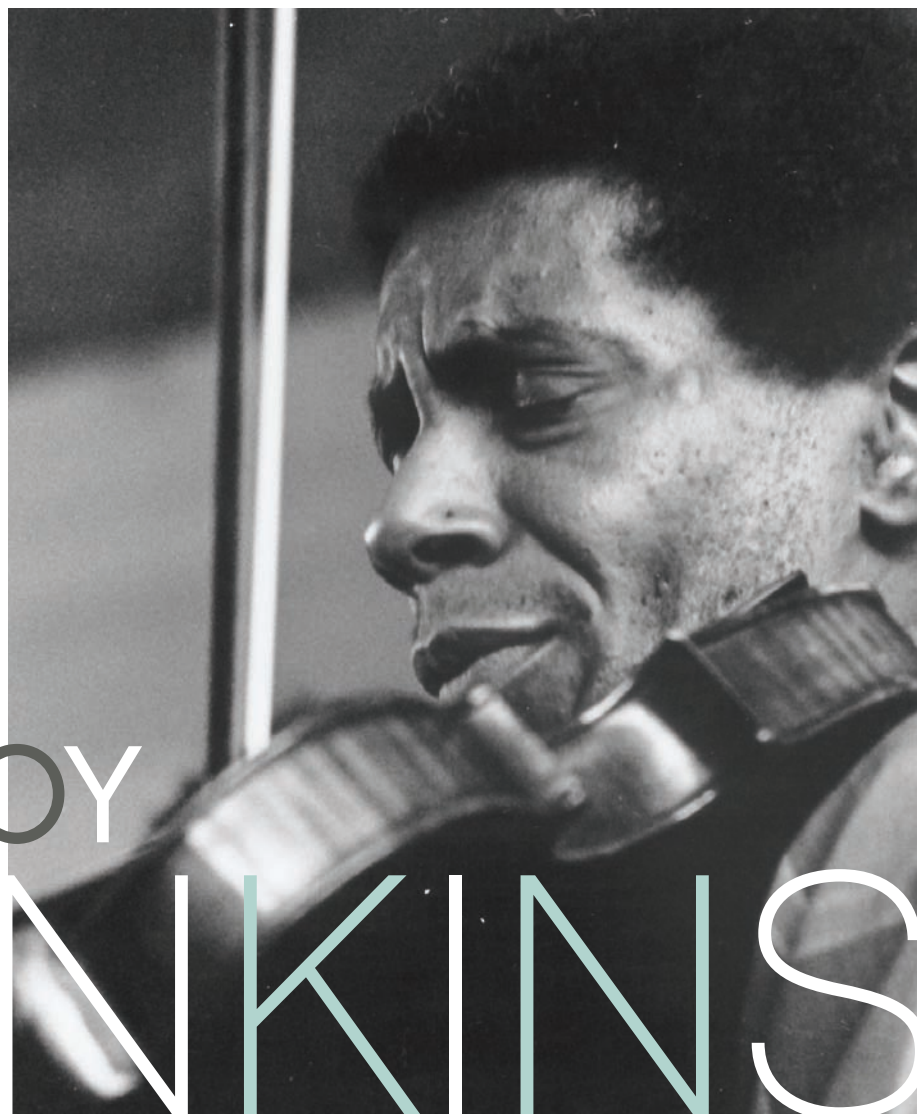


This article is the third in a series on issues of racial diversity as they affect the field of chamber music.

LEROY JENKINS  
IN CHICAGO, CA. 1968



# LEROY JENKINS

by George E. Lewis

The recent passing of Leroy Jenkins provides an opportunity for all of us to reflect upon the recent legacy of new American music. The work of this uniquely diverse composer and violinist served as a spearhead in bringing the border-crossing impulse of African American music to American art music of all kinds. This syncretism, I believe, is the most important American art-music tendency of the late 20th century, and a marker by which American music will be known in the 21st.

For much of the 20th century, the boundary between high and low culture in the United States was symbolized musically by the great competition between the jazz and classical traditions, a stand-in for a more fundamental cultural struggle. In the musical realm, these debates tended at first to focus on how—and indeed, whether—an emerging American “art music” should adopt sounds associated

with jazz. In 1930, William Grant Still's optimistic belief in the viability of a “Negro Symphony Orchestra” was based on his own experience as both composer and performer in classical, jazz, and popular idioms. Still predicted, that for the players in such an orchestra, “their training in the jazz world will even have enhanced their virtuosity, and they will be able to play perfectly passages that would be difficult for a man trained only in the usual academic way.” Here, Still's striking prescience lay in realizing that a focus on sound alone was not enough. For a new American music, historically imbued and culturally situated bodies would provide the base for the music of the future.

In the 1940s, as bebop musicians inspired the world by demonstrating the possibility of an art music based in improvisation, debates began to turn once more upon the how and the whether of improv-

To say that Jenkins “pushed the limits of jazz” is to miss a larger point. He—along with many other artists of African descent—was an integral part of late-20th-century experimentalism.

## & the 20th Century

isation—and, by the 1950s, indeterminacy, the younger Pollux to improvisation's Castor. The lessons learned from improvisation, where, as I have written elsewhere, “the possibility of internalizing alternative value systems is implicit from the start,” were crucial in jumpstarting the next phase in the history of American musical ideas, the emergence of internationalism in the midst of the “American Century.”

As performance historian Sally Banes has shown, the (white) avant-garde of the 1960s—as well as an entity that Banes did not recognize, a black avant-garde—pursued internationalism in different ways and for different purposes. The internationalism of black musicians foregrounded what Paul Gilroy later termed the “Black Atlantic,” a term that traced movements, colonizations, and settlements along the historical way-stations of the triangular slave trade. This tendency to look outward included Asia and Oceania as well as Africa; the repetition music of John Coltrane—“repetition with a signal difference,” to be sure, as James Snead put it—drew for its inspiration upon the emerging internationalism and postcolonialism of that era, impelling musicians of the 1950s and 1960s to create pieces whose titles celebrated the emerging independence of African nations.

Given a racialized intellectual and social climate whose warped effects did not, by any means, exclude music-making, artists of African descent who came of creative age in the 1960s and 1970s were perhaps as crucially invested as any Americans in the border-crossing freedoms and mobility that the civil rights movement and its successors—second- and third-wave feminism, gay rights, and the various ethnic advocacy movements—were then placing on the larger U.S. cultural and political agenda. This internationalized drive for

mobility was the cultural staging ground for the innovations of Leroy Jenkins.

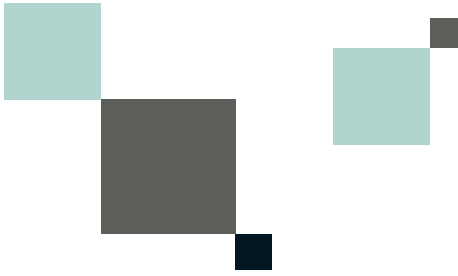
By obscuring the pioneering role of artists of color in questioning artistic and cultural borders, both journalists and scholars invented labels (such as “totalism,” “new common practice,” “transethnicism,” and the like) that evince a generally poorly developed engagement with issues of race and ethnicity in American experimentalism. On the other side of the aisle, “world of jazz” discourses that cordon musicians off from interpenetration with other musical art worlds have proved insensitive to the ways in which the work of latter-day musicians such as Jenkins has extended across borders of genre, race, geography, and musical practice, contributing to the breakdown of genre definitions and the mobility of practice and method that crucially characterizes the present-day musical landscape.

Thus, despite a *New York Times* obituary's characterization of him as a “violinist who pushed the limits of jazz,” Leroy Jenkins's influence and legacy overflowed journalistic and scholarly notions of genre, challenging future music historians to look more closely at what is proving to be one of the most dynamic periods in American music, where composers refuse to adhere to the ethnicized limitations on practice and genre held as axiomatic by previous generations. By any reasonable standard, we can clearly position Jenkins as an integral part of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century American experimentalism—indeed, one of its more prominent exponents. Across a career that spanned more than five decades, the life of Leroy Jenkins exemplifies the geographic mobility that rugged American experimentalism has displayed, a diversity that I would encourage the current generation of music historians to examine more closely, and perhaps even embrace.

This drive to mobility is symbolized most crucially by the Great Migration, the largest internal movement of people in U.S. history. Jenkins was a child of the Migration, and for his family, it all started when his great-uncle Buck Jenkins hopped a freight train bound for Chicago in the 1920s, and sent for his brother Henry, who married his boss's niece. In 1932, Leroy Jenkins entered the world, growing up in extremely modest working-class circumstances on the South Side of Chicago.

When young Leroy was eight or nine, his aunt's boyfriend, Riley, brought a curious musical instrument to the house. It was a violin, and when Riley played some finger-busting classical marvel on it, the young boy was transfixed. He pleaded with his mother to get him a violin, and his first instrument, a half-size, red-colored violin, came from Montgomery Ward by mail order. It cost \$25, which his mother paid for on credit. In a 1998 interview, Jenkins told me that he fully realized that at first, he had “a terrible sound. I almost gave it up, but I figured I'd keep doing it and I'd sound like Riley.”

Soon, Jenkins joined the church orchestra and the choir at Ebenezer Baptist Church, under the direction of Dr. O.W. Frederick, who became Jenkins's first formal music teacher. Jenkins grew up under the baton of Dr. Frederick, with his spouse, Miss Rita Love, at the piano, performing at church socials, teas and banquets, often playing the music of black composers such as William Grant Still, Clarence Cameron White, and Will Marion Cook. I would submit that the roots of Jenkins's mobility as an artist are to be found here—with his family and his community. Indeed, another great musician to whom Dr. Frederick taught the violin was Ellas McDaniel, later known as “Bo Diddley.”



## “In Paris, Jenkins and the ensemble he formed with Smith, McCall, and Braxton explored silence, space, timbre, extended instrumental techniques, collectivity, and form.”

At Chicago's DuSable High School, Jenkins studied with “Captain” Walter Dyett, celebrated far and wide for the pupils he had nurtured to success in the music world, such as Martha Davis, Dinah Washington, Nat “King” Cole, Milt Hinton, Richard Davis, Eddie Harris, Dorothy Donegan, Gene Ammons, Clifford Jordan, John Gilmore, and later, Joseph Jarman, Jerome Cooper, and Henry Threadgill. Like Dyett, Jenkins became a multi-instrumentalist, playing saxophone and clarinet as well as violin, and attending historically black Florida A&M University on (of all things) a bassoon scholarship. There, Leroy continued his classical violin studies with his other major teacher, Bruce Hayden, as well as teaching himself the craft of composition.

Jenkins spent nearly fifteen years in the South, and by the time he came back to Chicago in 1965, he had given up his other instruments to concentrate on a more or less conventional jazz violin repertoire. One day, he went to a concert of the music of Roscoe Mitchell, Kalaparusha Maurice McIntyre, Malachi Favors, Alvin Fielder, and Thurman Barker—the beginnings of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. Fascinated, Jenkins soon found himself taking part in AACM events. “I thought to myself, these cats are crazy, but they were dead serious. So I joined up, and after a while I changed my whole style on the violin. The atmosphere was free enough for you to do your thing. I didn't have to copy off anybody. It was different from what I had associated with jazz before.”

This was the beginning of the first odyssey of Leroy Jenkins. By 1969, he was in Paris with the first generation of AACM musicians who extended the trope of the Great Migration to Europe—Joseph Jarman, Leo Smith, Anthony Braxton,

Roscoe Mitchell, Malachi Favors, Steve McCall, and Lester Bowie. “L'École de Chicago” was breaking all the rules; no sound was excluded and no tradition was sacrosanct. As the AACM musicians realized that their music was succeeding in an international arena, Jenkins observed with his customary self-deprecating humor, “Country boys from Chicago, we weren't used to that kind of thing.”

In Paris, the explorations of silence, space, timbre, extended instrumental technique, collectivity, and form being pursued by Jenkins and the collective ensemble he formed with Smith, McCall, and Braxton exposed not only the infrastructural limits, but also the cultural provincialism of the then internationally unquestioned naturalization of the jazz club as the genetically best-suited environment for black musicians of all kinds. As Leo Smith told me in an interview about the period, “If you had Braxton, Jenkins, Smith, and McCall, and we would drop a silence bigger than a table, what do you do? Do you say, ‘Hey, Gimme another drink,’ or what?”

Returning to the United States in 1970, Jenkins moved to New York City, where he began a second odyssey. By the late 1970s, he seemed to be everywhere at once. He was on his way to becoming the major improvising violinist of the 20th century, inventing the postmodern conception of the instrument and leaving an indelible concert and discographic legacy, particularly with one of the signal groups of the period, the Revolutionary Ensemble. But Jenkins didn't stop there. He fulfilled commissions by the Kronos Quartet and the Brooklyn Philharmonic. He became a Guggenheim Fellow. He produced the Bessie Award-winning ballet-opera, *The Mother of Three Sons*, in collaboration with choreographer Bill T. Jones. Jenkins combined hip-hop/jazz fusion and Germanic legend with his

whimsically titled opera *Fresh Faust*, and engaged electronic and computer music as early as the mid-1970s, culminating in work with writer Mary Griffin and pianist “Blue” Gene Tyranny on an interactive video opera.

Ultimately, no form of creativity was foreign to Leroy Jenkins, and the legacy he left us, of the sheer joy of making new music in an environment of artistic mobility and cultural diversity, will endure. In that light, we need to affirm, to a later generation of composers, improvisers, and musical artists who expect that their practices will inevitably escape easy categorization, and for whom a postmodern landscape of mobility is assumed, that Leroy Jenkins and his work, quite simply, prepared the ground for their new and very possible world.

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