

Greg
Tate

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I first encountered Greg Tate's writing in the *Village Voice* in the early '80s; the dazzling combination of idiomatic and erudite expression in the pieces he wrote on Cecil Taylor, Afrika Bambaataa, King Sunny Adé, and others was highly impactful on me, and I used to look for his byline back then with as much avid anticipation as I did those of Lester Bangs, Greil Marcus, Nick Tosches, and Richard Meltzer. Tate's marvelously insightful two-part essay on Miles Davis's electric period for *DownBeat* in 1983 (a time when that period of Davis's work was still very underappreciated)—particularly the attention Tate paid to analyzing and contextualizing Pete Cosey's guitar playing—remains to this day one of my favorite pieces of music writing (much of Tate's work from this era can be found in his 1992 essay collection *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*). After reading it, I resolved to find Miles's 1975 live albums. They were totally out of print, but I managed to acquire a used copy of *Pangaea* (CBS Sony, 1975) from Golden Disc on Bleecker Street—the first time I spent big money on a rare record.

I met Greg in the late '90s at a DJ Spooky set in a bar on Bleecker, several blocks east of Golden Disc. A few years later the *Wire* asked me to do an Invisible Jukebox with him, and I was also happy to book his group Burnt Sugar at Tonic. Their genre-dissolving concept was right at home at a venue that was also eager to host Butch Morris, whose "Conduction" system Greg was adapting for his own purposes in the group. In assembling these interviews, I realized I hadn't really talked to anyone about the experience of working as both a musician and a music writer; Greg addresses this "co-profession" briefly in the introduction to the second collection of his writings, *Flyboy 2: The Greg Tate Reader* (2016), but I wanted to probe it further with him. We compared notes over Zoom one afternoon last December.

When did you first start playing guitar, in relation to listening to music and thinking about writing about music? And what came more naturally to you, playing music or writing about music?

I was one of those kids who started reading fairly advanced material pretty early. I remember really being interested in science and science fiction in third grade and getting books on lasers and astronomy, and things like fiction by [Isaac] Asimov, and L. Sprague de Camp, and Samuel Delany, by around fourteen, fifteen years old. I later became voracious in terms of acquisition of vinyl—acquisition across genres, but really centered on the history of jazz. I made a point of going out and getting things from every period, so I had a working knowledge of how the music had evolved.

I dabbled in guitar through high school, because [laughs] every other person in my high school played in a band, played bass or guitar, was interested in Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, Santana, Kiss, Bowie, and that kind of thing. But I was still kind of more interested in collecting music, listening to music, reading about music, and thinking about music, all the way through college. And then something spurred me, right before I moved to New York, to buy a Strat, so that would be about '82. I'd been writing for [Robert] Christgau [editor at the *Village Voice*] for about a year and I hooked up with some friends here, started playing in a jam band. And being around Ronny Drayton and Vernon Reid, and [James] "Blood" Ulmer, by osmosis, helped me pull together some technical things that I'd been struggling with. So my playing kind of advanced exponentially just from being in New York and being around all these hot-shot New York guitar players.

But it wasn't until '91, when I was about thirty-four, that I really felt serious enough about it that I

felt like I had to start a band and start writing songs and playing out, so that was the band Women in Love, and I really grew tremendously doing that. That band was kind of the first experiment, 'cause even more than guitar playing I got really into writing songs, pretty complicated affairs, and trying out all these different ideas and styles and genres in the same band. I was working with people who were definitely genre-mobile, concept-mobile. It came together enough that after three years we did our first album, and our producer was Al Bouchard, of the Blue Öyster Cult, because I knew his wife, Deborah Frost, the writer. And Al liked what he heard enough to bring his acumen into the studio. I'm as proud of that Women in Love album, *The Sound of Falling Bodies at Rest* [Madrina, 1994], as I am of *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*.

So once I committed to it, it became as fluid as writing. But that band dissolved around '95. Kept playing, working with different people, putting together these large ensemble projects, and eventually around '99 it morphed into Burnt Sugar because I was starting to realize I wanted to do something that built on the *Bitches Brew* [Miles Davis; Columbia, 1970] template. Not even so much in terms of the sound but the way Miles had of working with musicians in the studio and with [producer] Teo [Macero]. Realizing that a lot of what Teo, Lee "Scratch" Perry, and George Clinton were doing in the studio with effects were things that modern players had incorporated into their sounds. The people I was working with in that initial version—Vijay Iyer, Morgan Craft, Jared Nickerson, Qasim Naqvi, and various other folks—were the kind of contemporary New York improvisers who've developed this very versatile approach to sound-making on their instruments, had ways of kind of expanding the borders inside of whatever genre they played in. They had absorbed all that music

that had come through in the '70s and '80s, so it was just part of their modernist and postmodernist improvisational vocabulary.

I had been following Butch [Morris] since before the first numbered "Conduction" at the Kitchen, which I attended. He stood out as a cornetist and a composer—even with David Murray in the mid-'70s, he was somebody everybody was looking at as a writer as well as an instrumentalist. That first full-on Conduction album he released, *Current Trends in Racism in Modern America* [Sound Aspects Records, 1985], was this great remix of what was going on downtown, with Christian Marclay, Yasunao Tone, John Zorn, and Frank Lowe. It was interesting because it was a much more ethnically integrated group than normally played together at that time. That was what I felt was the inside critique built into the whole thematic about current trends in racism in modern America—you had these postmodernists who lived on the same block, but just because of that kind of tension between Black and white jazz cats, New Music cats, it made for a sometimes racially Balkanized scene. And then Butch began to do all these Conductions with ensembles from different countries, mixing and matching downtown jazz cats with traditional Senegalese, Chinese and Japanese, and Turkish musicians in the '80s and '90s. That had a serious impact. Butch kind of represented the twenty-first-century version of what Miles and [Frank] Zappa and Sun Ra and other people had been doing in terms of really approaching the improvising ensemble as a paintbrush, canvas, and palette—not to mention a repository for ideas you had about the role of society in music and vice versa. If you wanted to do something more than a jam band with this great assemblage of players, that seemed the way you could have the kind of articulation and control over the outcome that I had as a writer.

But to expand on the answer to your initial question [*laughs*], I'd definitely say going through the growing pains of actually playing music in front of an audience softened my critical attack [*laughs*]. You get humbled about anybody's nerve and capacity to put themselves in front of people.

Well, that's why a lot of musicians get down on critics; they feel like a critic's never been in their shoes and critics don't really know what what's involved in doing the work and performing.

If I look at people who didn't play who were writing at the time, it was still important, or it's necessary, because I think music exists in the public sphere in a place that's beyond the practitioner as well. It has a social resonance. And certainly by the time you get to the music that people began making in the '60s and '70s it's about something else, anyway, other than chops or genre. It's meant to connect and conjure up extra-musical forces.

For my part, what I've found is that with writing, I really like going over it over and over and over and getting every single thing right before I send it to an editor, and that I have less patience for doing that with music in a recording studio. And also improvisation is something that I really value and practice in music and that would never occur to me to do with writing. I wouldn't knock out a first draft and just send it off into the world that way.

[*Laughs.*] Yeah, I'm probably the opposite. Particularly writing for the *Voice*, you maybe only have a week to one day [*laughs*] to turn something in.

Right, I haven't really worked with deadline journalism like that so much, just a little bit.

If you've got Christgau as an editor, if you didn't go over every line, he would. And you had to justify your choices. At the *Voice*, too, you were encouraged to take risks with style and content, with statement, with signification. I had experiences with Christgau where I'd turn something in and he'd basically say it was incoherent and unpublishable, but then after about an hour [*laughs*] of going through it together—because you went through everything line by line even before they got a computer system, so you'd be bringing in your manuscript and sit there, at the dean's knee, going through that dread-producing, anxiety-provoking process with him. I became, because of deadlines, a pretty fast writer, but I also became somebody who learned to slow down and move through it line by line, graf by graf, in the second draft process. Everybody's different, though. I remember looking over [*Voice* film critic] Jim Hoberman's shoulder once, looking at his computer screen, and it looked like complete gibberish, and he told me that was his process, which was he would just spew it out and then refine it.

That's kind of what I tend to do, which is to just get the ideas out first and then I have to keep going back to finesse it and stylize it.

I started out, in terms of doing any serious writing, with poetry and then performance poetry, so I know that translated into those first ten years at the *Voice*, thinking about everything as a performance. 'Cause the other thing you definitely had at the *Voice* was a sense of an audience; you knew the whole paper was like a show for people every week, and you knew that from letters to

the editor—'cause people were getting bomb threats for what they were writing, and not just the political writers! You also knew that folks were reading it from just being in the greater New York music community. There's two examples: Maybe one of the first times I went to the old Ritz to see a show I pulled out my ID and the guy working the door said, "Are you Iron Man?"¹ Yeah, I read you in the *Voice*." And there was another moment: I had to get a lock changed in the apartment where I lived in Sugar Hill, Harlem, and a burly Latinx brother comes over, and when I'm paying him he says, "I read you all the time in the *Voice*." I was like, "Oh man, this thing has got reach." Stanley Crouch was the person who discovered, from the circulation people, that if a Black story was on the cover of the *Voice* it sold maybe a thousand or maybe a couple thousand more issues, so he used that to kind of jack up his rate. Of course we then realized it applied for all of us. As much as anybody performing in theater and music in New York, at the *Voice* you definitely realized you had a performance platform for your writing. And a certain amount of a kind of power and cachet came from that too, for better or worse [*laughs*].

I'm always thinking about Godard, who said something in an interview like, "Whether I write an essay or make a film, it's all the same." To him filmmaking was a direct transference of what he was writing about cinema when he was a critic, just putting it into practice. What you were saying before about Burnt Sugar springing from this kind of continuum of the Miles '70s bands and Funkadelic and Butch et al., it's almost like instead of writing an essay about how all these things are connected, you formed a group to do that. Do you see

the group as an extension of the sort of through lines you were trying to establish in your writing?

Yeah, certainly. Jon Caramanica actually dubbed Burnt Sugar "living criticism"—he was the first person to wed the two functions. I didn't really think about it in a defined conceptual way. Because even before I started writing there was just a whole set of propositions about Black music and its history and the way it functioned or circulated in the world that was important to me. I came from a very political family. My folks were actively involved in the civil rights and Black Power movements and the African Liberation movement in Dayton, Ohio, where I was born. My mother, Mama Florence Tate, was a press secretary for Marion Barry and Jesse Jackson during their first political runs. I got into studying Black music through [Amiri] Baraka's book *Black Music* [1968]; that's my conversion experience, in terms of becoming obsessive about jazz, and the conversation around jazz, and jazz collecting. Those things really informed the first writing I did. And I recognize that even as early as maybe the first four or five pieces I did for the *Voice*—I'm really interested in this tension between Black subjectivity and Black political collectivity and the working-class Black community in music. Cornerstone of jazz anyway, but when I look at some of the kinds of propositions and conclusions even in reviewing Sun Ra, Bad Brains, Blood Ulmer, this idea kept making its way to the fore.

I also remember you did the foreword to the New Music Distribution Service catalog way back in the mid-'80s, and you're talking in there about how it was a good guide for people who had "extraterrestrial earlobes." NMDS was a real booster for the cross-pollination thing we were talking about with Zorn and Butch, and Hal

1 Tate used the high school nickname in early bylines.

Willner fits in there too, but also it's just about being open to all different kinds of music.

And that's the time in funk and R&B where people are kind of expanding the whole notion of what the genre could do. You got Thom Bell and Gamble & Huff and Curtis Mayfield—they're bringing all the serious classical orchestration into the funk and R&B. P-Funk, Funkadelic are all over the map; when you listen to an album like *Maggot Brain* [Westbound, 1971], it's like every cut could have come from a different band. Even in DC, and certainly in New York, you could go out and hear your people play with all of these ideas around sound and genre and style. I came to New York in time to catch the last of the loft scene as well, where you got to hear so many different people's conception of what a jazz band could be. So it would be [Henry] Threadgill one set; he might have Anthony Davis in his band, and then Anthony Davis was the leader the next set. Whatever mythology has kind of survived of what that moment was like creatively, it's all true—people were doing whatever the fuck they wanted to do, on a nightly basis, based on their whole relationship to music, and canon, and genre.

A lot of these musics were still in kind of a developmental phase, so, like any person who's in a developmental phase, they're trying out all this different stuff just to see what they like and don't like, and what works and what doesn't work. And I think it's also a little bit based on the whole idea of appealing to an audience—if they didn't go for this thing, maybe they'll go for that thing. Lou Reed got his start cranking out songs for this low-budget record label; he would write a surf song, a motorcycle song, this and that, with the idea that

someone will buy this record for the surf song, someone else will buy it for the motorcycle song.

I just found out that George Clinton, at the beginning of his career, spent a hell of a lot of time in the Brill Building hearing all of those people who were still there—[Burt] Bacharach and Carole King—all of those, as much as Holland-Dozier-Holland or anything coming out of Motown, were major influences. And it explains why he became such a versatile writer as well. As much as people talk about him as a non-musician—to a certain extent that's true, but he's the one who's coming up with all those lyrics and melodies. And he comes out of doo-wop quartets; he's got that notion of harmony, how you stack vocals.

When you listen to Funkadelic or Sun Ra or any of these large ensembles now, sort of post-Burnt Sugar, do you hear it in a new way? Even just after being in the recording studio—if you listen to Bitches Brew now, do you hear it differently after having had the experience of doing the Burnt Sugar stuff in the studio?

It's really interesting 'cause I think records that are foundational for you, you never lose your sense of innocence, your sense of surrender to the thing. I mean, *Bitches Brew* became the template for *Burnt Sugar* because I realized, "Oh wow, that's my favorite recording of all time," but I would never have thought that until I read—you know *Mojo* magazine has that great little column where they ask people what's your favorite Friday night record, favorite Sunday morning record, and favorite record of all time, so one column was Bootsy Collins and another column was Ike Turner and they both said their favorite record of all time was *Rumors* [Warner Bros., 1977] by Fleetwood Mac. So obviously

there was a surprise element to that, but it made me ask the question of myself and I tried not to be premeditated, I just said, “Let me see what floats up,” and it was *Bitches Brew*. And then I realized, it’s not my favorite Miles record, or even my favorite fusion record, but it had a kind of meta quality to it—that it was brought into being by Miles functioning as an auteur, that it extended to his collaboration with Teo, to the Mati [Klarwein] album cover—it just existed as a thing that was kind of wholly musical and then extremely meta-musical beyond that. So when I listen to *Bitches Brew* I’m just listening to *Bitches Brew*, with no relationship to anything that I’ve done or that I’m doing; it just has a certain kind of a purity in my memory. Any of those things from when we were fourteen or fifteen, listening to music, those things are still visceral.

But a lot of times I can hear things in production that I wouldn’t have grasped either because I was only fifteen or sixteen, or because I didn’t have any experience with being in a studio; and a lot of guitar sounds were very mysterious to me as a player growing up and now I understand how they did it.

When you’re in the studio recording or mixing or mastering you realize you have a pretty evolved sensibility around listening, but when I go back to those older things I don’t dissect in that kind of way. They exist in terms of your reference points. There’s things that, no matter how many times you listen to them, they never grow old; you’ve got this emotional and intellectual relationship to them.

Especially with the Miles ’70s stuff, you could go through those records and listen only to Michael Henderson, or listen only to Pete [Cosey]; you could pick

any one player and it would be interesting. And so much is going on collectively that it takes years to get your head around it.

I did notes for the fortieth anniversary of *Bitches Brew* and I was talking to Bennie Maupin, and he said Miles turned to him and said, “Think of the music as a big cauldron of soup and we’re the witches in there stirring.” “Witches,” not “bitches,” cause “bitches” actually came from Betty Davis. Miles was known for calling musicians he liked a “bitch of a player.” But it is the ensemble quality of that record that made it so potent, ’cause Miles had that whole thing of the only way you get something new in music is you take the best musicians you can find and you make them play beyond what they know. There’s nobody playing any clichés on *Bitches Brew*; they’re forced into this environment where they’ve got to come up with wholly new solutions and responses in the moment, you know? And that’s all going on on this ensemble level, which is then collaged into a compositional shape by Teo.

I did a gig with Henry Kaiser about two years ago—I was touring in California and he’s a really old friend and former teacher of mine, and I said, “Let’s do a gig together while I’m out there.” He’s been doing the “A Love Supreme Electric” [John] Coltrane project, although it’s actually more the drummer’s project than his, but he said, “Let’s do that and in the second set we’ll do some Miles stuff—let’s do Jack Johnson, and you’ve got to play all the John McLaughlin parts.” Now, I’ve had Jack Johnson [Columbia, 1971] since I was fifteen, but I’ve never sat down and tried to learn his parts, and nowadays of course there’s some guy on YouTube who’s breaking down every single lick for you, and it was amazing. When you analyze what McLaughlin’s doing, his

chording falls right in between R&B guitar playing and jazz playing, and McLaughlin has a background in both but he's not really synthesizing it that way until Miles gets him to do it.

And the McLaughlin and the Pete that we know from those records—they're players who emerged from playing with Miles, kind of getting out of their own ways and turning up [their amps]. You hear all the bootlegs of that band, and it's really not until Dominique Gaumont comes into the band [in 1974] that everybody starts turning up. Miles said he brought him in just to fuck with Reggie Lucas, even though Dominique was a very underdeveloped player, 'cause he thought Reggie was kind of lazy. But the consequence of him being in that band is that everything goes up to ten, and then we hear Pete with all the distortion and all the effects; it's all the stuff he was holding back.

Yeah, in '73 it's so much different than '75. Some of it is, you know, if you get asked to join Miles's band, you might not want to blow him off the stage right away [laughs]. I'd imagine there's a certain sense of decorum until he says, "Play some Hendrix! Turn it up or turn it off!" like he told Mike Stern.

Dominique comes in and all he knows is Jimi; he totally sets the stage for everybody else getting louder and more distorted. At a certain point Miles totally embraced having three loud-ass, funky guitarists in the band.

Michael Snow