

PREFACE to Yusef Lateef's Songbook
Published by YAL, available at yuseflateef.com

I once asked Yusef Lateef what he practiced. He replied: "I try to discover things that I had not known before."

Given his career to date, this is no small task. Yusef Lateef has been studying, creating and teaching music for well over six decades. He has worked with Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, and countless other master musicians. His compositions have been commissioned and performed by major symphony orchestras in the U.S. and Europe, and he spent four years as a research fellow in Nigeria. In addition to a doctorate in education and many years of university teaching, Lateef has self-published numerous musical method books, scores, and recordings, as well as a novel, a book of short stories, and philosophical writings.

Yet at a point in life when most artists are content to settle into the comfort of past accomplishments, Lateef continues to explore. I recall that during the 1990s, while teaching composition at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Lateef was taking classes in advanced mathematics and biology, and using the theories from those studies to devise new compositional methods. More recently, he explained to me that he was retiring from university teaching (at the age of 82) - not to rest, but rather to have more time for composing. He then quickly completed a concerto for piano and symphony orchestra, among other projects.

Taken as a whole, Lateef's body of work confounds the categories typically used to explain late twentieth and early twenty-first century music. While grounded in the broad continuum of African American music making, he has pursued a staggering range of possibilities that challenge us to interrogate facile notions of "jazz," "classical," or "avant-garde" music. Like numerous artists of his generation who are invoked as masters of "jazz," Lateef has long rejected the limitations and preconceptions bound up in that label. Instead, he insists that his craft must be understood in entirely different terms, ones that he himself is best prepared to provide. He describes his music as "Autophysiopsychic Music," or "music which comes from one's physical, mental and spiritual self."

Since 1970, in fact, Lateef has articulated his views on music in self-published method books as well as theoretical and literary works. Curious readers may consult his online essay, "The Pleasures of Voice in Autophysiopsychic Music." For many music students, the transcultural *Repository of Scales and Melodic Patterns*, one of his best known works, is an inspirational touchstone on both technical and philosophical levels. Of course, such writings are best understood alongside Lateef's music. Listen to the weight of his flute playing, as it breaks free from the stunning unison lines of "Coltrane Remembered," on *The World at Peace*. Or from the same disc, get a glimpse of the multilayered harmonic and melodic imagery of "Like a Secret Argosy," a dense sound world merely glimpsed before vanishing under the two minute mark. Explore his larger works such as the *African American Epic Suite*, for soloists with symphony orchestra, or his works for smaller

ensembles, often in collaboration with other master musicians such as Von Freeman and Archie Shepp. Many of Lateef's YAL releases over the past decade also combine acoustic and electronic forms, as well as text and vocals by Lateef himself. The result is often a unique kind of twenty-first century *Cantata* (to borrow one of his album titles), with a sound all its own.

The range and breadth of Lateef's musical travels is astonishing, but what is most inspiring to me is something else, something more difficult to explain. He brings an overarching, singularly intense mindset to all of his projects, using all the possible tools at his disposal - scientific and intuitive, old and new, individual and collective, distant and close to home - to probe the nature of his feelings and thoughts. As a student, I marveled at the ease with which he flowed among different approaches to making music, different states of consciousness. While working within technically complex frameworks, he is always able to keep his ears and imagination open to new possibilities, to unexpected directions that the material might generate.

This publication is an exciting addition to Lateef's catalog, because it is the first to take the form of a songbook. This leadsheet format lends itself well to creative adaptation, since songs can easily be arranged for different instrumentations. Yet we should remember to develop a fresh way, perhaps even a radically different way, to make use of the content here. I'm sure Lateef would agree that the "notes and tones" indicated in these pages are merely tools for each student to develop his or her own voice. He would not want it to be otherwise.

Saxophonist and composer Julius Hemphill remarked in 1994 that "you often hear people nowadays talking about the tradition, tradition, tradition. But they have tunnel vision in this tradition. Because tradition in African-American music is as wide as all outdoors." (1) Lateef, on the title track from his album *Earth and Sky*, transposes this sense of expanse to his own key, intoning "I don't know where the wind goes, when it blows away." Perhaps not, but we must thank the artists who keep posing the question, leaving us traces of the answer in their songs.

Michael Dessen
March 19, 2005

Notes:

1. McElfresh, Suzanne. "Julius Hemphill." *Bomb* 1994: 46-49. Also quoted in Lewis, George E. "Experimental Music in Black and White: The AACM in New York, 1970-1985." *Current Musicology* 71-73. Spring 2001: p. 143.