could be like. And you might have noticed that the article contrasted the situation in classical contemporary music with the situation in contemporary art, where we have Okui Enwezor, the late great curator, Nigerian curator, the first non-White curator of the Documenta festival, and how Documenta, other arts organizations, these kinds of issues of decolonization, thinking about race and gender, trying to tease out sort of thorny matters of identity politics, and things of that sort, a very important part of art making and discussions around art making. And it seems as though contemporary music wasn't really addressing these issues to the same degree, and the discourse wasn't quite as developed. And the notion of who was a subject in the discourse that suddenly you don't have just one Metropole, let's say, right here, you have multiple sites, in which contemporary music emerges. And so that's part of what we're trying to emulate in some way. Although the art people have their problems too.

Will Robin 10:51

When you say, kind of subjecthood or being a subject -- can you flesh out a little bit what you mean by that? Who can... who is allowed to be a subject versus who isn't, if that's the kind of framing that you're using?

George Lewis 11:02

I guess I am thinking about subjects versus objects. And in a way when Fred Moten, the critical theorist, talks about the resistance of the object, he's talking about the Black people under conditions of chattel slavery. And so ... where you're not really considered to be a human being. And so you could bring in people like Sylvia Winter in there, you can bring in all kinds of people. But I started to focus in on why it was that or... Well, let me take another example. Let's take an example from the article you read about Frederick Jameson, where suddenly, in the wake of a lot of postcolonial discourses and the movement for the independence of African people in third world, "people". Suddenly these people became subjects not just objects in the discourses they became... they were people you had to reckon with. They were in possession of themselves and their objects, and you had to ... and they had to be reckoned with on the international stage, and that's what I mean by being a subject. It's sort of faintly philosophical. But the idea is that you are a part of the history and not just an object to be moved around or a background figure something like that

Will Robin 12:18

And reckoning with that it seems like, it's this kind of ...also leads in some ways to this backlash against you know, "identity politics," or whatever which ...

George Lewis 12:27

Well, you know, the funny thing about identity politics, it's often assumed that the people who are demanding entry are the only identity politicians, and it seems to me that we... identity politics are of prime factor in what's keeping these people out.

Will Robin 12:44

When you make I mean, I really love the point you make in the article about you know, you saw I think somewhere -- Paris or something this poster for an exhibit of Polish avant-garde music and art maybe and you know, no one says polish, the Polish avant-garde is identity politics, right? Like cinema. Yeah, it's interesting. So what gets called identity politics and what doesn't.

George Lewis 13:05

And it's funny because I had just come back from Darmstadt and that's exactly what I was trying to do. And -- but not for the Polish avant-garde but for let's say the Black pan-African or Afro-diasporic avant-garde. So I didn't see any real contradiction there, any reason to treat one group differently from another

Will Robin 13:26

I kind of want to maybe zoom out or back up a little bit and kind of think, was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how these kinds of issues have shaped your kind of trajectory as a musician and then I also want to talk about as a scholar, too, since you know, I guess music came first and then writing and

scholarship came later but like, How... To what degree do you see your own life as a musician kind of as part of a conversation like this?

George Lewis 13:56

Well, it's interesting because I've had several phases of being involved in music. You know, the AACM came to, let's say a certain kind of maturity; at the time that I was in it, it was a composers' organization; I mean, it was sort of dominated by composers, which is something we don't hear a lot about at all. But everyone was charged with creating their own compositions. And people seemed to feel that that could be involved with scores in some way, sort of like Fluxus where you're always talking about Fluxus, they are thinking about the score all the time, which is a very odd thing, because Fluxus being so musically grounded even though it's an intermedia sort of collective. The AACM, similarly thought about scores, whether they were graphic scores, or they were fully notated scores, whatever you had, so, and it seemed to them, as it seemed to me -- and I just read this in a very interesting article about Julius Eastman, where I think it was Tiona Nekkia McClodden, who is an intermedia artist, Black intermedia artist. She saw a picture Julius composing. And she said, Well, wow, how unusual. That's ... I don't see pictures of Black people composing. And that's a question that I put to Muhal Richard Abrams when I was putting together my own book, I said, Well, how come there's no picture of you guys composing? And, you know, I'm not sure that I ever thought about it in that way. You know, it was sort of like something that ... `because that's part of the representational matrix that you start to see. I've had ... examples of this have been legion, I mean, a lot of it... when you're talking about representation, representation is kind of a resource. And so I'm taking your question into what you have to do in order to be recognized as subjects. And it's through media, through images, through all kinds of, you know, videos through all kinds of ways of making you apparent in a certain way, um, so, this might require a little editing. But I have to think to what I'm doing now and work backwards. I was always doing, I guess, the scholarship is a different issue. It's not the same thing as a life in music as a composer or a performer, and so on. And what I ... it seemed to me that a lot of the things I was doing, were similar to what a lot of my non-Black colleagues were doing. But that is my case, there was this sort of sequestering off in terms of genre. So I began to see that genre is a representational resource, rather than just a means to intelligibility, which we hear a lot from traditional and even less traditional genre scholars.

Will Robin 16:59

So you.. I mean, I think you've kind of mentioned this in the article, this idea that genre is assumed if people see a black person, they assume jazz, kind of, in some way.

George Lewis 17:10

Well, they don't assume what I'm doing. Sometimes they tell you that you're not doing that. But you know, you can't be too concerned about that. Because everybody... people, you have to look for people who support you. You can't be too concerned about people who don't. So in the end, whatever the project is, my task now is to try to find other people who need this kind of support, and who recognize the issues, who face these issues and to help them overcome them.

Will Robin 17:44

Sure, I interrupted you a little bit. You know, rather than complaining about how you're represented, I mean, it's more that you, you can find ways out, and a lot of the best ways out are through understanding the discourses and the nature of representation. How that operates. Right. So what I guess, maybe this is a way to talk about that kind of transition from musician to scholar, which is that you became more aware of these discourses as a musician, and you end up writing about them, right? The first article in 1996, which a lot of people still read, for some odd reason, although it's far too long, and I think a little rambling... I think it holds up!

George Lewis 18:22

... but it tries to address some of those issues around race and contemporary music and improvisation and composition, and this sort of overused thing now of saying Afrological, Eurological, there's... it's not really a binary, it's just two circuits of representation. And so what happens in each one, and how they actually intersect, but the intersection is very carefully policed in... just as let's say, the so called miscegenation laws in the US and before 1960 ... in similar ways, these kinds of mixtures, which would be at least in the US context, sort of natural and very, you know, not anything to be really worried about were somehow intensely policed. And I mean the history of it is far too long to go into.

Will Robin 19:19

Sure. Well, how did you get to writing that article, which is "Improvised music after 1950", like the headline title...

George Lewis 19:25

Well, let's see. I guess there's a lot of stuff I had to get off my chest haha. And then I read an article -- it was an interview with John Cage by Michael Zwerin who ... I knew Michael Zwerin from when I lived in Paris, and I guess he was letting Cage say all these things. I guess Cage was [inaudible] about Black music, and he was saying these things and they didn't seem very authoritative or even factual [laughs]. But um, but he was being allowed to say them anyway. And so that seemed to be a situation where the authority of Whiteness was the most important issue rather than authority, which would be developed or demonstrated by the trenchancy of one's utterances. So that was the, that was the foundational, you know, burr under the saddle. And then Jann Pasler, my friend and musicologist who was my colleague at the time, encouraged me to actually start writing something, and that's all I remember that was the result. Two pretty good things got done that year. The first was that piece, and the second was the percussion piece with Northstar Boogaloo, which involved hip hop and virtual rapper Quincy Troupe through samples, and computers that deliver the text, and so on. So those got done in the same year, and in a way they're kind of similar but, you know...

Will Robin 20:55

How ... I mean that's an interesting thing because they it seems clear that there is a cross ... an exchange between your work as a scholar and your work as a musician, so like how did... when you say they're related in 1996? What did that kind of mean for you?

George Lewis 21:10

Well, first, I think it was a kind of a turn, a new awakening in a way. You know, I had spent five years at UCSD. And a colleague showed me his work on a rather arcane computer program for sound

generation. He said, Well, this is a great thing, because I'm here in the university, and I can use these resources to develop things that maybe no one thinks they want at first, but might turn out to be useful for a community of some kind. I said, Well, I could do that. And so that article was the first and then later the book on the AACM, which is written from that same kind of attitude. But in terms of the cross fertilization between the two -- A lot of the subjects I read about are situations which I've been personally involved, trying to rethink interactive computer music, and issues of subjectivity there, or trying to think about race, or trying to think about ... you know, right now the work I'm doing on Julius Eastman, which is not nearly as thoroughgoing as what my colleague Ellie Hisama has been doing, or Mary Jane Leach, who actually put Julius's work back on the map. But I'm in there trying to bring my personal perspective from having known him a little bit, and having worked with him. And so these kinds of things, they end up ... if you look at most the articles, they're about communities which I was able to interact with through performance or composition, but who I... also I was able to sort of step back from that and theorize what was going on there.

Will Robin 22:47

Yeah, I mean, it strikes me -- and this is something I'm thinking about as I'm wrapping up my book project. is when you work, write about living musicians, especially living musicians that you know in some capacity and you kind of do the step back and theorization work, it's complicated -- like what has been the kind of reciprocal relationship with your book about the AACM and the AACM itself?

George Lewis 23:11

Well, for me the AACM book, I was hoping that younger generation people who are inclined to these kinds of musical ideas would read this book and sort of... including members of the AACM itself, and see where they came from; the book came out in 2008, the AACM started in 1965. By the time the book came out, at least one of the founding members of the AACM had passed away. And within, by... 25, what is it a couple of years ago, everyone else was gone. So I was interested in them learning about those histories. And also I was interested in connecting up ... I saw, I could see the influence of the AACM in so many quarters of the musical landscape, because I had been in all those places. And I could see, in ways that maybe some of the other people hadn't been in all of them, could see how widespread the influence of the AACM was and how important it was. So that was one of the plans to do that. And then also the AACM as a ... thinking about it representationally, the kinds of ways in which the AACM was framed, a lot of the folklore that had grown up around the AACM, the idea that it had been formed, for example, to sort of make some sort of intervention in the culture of jazz, that turned out to be not true. And it turned out to be not true because Muhal Richard Abrams gave me access to the audio tapes they made of their meetings, where jazz was never really discussed. And so when you think about that, you think, well, why do we... or the idea that it's about, creative music was a synonym for jazz, when it was really just their way of trying to win space by naming themselves in the same way as the naming systems, people naming yourself by taking African names or Arabic names, a mode of self-determination through discourse. So once you do that, that's ... I think that's part of the reason why it turned out to be a little... Well, it's amazing that people still read it after all this time, you know? I mean, now it's 12 years old.

Will Robin 25:21

It's a great book!

George Lewis 25:22

I mean, people still come up and ask me to sign the book, or I think wow, this is very embarrassing, but, but at least it seems to have struck a chord. And the other thing I like about it is that it was not written in a particularly populist... or... way. I mean, it was, it's a, it's an academic 700 page book. [laughs] you know... and so a lot of people told me that people didn't want to have that kind of book, and that they should have a book that would appeal to the masses. What are you talking about? I mean, the best part of the book for me was that the musicians liked it. So this gets into something that you just talked about, which is the complication of writing about communities that you know. And I think really one of the cardinal rules is really do no harm. You know, I mean, muckraking, all that kind of stuff. That wasn't really the point. The idea was to talk about the music. So there are a couple of narratives in there, which are obviously, people's self-fashion fictions about themselves and their journey. And I left those in because I felt that was the way they wanted to be remembered. And when those people eventually passed away, I felt that some good had been done there. Because even the fictional narrative gave me a lot to think about in terms of the aspirations of the people who formed that organization. So we need to find out about that, more than the so called "truth," which is some... that's not what we're looking for. We're looking to a story, maybe even a myth, some of the stuff that I wrote about, it's sort of like, people ask a lot of the questions you're asking me now... I don't really remember what happened anymore. I'm almost 70 years old. So a lot of what I tell you almost appears to be a myth that I've nurtured over the decades. So I hope it's an entertaining one, that's what I can tell you,

Will Robin 27:20

Right. I mean, while at the same time, though, right, you're still ... I guess you're allowing some myths to be told, because they're important to those participants. But at the same time, you're also kind of intervening in that book and into the discourse around, you know, what The Village Voice or the New York Times is saying about these musicians in the 1970s or 80s, or something?

George Lewis 27:40

Well, yes, and the ethnographic component, I learned a lot from reading my colleague Aaron Fox's book, Real Country. Now, there's a lot of stuff in that book that you have to read between the lines to find out what people are really thinking, and you know what they're thinking, but he didn't like bring it out, like well, start condemning people and you know, calling people names and all that; instead it was a, there was a lot to love about the scenes he was in, and the people in them. And so to have that be obscured by, you know, these judgments that you make, and trying to, you know, it wasn't going to work. And so that was a real touchstone for me in working on this; like, he'd been working on it for a number of years -- I don't remember when he finished it. But I realized that he was trying to do something similar to what I've been trying to do and that the ethnographer is, you know, real serious academic. Ethnographers have to think about these issues.

Will Robin 28:39

Right. Yeah. So kind of jumping forward to what you've been ... what we started talking about at the beginning and what you've been kind of grappling more recently, which is, I've seen you give a couple talks about this and the, the shorter essay, as well as the curation essay, the subject of the Creole. Can

you talk a little bit about the ... this idea of Creole or Creolité as a as a kind of metaphor for music making in the 21st century, why that's useful for you?

George Lewis 29:06

Well, I was asked to write about the condition of 21st century music by the then editor of [the journal] _20th century music_. And it was a very interesting task because I started to get involved in periodization issues, like the long 20th century, the short 20th century, or whatever...

Will Robin 29:27

Everyone wants every century to be long. [both laugh] No one wants a short one, I've noticed. Well Hobsbawm, he liked the short 20th. Oh I missed that, I should go back and check...

George Lewis 29:37

Yeah, he liked the short 20th, that's the book ... but anyway, I thought in the end periodization was less about timeframes and more about subjectivation, I started to discover, when I looked at Jameson's "Periodizing the 60s" article, Fredric Jameson, I said, this is where I seem to be going with it, because it seemed -- and then I ran into Gayatri Spivak's article on "World Systems and the Creole," and when she started talking about Creolity as a means to better addressing the ... what was going on in the world, the kinds of mixtures that were happening, and somehow that led me to what I've already been looking at thanks to Alexander Pierrepont who just finished his wonderful book on the AACM _La New Way_. And he introduced me to the Caribbean post-Glissant scholars and novelists like Patrick Chamoiseau Marceau, Raphaël Confiant, and they published a bilingual volume called _Éloge à la Creolité_ or in praise of Creolity or Creolization. So they're taking Glissant, Édouard Glissant a step further, and what they're tending us to, It's a matter of maintaining the creativity of the human that we have to form and recognize that we are coming from these multiple backgrounds. And, you know, I think the quote is something like the son or daughter of a Haitian and a German living in Beijing, when you're faced with multiple identities, multiple modes of being in the world. And so to maintain creative depth, that's what being a creole is. And that's the point that Gayatri Spivak was making, among others. So it seemed to me that this could be the condition of contemporary music. And it already was, in a sense, because of the massive borrowing back and forth, across, between, and around where there are so many references happening now that inform contemporary music, that there's no sense of a real Metropole anymore, like, doesn't all go back... You can't trace it all the way back to, I don't know, Gregorian chant or something, you know, you have to find... you have to look more at it more rhizomatically. So, it's in a way, although I don't use that metaphor of the rhizome, it seems to me that right at the moment, that seems to be a part of what creolization will be all about. And we're seeing some composers, I think the example, I don't know if I developed the Johannes Kreidler example at the time, but there are people in new conceptualism who are trying to think about these issues as well. So, in a way, I'm going to say this, it was like when they gave Barack Obama the Nobel Prize. It wasn't like for anything he had done, but it's for like, for what you could do now that you're the president. And you're not a White president. So you could be thinking about these things, we hope you are. And so take this money and take this notoriety, do something with it. So in a way, my saying that contemporary music finds itself in a situation of creolization is something that I'm hoping that the field recognizes.

Will Robin 32:50

Hmm, you want it to be taken up as a kind of charge?

George Lewis 32:53

Well, that people have to revise their image of themselves. They have to really expand their sense of identity, who they are and what their position is in the world. And I think that's possible. I think it's happening. But it's a slow growing process. And I'm trying to work at it through several ways. I'm trying to influence... And I've been, you know, supported by some institutional frameworks that are thinking about these things in terms of what they call diversity. I've had some former students, musicology students and composers, who have been thinking about these things and developing their own understandings of them, and in their own way, some of them you know, like Ben Pickett, or Ryan Dohoney, you know, Rebecca Kim, one new one, Jane Forner, I think they're going to... they're doing great things or they're going to be. And so that's, I think that's another ... musicology for me looked like a zone... even though musicology ... the demographics is 95% White, you know, but it's still a zone where there are significant possibilities for change, I feel. So I've tried to align myself with the field. Although I don't... I still wonder about the extent to which I'm really considered a musicologist. But I don't really care. [both laugh] I go to the meetings, I teach all the students, and I have a great time.

Will Robin 34:21

Well, I want to come back to that kind of like direction of musicology. But I'm curious about the, you know, the Creolité thing like how, how do you see that as being, let's say, I don't know if improvement is the right word, but a difference from you know, like postmodernism, right? like, what does Creolité give us as a concept that postmodernism might not, or that other concepts that have been applied to, you know, the condition of art music in the last 30 or 40 years?

George Lewis 34:47

Well, the issue... I think the issue with postmodernism was a flattening of categories. And I was one that was interested in the idea of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, let's say, being a postmodern organization. But it seems to me that a Creolized organization is much closer to the mark, because it allows us to take into account a fuller range of perspectives. You know, it seemed ... I mean, postmodernism could be a predecessor, or actually not really a predecessor because creolization comes along before postmodernism, in some ways, and certainly the idea of the creole has a much longer history. So I wasn't looking... I guess I'd be closer to a post-colonial perspective. But even there, the idea of actually decolonizing the arts seemed closer to what creolization could give us. And the other obvious thing about it for me ... the first creolization talk that I gave, which you have, which the article is based on, was done at Donaueschingen in 2017, I think it was, and I'd been to Donaueschingen and as you say, I mean, I think was 1976. That was the last time I'd been there. I went with Anthony Braxton, and we played on the jazz night as a duo. And I thought it was very odd then that we were doing some of the same things, some of the same structure that people on the so-called classical side were doing. And some of these people I was hearing for the very first time, I think I heard a Michael Finnissy piece for the first time, things of that sort. So I was surprised at the affinity between what Michael was doing what we were doing. But that affinity wasn't really being recognized, but in a creolizing envelope of listening, and the field, it would be recognized, understood. And I think even a lot of the people who wouldn't have been aware of that back then are thinking about it now. So you have to sort of be prepared to stick it out over the long haul, in order to think about change.

Will Robin 36:57

And so to the kind of, you know, I don't know future of musicology question, you know, we ... and I know you've read Loren Kajikawa's essay, which is... I talked with Loren in an earlier episode of this podcast about kind of how to how to fix, or deal with, the kind of current condition of the music school. And I'm, I mean, we don't have to talk about that. But I am curious about kind of where you see ... what are the strengths of musicology as a field going forward that need to be built on versus the things that need to be left behind? Like, where do you want the field to be headed?

George Lewis 37:31

What you know, I'm, I'm going to say that a number of people oriented me to their view of musicology. One was Jann Pasler, who I already talked about my colleague there. Another was Samuel Floyd, who developed the Center for Black Music Research, and developed a number of publications, probably some of those were... those were my first publications. Which I'm still running on that, but then later, Elaine Sisman, who was the President of the American Musicological Society at the time, and who was... who, for some reason being a total rookie at the AMS, put me on the presidential panel with Ruth Solie and Richard Taruskin, and her and, I thought, god, this was like, could have been lambs to the slaughter time, you know, but they were very nice to me. But what I learned from that was that musicology, we had kind of an inferiority complex vis-a-vis the larger intellectual world. That is, no one was really looking to our field for transformational discourses, even though they all listen to music!
[laughs]

Will Robin 38:47

Right. Yeah, that's the funny problem. Right.

George Lewis 38:52

And so that seemed to be a lot of the topic of that time. I think that's starting to change now. I think people first of all are aware of the issue. I wrote the foreword to Jann Pasler's, edited volume *Writing through Music*, in which we address this issue of... that a lot of the intellectual, you know, organs of the press, let's say New York Review of Books, or Atlantic Monthly, or London Review of Books, whatever, you know, they don't really talk much about classical music or even less classical contemporary music, which is my sort of field within musicology. And so, even though there are all kinds of discourses coming out of that, which would be very salient to thinking about the future of the planet and where we are going. I'd say that in some ways, the composers themselves have circled the wagons for a while and sort of not dealing with these kinds of discourses. There would be a public transcript about it. And there would be a private transcript. And of course, I would hear both. And so ... they were very different. And so part of my plan was to make public the private transcript and encourage the others to really come forward with their ideas, and also to come forward with their misconceptions so that everyone can talk about them. So the reason why I see musicology as being a place where that can happen, is because of the commitment to scholarship, the commitment to, as I see it, finding what you find and making that clear and being prepared to upend your understanding of what... of your beliefs, to be prepared to encounter considerable challenges to your beliefs.

Will Robin 40:44

Great. Well, thank you so much for this fascinating conversation. I really appreciate it.

George Lewis 40:49

Well, thanks a lot, Will!

40:50

[music]

Will Robin 40:57

Many, many thanks to George E. Lewis, the Edwin H. Case Professor of American music at Columbia University. If you don't own it already, you should go out and buy his book, *A Power Stronger than Itself: the AACM and American experimental music*. He's published a lot more than that, links to which are over at our website, soundexpertise.org. As always, I'm @seatedovation on Twitter and our producer and theme music composer D. Edward Davis is warmsilence on SoundCloud. Please subscribe to Sound Expertise and we would appreciate it if you would write us a review on your platform of choice. I'd suggest giving us five stars or 4.5 stars or even if you really really hate the podcast, I think four stars is fair. Next week, I'll be speaking with the musicologist Marian Wilson Kimber about American women and elocution in the 19th century. See you then.

41:44

[music]