

Kris Davis – Piano
Matt Mitchell – Piano
Aruán Ortiz – Piano
Matthew Shipp – Piano

SIDE ONE

1. LET US BREAK BREAD TOGETHER

(Traditional, arr. Matthew Shipp)
2. I NEEDED THEE EVERY HOUR

(Annie S. Hawks, arr. Matthew Shipp)

Performed by Matthew Shipp

3. IDENTITY PICKS

(Ryan Power, arr. Matt Mitchell)

4. YOU MADE A DRAWING

(Christopher Weisman, arr. Matt Mitchell)

Performed by Matt Mitchell

SIDE TWO

1. SING ME SOFTLY OF THE BLUES

(Carla Bley, arr. Kris Davis)

Performed by Kris Davis

2. SKETCHES SET SEVEN

(Ed Bland, arr. Aruán Ortiz)

Performed by Aruán Ortiz

One of the greatest gifts I've received in my semi-maturity is the ability to appreciate the *sluggishness* of the English language. After years of courting precision in language, I've become obsessed with how a random, conversational word can easily have upwards of 15 meanings: from singular (or multiple) accepted dictionary definitions to subtle contextual twisting. Shades of understanding shift ebb and flow based on how well I know the person I'm talking to, or what part of the country we happen to be in when we are doing the talking. And, of course, there are all the wonderfully vague-gray areas of memory, experience, and predispositions that pile upon the use of an everyday word, like "stone" or "glass".

Since this revelation, I've begun viewing words, not as gathered collections of definitions, but as ever-shifting, three-dimensional concepts made up of matter, history, and space, all of which can be viewed through different "lenses" (economic, historic, pop societal/cultural, etc.).

An example will make the above a little more concrete, and so let's look at the three words that make up the phrase "the Great American Songbook." At the most basic level, they refer to "a collectively created canon of influential American pop songs, mostly from the early part of the 20th century." This, fairly vanilla, definition offers a good starting point to understanding its meaning—the phrase contains within it *matter* (songs), *time* (early 20th century), and space (America).

In the sense that it covers all three of my values, this definition of the Great American Songbook is fine. But, here, on the back of this record, I want to draw your attention to how thought-provoking these three words can be when viewed through a more imaginative lens. In other words, by questioning the three elements of the phrase, the Great American Songbook—

- What makes music American?
- How does the era affect how we determine the standards of American pop music?
- How does the idea of socially produced space in

the 20th and 21st century contextualize what pieces we may value?

We can redefine this phrase in a way that's more profound than just a series of jazz standards, "chestnuts" of American song, or fodder for piano bars.

The four musicians in this volume, our second, of *The New American Songbooks* project have unconsciously focused in on a collective that provides a new lens to the matter, history, and space of "the Great American Songbook" that of the outsider.

With, perhaps, the exception of composer/pianist Carla Bley—represented by Kris Davis's perfectly constructed and stunningly percussive version of *Sing Me Softly of the Blues*—each of the compositions on this recording come from an artist that is treasured by a small and loyal following, but has mostly worked in relative obscurity. With this common quality among the composers featured here—Bley is certainly not as recognized as she should be—the pieces share values, histories, and spaces that are influenced by their composer's relationship to the broader listening public.

In the case of Matthew Shipp's versions of Protestant hymnal music, we may not even know the piece's composer *or*, as in the case of Annie S. Hawks's *I Need Thee Every Hour*, their recognition is overshadowed by the pragmatic context of their work.

Compare that with filmmaker/composer Ed Bland's *Sketches Set Seven*, given a deconstructed reading here by Aruán Ortiz. A Southside Chicago native, Bland is better known for his iconic and radically important film *The City of Jazz* than for his beautifully off-kilter, but melodic, atonal compositions.

And, finally, bringing the Great American Songbook squarely into the 21st century is Matt Mitchell, who chose to interpret songs by Christopher Weisman and Ryan Power: both songwriters of the Bandcamp era, who work in a contemporary

economic space outside that of the major label systems of the past.

In each of these examples, the positioning of the composer outside mainstream culture establishes a freedom to create material that lifts audience appreciation above mass consumption. Therefore, the music of these composers stands just outside of the last century's mass-market history—either the work itself or how it's presented as going against the still-predominant mainstream (capitalist) culture. And, because these composers have worked outside the musical mainstream, they don't exist in the same cultural space as those we consider icons of the Great American Songbook, such as Irving Berlin or George Gershwin.

So, if the unifying feature of all the pieces on this record is how they exist outside mainstream American culture, then how do they become candidates for a New American Songbook?

I put forth the idea that it is through the exploration of the color—and hence nuances—of the phrase Great American Songbook, as laid out above—and appreciating the multiple meanings each word can have—that we find our answer.

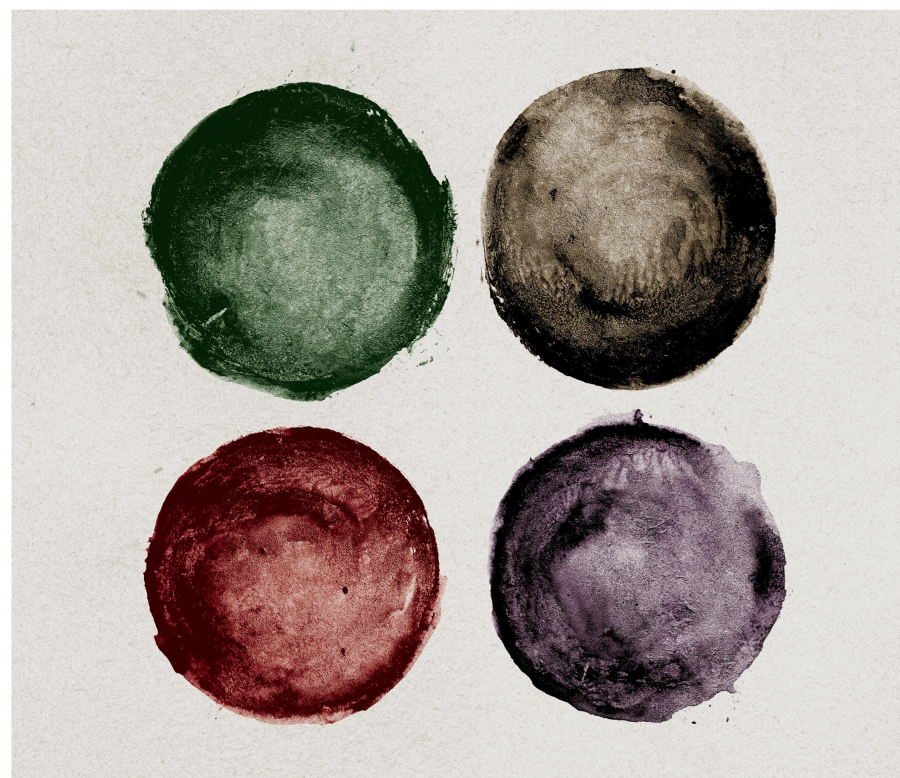
Are these songs? Yes, unequivocally; both in the common sense of being sung, but also in the more abstract sense of being transmitted from one performer to the next—changed, added to, and sent on to the next listener.

Are these songs *American*? Each composer is American, yes, but the compositions embody something more—a spirit of America at its best, with musical ideas issuing forth from the South Side of Chicago or the Protestant villages of New England, performed through the fingers of pianists from the U.S., Canada, and Cuba, all with vastly different aesthetics.

Finally, are these American songs, *great*? They are vast. They are epic. They are meant to be celebrated, and, as you are about to hear, they are truly great.

Kris Davis Matt Mitchell Aruán Ortiz Matthew Shipp

NEW AMERICAN SONGBOOKS VOLUME 2



KRIS DAVIS (SOCAN), MATT MITCHELL (MATTHEW TILY MITCHELL, BMI), ARUÁN ORTIZ (NAURAZITRO MUSIC/ASCAP), MATTHEW SHIPP (MATT SHIPP MUSIC/ASCAP), IDENTITY PICKS (RYAN POWER, BMI), YOU MADE A DRAWING (CHRISTOPHER WEISMAN, BICYCLE OPERATOR AND COMCH PUBLISHING/ASCAP), SING ME SOFTLY OF THE BLUES (CARLA BLEY, ALRAC PUBLISHING), ED BLAND (OSMUND MUSIC)

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