FACE TO FACE

At the nexus of jazz and hip-hop with Jason Moran

BY ALEX ABRAMOVICH / PHOTOGRAPHY BY CLAY PATRICK MCBRIDE

The 32-year-old jazz pianist Jason Moran first caught the public eye a decade ago, when he joined saxophonist Greg Osby's band, and subsequently performed with Cassandra Wilson, Ravi Coltrane, Joe Lovano and Lee Konitz. But Moran is known best for the series of albums recorded with his own trio, the Bandwagon, and for his virtuosic solo album, *Modernistic*, featuring a radical interpretation of Afrika Bambaataa's landmark hip-hop single, "Planet Rock." "This is like watching Armstrong transforming Tin Pan Alley tunes in the Thirties, or listening to Coltrane play 'My Favorite Things,'" a friend of mine said last year, as we watched the Bandwagon perform Bambaataa's song live at the Blue Note in New York City. "It's the kind of engagement with the culture at large

that jazz needs so desperately, in order to thrive."

But there's more than that to recommend Moran to hip-hop fans: On his newest recording, *Artist in Residence*, Moran continues his practice of improvising against looped fragments of conversations. What results — a reverse negative of freestyling over a beat — is as passionate, funky and forceful as it is thought-provoking.

This interview took place on a blustery day, in the study of Moran's Harlem apartment. Our conversation went on for a few hours and encompassed everything from his take on post-Katrina New Orleans (he likened the city's legacy to Salzburg's) to his love for unjustly obscure hip-hop.

Alex Abramovich: Let me start by asking about your cover of "Planet Rock."

Jason Moran: "Planet Rock" was one of the songs we danced to as kids in the early Eighties. I heard it again around 1992, after I'd started getting serious about piano and hearing music with pianistic and jazz ears. I remember driving down the street with my brother, and when it came on the radio I was like, "Man, this is a serious piece of music." It actually goes through sections. There are interludes, it's well put together and it's lengthy for a hip-hop song. They don't make 'em that long anymore." Right before I was going to do *Modernistic* I was thinking, How do I make a solo recording that's as vast as what I listen to? How can I incorporate "Planet Rock" into solo piano repertoire and have it rub shoulders with Schumann? And how can they be on the same record with Muhal Richard Abrams and Jackie Byard?

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Jason Moran in New York City
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It was a matter of finding the connections between hip-hop and the piano-as-percussion-instrument, which I did via John Cage's prepared piano music. If I could put all *that* together, I thought, then "Planet Rock" could still work as a hip-hop piece, and not some jazzy version of it. It could still hold some of that drumbeat, it could still hold that bass line and I could *play* the lyrics. In a lot of jazz versions of hip-hop tunes they never play the lyrics, they just play the background music.

AA: Bambaataa had done the same thing with Kraftwerk as you were doing with him.

JM: Yeah. That's what I like to do: Connect generations by playing one song and making it relevant, hopefully, to today's audience.

AA: You arrived in New York in 1993. What did you make of the jazz scene at that time?

JM: I thought it was amazing. I could go to the Village Vanguard and hear Andrew Hill. I remember one summer in SoHo they blocked off a street. Cecil Taylor was onstage with a piano at one end of the block. At the other end there was another platform with a Japanese dancer. But the dancer used the entire street as the stage, danced all through the street and all up under Cecil Taylor while he was playing. Shit, there ain't much of that happening anymore. I'm so glad I saw those things. It seemed that back then the music felt more within the city, freer to the public than it is now.

Also I was uptown, and Harlem was entirely different. Everybody was on the street selling things. I bought instruments on the street, bought records on the street. The city was in a different place. Forty-second Street wasn't the same 42nd Street. I still think that I got here late, but early enough to see some of the grit.

AA: You went to a magnet school for performing arts, in Houston. At around the same time a lot of music programs were losing funding and shutting down. Kids still had access to turntables, but not trumpets or pianos.

JM: All the musicians I knew were quite serious, so they always had instruments. I was always in schools where instruments were available. I never saw the other side, but always knew it existed. What's scary is that, since there aren't necessarily a lot of musicians just functioning out here in the world, as professionals and making a living doing it, it might take a middle-class mindset to think, "Oh, that is a possibility for me." There's a wider sense of perspective, whereas someone with a lower-class income might not see that as a possibility. But I feel there's a rebirth happening.

AA: With kids in schools today?

JM: Yes, and even in pop music. There was a long span where you wouldn't see bands on stage. Now pop musicians all have bands. And, actually, a lot of those bands are made up of jazz musicians I know. You can look in Kelis's band, Nas's band, Mos Def's band, Talib Kweli's band, Erykah Badu's band. Hopefully, the child who listens to this music sees you don't actually have to be the person out front. You can be the cat playing trumpet, playing bass or playing keys.

AA: Art forms seem to go through stages in their development. At some point, the form becomes self-aware and modern, then post-modern, then neurotically self-aware, then exhausted. In rock 'n' roll, we're seeing musicians who are more interested in curating and regurgitating the past than moving the music forward.

JM: What has happened in jazz is that the form hasn't modernized with the rest of the world. So if you go to a lot of clubs — I'm even thinking from a design perspective — they're all set up the same. You have to have small tables with relatively cheap chairs, the lighting is the same, the pictures on the wall might be the same —

black and whites of great musicians. That traps you in a certain space — where you play and what looks at you while you play. That's one problem, I think.

AA: If the venue is a more traditional space, are you inclined to play more traditionally?

JM: I try to go more against it. And the second thing that has started to hamper us is what we were talking about earlier — the disconnect between the culture and the music. The connection's never taught, or it's extremely rare. In all my years of jazz education I never, or rarely, heard talk of it. If I did, it was from my teacher Jackie Byard, who would talk about race relations or being black and traveling the world in the Fifties. In my standard improvisation classes, you'd rarely hear about the connection between a scale and culture. Not unless you started to study older forms — East Asian music or Japanese music or Senegalese music, which we didn't study, either.

With hip-hop, they had it over a high fire with a lot of money burning for such a long time that the subject matter got narrower and narrower. It's almost like watching BET, where you see the same comedians, and most repeat the same jokes. That's happened in jazz and it's happening now in hip-hop. But in hip-hop there's a lot more money behind it. There's a lot more to lose.

AA: Are rappers musicians in the same way jazz musicians are musicians? The shelf life seems to be shorter.

JM: I think they're musicians in a different way, but I think they're much the same. The main thing to take into account is the money involved. That, I think, is what contributes to artists not sticking around as long. Record companies decided to put millions of dollars on this cat, and it might not be so great. Even if they're paying $100,000 for a track from Kanye and another $100,000 for a track from Pharrell. Shit. Two-hundred-thousand dollars? Do you know how many jazz records they could put out with that kind of money? It's ridiculous.

AA: I've been listening to your blues record, *Same Mother*. What do you think when people say "the blues?" Is it a form, or a set of musical tendencies?

JM: I think it's an intention. Son House said that blues is what happens in the love between a man and a woman. I thought that was good, although today you should also say "a man and a man" and "a woman and a woman." Any two people living together is going to be fraught with some blues. But Son House's definition really got to the essence of it, because then we're not confined to talking about chord changes. So on that record we did things that, quite honestly, people would never consider the blues. I think that *Alexander Nevsky* —Prokofiev's score for the battle scene in the field of the dead — is nothing but the blues. It's a woman singing for some man. Jazz moves around a lot, but the blues is a definitive sound where you contemplate your relationship with whoever it is — whether it's you and God, you and your bandmate, you and your lover. It's where you contemplate relationships.

AA: I read that you wanted to collaborate with Ghostface Killah?

JM: I'm slowly working on that. It's more that I'm slowly working up the nerve. I think there's an important thing that has to happen between the music that I haven't heard yet, and it's where jazz doesn't depend on being jazzy and hip-hop doesn't depend on being hip-hoppy. So I want to do just me at a piano and Ghostface. We can do some of his songs and he can do some of my songs. We can make some new songs. If it happens — and I think it will because he seems to be the type of person who's always going to be fresh. Always right on the edge. The tendency when people do these kinds of things is to go toward a Nas or Mos Def or Talib Kweli direction. They don't go to a Mobb Deep or — some thug motherfuckers, basically. But I think Ghostface has a sensibility. He knows how to do a love song. He knows how to do some real hardcore shit. He knows how to flex. But I've heard him in interviews and his line was, "I'm trying to get good at what I'm good at." I thought that was so basic and so beautiful, because that's what we're all trying to do. I hadn't heard a rapper say that. He speaks from a sensitive space.

AA: Does he know there's this guy named Jason Moran out here?

JM: Hell no.

AA: But you think he's curious enough?

JM: I think he's artistic enough. I'll say that.

AA: You mentioned Pharrell. How good is he?

JM: I think he's fabulous. But he ain't my favorite producer. J Dilla was the end-all, be-all for me. You could tell he understood music like a musician, and he hung out with a bunch of musicians. He played bass. He had this way of making the hi-hat push and the snare drum pull and the bass drum be close to the beat. And he was so musical with how he sampled. He would cut shit up in 30 different ways, then put it together and you would never even know that it came from this. He had a beat that felt like you were listening to Count Basie, but it was hip-hop.

AA: Do you feel you lost something by becoming a professional musician? That you can only listen professionally now, and never just enjoy it?

JM: The music I can just listen to and enjoy is classical music, and

some folk music, because then I don't understand the format so much. Listening to hip-hop or listening to jazz, I'm paying attention to time signatures and chords.

AA: How much dance music is still embedded in the jazz you play?

JM: I think people could dance to it if we cleared out a table. My wife and I have been talking about doing a dance show. There'll be no tables, and you can actually come for free. But you have to dance — you can't come to stand and watch. Come and just let us be background or hire a bunch of dancers — they're free with their bodies and might inspire someone else to dance. I want to see what that looks like.

AA: I know that you tape conversations, and play off against them, improvise around the words, the same way that a rapper will improvise words around a beat. Is there a hip-hop influence in that?

JM: That goes back to the Eighties, where you'd plug one tape recorder into another and play it back. That's how I was putting together tapes in the Eighties. In the Nineties, when I got to school there was this ridiculous white guy on my floor who used to say incredibly racist things, but he didn't know it. I started recording him and I made this 50-minute piece by splicing all these clips together. This is before you could do something like this quickly on your computer. I was piecing all this stuff together on tapes, and then I lost the tape. I think it was a masterpiece — 50 minutes of this racist who didn't know he was a racist.

But when I started listening to rap, or when rap started listening to me, I started noticing all the samples listed on the backs of the records. So I started looking through my dad's record collection and found all the originals. You would hear a producer taking eight seconds from this five-minute song. Knowing that, you might not be listening for the overall arc of the piece anymore. You might just be waiting for the chunk that's going to say, "This is for you. This is yours. Take me and manipulate me." That's how I started listening to music.

AA: Just hip-hop?

JM: Everything. I can hear it on the train. Musicians can hear it on the streets, car horns, whatever. I started hearing it in languages a lot, so when I transcribed "Planet Rock," it was just as much fun as when I transcribed the Turkish language. I heard Miles Davis talk about going to a Lakers game. He'd be hearing songs with a ball bouncing or the screech of tennis shoes. I thought that was bullshit when I heard it, but once I grew up — and now that I consider myself a musician — I totally hear everything he's talking about. You can use your life in your music, which is the point.

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