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NewMusicBox

Leroy Jenkins in Conversation with "Blue" Gene Tyranny

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Changing Your Life Through Music

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: In this pamphlet about the AACM put out in the mid-70s, you are quoted as saying "When I first heard the AACM, that was just perfect, not just because it was ahead of its time, but because it was time for me." Would you tell me about growing up in Chicago, and the influence that the AACM had on your life then and later?

Leroy Jenkins: I came up in the 1960s and the '70s. In the '60s there was a heavy influx of drugs in the black community. So a lot of us, including myself, were involved in it. In the '60s I went back to college at Florida A & M down in Tallahassee, Florida, to finish because I didn't have the money or the wherewithal to make it in Chicago. Chicago was like the pit of hell as far as I was concerned because all my friends were drug addicts. So I went to Florida and I got my degree and I studied with Bruce Hayden, a great fine black violinist who was a frustrated classical violinist because he had to take a job to support himself even though he was excellent. He was happy when I came on the scene. He didn't have a student so I studied with him and got the benefit of all this violinistic experience. I was ready for it because I was trying to rebuild myself. I got lucky in that sense. So I studied with him the whole four or five years just straight every day. He was only about three or four years older than I was. I had messed around, like I said, in Chicago and come back to school so I was older than most college students at the time. Not old old, but old. So we would hang out.

He was the first one to recognize when at last I was getting the tone of a violin, I mean the real tone. I was keeping my regular practice routine and one night I started practicing just with him there—he was sleeping in the studio—and all of a sudden he kind of jumped up when I started to practice and said, "Leroy, that's it! That sound, that tone, that's it!" That was a major breakthrough for me. I'll always remember that. When I got back to Chicago, my old friends either were dead or in jail, and I was on another level. I had been teaching for four years and gone back to school.

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: You were teaching in Alabama...

Leroy Jenkins: I was teaching for four years down there until they ran me out of town because I had money problems. I could teach but I didn't have the character of a teacher; I didn't set a good example. So I had to escape from there and go back home to Chicago and got a job working as a music teacher in the Chicago schools. When I first got back to Chicago, I didn't want to get back into my community. A few of the older guys kept showing up—one guy that I identified with because he was a schoolteacher, surprisingly enough, and he was on drugs. Anyway, that's the way it was at the time in the 1960s. It seemed like it was the whole world. Maybe they still are, but it seemed to me at the time that everybody was using drugs, hard drugs not just marijuana. I got lucky. I got through the pit of hell life that I went through. I compare myself to the Jews at Auschwitz. After 30 years, I still have marks on my arms from using drugs. We had a beautiful community and then all of a sudden drugs came into the community and just destroyed it. A lot of my friends had great minds and great abilities and they all just went that way: O.D. this, O.D. that... I was lucky enough to get out of that.
When I met Roscoe and Braxton, they were much younger. They didn't hardly know about that stuff that happened in the community. Muhal knew about it, since he's around the same age as me, but he wasn't into drugs and none of the other AACM guys were. They brought me to this music, Muhal and all those guys. I wanted to make a statement that it was time for me with this new music, this new thing they were doing, for me to make a change too.

Muhal was a famous so-called-jazz-at-the-time pianist in Chicago. I was mostly a church musician. I played the violin for churches and stuff like that. I wasn't really a jazz player. I loved jazz. I listened to Bird and all those guys. There were many Charlie Parker copyists. They used to call me "Little Bird the Third," because there were so many "Little Birds" in Chicago. I had music all the way. I'd been doing music since I was eight years old, so it's not by chance that I'm doing what I'm doing. I never did anything else since I was eight years old. My folks and everybody knew I was going to be a musician. I was always striving for it. And these jobs… I worked four years in Mobile and came to Chicago and worked four years there. At both jobs I was ready to go, I had my foot half way out the door, but I had to have a job to make money so I could eat and sleep. I think I did a pretty good job as a teacher, but after a while I quit.

In 1969, the next step with the AACM was moving to Paris where I met Archie Shepp and Ornette. Ornette was playing the violin at the time. He came into this place called La Lucenaire where all the new music was being presented in Paris in 1969. He came in with his big block checkered suit—Ornette was really a great dresser—and he told me: "Man, you're really great! Come to New York." So that made my day, it made my whole year. I told some of the guys. We were very competitive, Braxton, Leo, Roscoe especially. We were there for almost a year and then I came here in 1970.

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: That was around the time you formed The Revolutionary Ensemble...

Leroy Jenkins: When I first came to New York, I stayed with Ornette. Everybody knows this story. Ornette told me to look him up when I came to New York. This guy in Chicago wanted his car in New York, so Braxton and I drove up from Chicago and decided we were going to move here. We didn't have a place and Ornette said we could stay at what was called the "Artist House" at the time. It might be where Phat Farm is, on Prince Street, downstairs. He had one floor, his loft, and the floor that was the Artist House, which was a performance space. He told Braxton we could stay down there. He had mattresses. I had never had that kind of a hard life. I always had a place to stay. This was in February and at night it was cold, cold. I was thinking about going back home. In the morning, Ornette came down and said, "Oh man it's freezing down here,"—he was from the south, anyway—"come upstairs." He had this big room with a big color TV, in 1970. He had 4,000 square feet.

Braxton left. He got a gig with Richard Teitelbaum...

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: ...Musica Elettronica Viva...

Leroy Jenkins: They became good friends and they went off on tour, but I stayed there and I had this big room with a big bed and color TV, even though I didn't watch it that much. Too much was happening to be watching TV. But I stayed there for three months and met a lot of people who came to meet Ornette. I didn't realize how famous he was. At first, I thought he was a struggling guy. He was struggling then, but not because he needed to but because he was demanding such high things. He seemed to be making it fine, and it was great to see him live like that, you know, a guy that's playing this kind of music being able to command that kind of life. It was a great experience for me. Guys like Lee Konitz... They knew each other. And I thought that was weird. I would never believe that Lee would know Ornette. In fact, I thought he'd be putting him down. I became friendly with Lee on account of that—not for musical reasons, but for friendship. And every time Ornette has a concert, I look for him.

Genre and Race
Leroy Jenkins: I had two black teachers, and they both were classical material of the first order, but they couldn't deal because they were black and so there was no sponsorship out there. If they were sponsored, they would be sponsored as the black player. It hasn't changed; it's the same thing today. I was on the airplane and I had this violin and this white lady says, "What is that you have there?" because it was in a case and didn't look like a regular violin. So I said, "A violin," and she says, "Oh, you're a jazz violinist." She didn't mean any harm. I've never seen any black violinists out here playing classical stuff, have you? So she was right in a way. I didn't say anything about it because it wasn't her fault. It's built in, the racism is inherent in our society. That's an example of it.

There's certain things, like for instance this guy, [Heisman Trophy winner Paul] Hornung—who berated the guys at Notre Dame because they weren't pursuing black players. He said we need some black players on this team in order to win. That's what he said. So he got in trouble and they started putting him down in the papers. He's a national hero in this town and all of a sudden he opens his mouth and says something American. It happens all the time, man. Every time a big person gets in trouble it's always based on stuff that's American.

Just the other day, I went to the Erie Arts Center in Pennsylvania. They had this older guy pick us up—he was 77 years old and he was white. So anyway, we were coming back and we were talking and we were talking about price, so this guy says, "I Jewed him down..." Wow he's just saying that. And you know I used to say that, I said that in front of some Jewish people one time. I didn't even realize what I was saying. In my upbringing in the black community, Maxwell Street in Chicago, my father, my mother, everybody called it Jew Town. It wasn't derogatory but that's what they called it. That's America; that's what's happening. That's why all these names happen. America's based on that kind of stuff. You've got all these different kinds of people here from different countries doing different things and they've got all these different prejudices that people have. I think it's not something we probably ever will be able to change; we'll always be like that.

It's happening here with the president of Merrill Lynch [Stan O'Neal]. He catches more hell than the average CEO just because he's black. Being a child of the '40s and the '50s, any time I see a black accomplishment I'm still into that. So I watch. I listen to the way the papers describe things that he did and I can see that that's built in, disguised putting him down. That even happens to me and it happens to a lot of my contemporaries in the papers when the critics review, it's always that built in racism. I mean, it's weird, man! I know we talk about it all the time, black musicians, guys like Leo and Alvin Singleton and Roscoe and Henry and all those guys that I talk to. Alvin Singleton's a very interesting example, because he is on the other side. He is, for lack of a better word, a "classical" composer not a jazz composer, and he's one of the only ones, yet if he had an instrument and was going to be at the airport he would probably be called a jazz musician. But he wouldn't mind! He likes the idea. You know he's classical, he likes the idea because he looks at jazz as being a free thing so he doesn't have to worry about it.

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: Creative musicians don't necessarily do the same music, but they're interested in each other's music.

Leroy Jenkins: They respect each other. But the inside thing is that when we talk I think, "Man, the stuff he's doing, the pieces that he's written, he should be rich and famous." Guys make jokes about me, if I had been white, I'd been rich and famous too. Now here's the reason we know it's not going to change until the whole thing changes—black African American composers don't have the same infrastructure, we don't have people we can go to, patrons of the arts who are black, to ask for money. Everything we get is from white patrons. There's not one black person that's given to any of the organizations I know or me or anybody else. So there it is. That means right there when we show up, we're almost automatically second-class. Even if we're better and the guy going to give us money knows it, and I walk in at the same time with a white guy, he goes first. It's perfectly natural if the guy's white. I think it would be perfectly natural if the guy was black he would chose me first, right? Give the brother a break, you know? So that's where we are, we're second-class in that way. When we walk in the room where all the power and the money is everybody turns toward us, 'cause we're the only ones there. I'm not kidding you. This happens to me all the time. Sometimes I'm in a room where I'm the only black guy there.
"Blue" Gene Tyranny: It goes way beyond any of the genres.

Leroy Jenkins: In America, its philosophies are built on divide to conquer. You're playing the experimental music here, and jazz here, so after while people start asking questions like, "What kind of music do you play?" That divide to conquer thing just spreads out over society, not only in music but everything, everything we do. I think that's where it all comes from. That theme has pretty much permeated Western civilization, over here especially because everything is put in little boxes. Everything is categorized. I think that's the reason for all the different genres, all the fiefdoms that are operating around here are a result of that. America has spent a lot of time and energy on account of their dividing stuff up. That's why when you go to a homogenous society like Sweden, Holland, or some of those kind of places, which are 90, 95 percent white, everything's just going along, no friction. But come here, man, shhhh….I think we do pretty well, actually, when you think about it. There used to be a time I was a revolutionary and I put down America, but I'm looking and it has its ills, but it's better than a lot of places.

The genres are what's messing things up, and it's messed up a lot of minds because they're being so indoctrinated in these schools. It's just like the new jazz has gotten so now it's like classical was before the contemporary people came along and made a scene out of it. So I guess that's why we're having such a hard time in music. The jazz people don't understand us. We're not jazz. They won't accept it. A lot of jazz guys on panels when I present music in the jazz category—'cause that's where they put me—say, "This is not jazz." So then I'm put it in the classical music area, and they say, "This is not classical music; this is jazz!" That's what's messin' up. A lot of classical people look down on jazz. It'll mess up their pedigree if they go into a jazz course, which they should do actually 'cause it would put more feeling in there.

If you compare a new music concert attendance-wise to an avant-garde jazz concert, the audience participation [at the new music concert] would be 50 percent more. I may be exaggerating, but you can get more people at a white event. If we had, you know in the same building, the same kind if advertisement, the white event would get more because most of the people who are listening to the music are white. Most of the blacks and Latinos, they're mostly into dance music, rhythm and blues, stuff like that.

Our schools are inferior. When I see the examples of white schools on TV or the movies or this or that they're always nice and clean and colorful and inviting, and a place you want to be. But in a black school, it's always noisy, dead looking, the kind of place you wouldn't want to be. They don't have any culture in the schools. They don't have the facilities. They have police at the doors, and a lot of noise. Then they took the music out of most of the black schools, so what happened? Rap. They couldn't stop the creativity, so they started doing rap. That's my theory. We have rap today because they didn't have musical instruments. If they'd had those musical instruments and were taking music in schools, we'd probably have an audience. When I was coming up, when this music first started, there was a small black audience because the schools in those days were a little better, the segregated schools in Chicago. I don't know about whether or not they were in the South, but in Chicago the segregated schools were good. Maybe not as good as the white schools, but they were good. I had music in my school, foreign languages, laboratories, botany, all those courses. I played in a jazz band. I played in a concert band. I played in the marching band. I went to a black college—Florida A&M is a black school—same thing there. So my whole thing had been black up until I came to New York, and that's when it changed.

Connecting to the Music of the Past and the Music of the Future

Leroy Jenkins: Jazz is America's music, so where America goes, that's where jazz is going. Even where it is now, even when we break away—because we're in flux in America, so we're in flux in the music right now—the establishment vs. the people who are trying to change things. Regardless of where I go classically or whatever it is, I always try to maintain that Chicago blues thing. When I came up as a kid, I didn't hear Mozart. I was hearing Louis Jordan and Billy Eckstine and B.B. King and Duke Ellington, jazz guys like that. That was what I was listening to. So I was fortunate in that way, being in a big city, seeing these people all the time, going to
the Regal Theatre in Chicago. I saw 'em all, plus a movie! I used to marvel when I'd see these guys come out in front of the band and take their solos and quit on time. That's what I'd look at all the time, the way they quit on time. I didn't know anything about resolutions, even though I was a musician. I could hear it, but I didn't know what it was. I thought that was magic. Guys like Illinois Jacquet, he'd take you into a frenzy. After a while, I discovered how these guys stopped and started, 12 bars, 16, and 32 bars. Most of the jazz tunes—I hate to say jazz but I have to separate it—I was playing B-flat, F, D-flat, G… Usually, when you're playing D-flat, A-flat, that's pretty rough for a violin. B-flat's not too bad, but even B-flat's a little rough. F's cool. But it's just so confining. Even though, at the time, I wasn't up to where guys like 'Trane or Sonny Rollins were. They'd do their substitutions, so they don't have to worry about that kind of stuff. All these guys come out of the Dizzy Gillespie school. They call it "changes" but he was really a harmony guy. He could invent and convert, you know, with his chords, and 'Trane was a part of that.

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: On the solo album on Lovely, you play Coltrane's "Giant Steps" and Gillespie's "Wouldn't You."

Leroy Jenkins: When I did that, I wanted to show my connection to these guys. These guys were masters, man. Why should I try to superimpose on that stuff? That's a losing game right there! You can't be messin' with guys like that, tryin' to do what they do. You better get out of there and do your own thing. Disguise your ignorance, go somewhere else. I try to relate to that. I think 'Trane related to us guys, to Ornette. Some of the older guys though couldn't, even a guy like Dizzy. It was hard for a guy like Dizzy to accept this kind of music because he was so perfect in that bebop harmony he was doing. I guess I can understand that. But I respect all those guys and I figured that whatever I do has to be on their level, in whatever I'm doing, playing or writing, and their level was high.

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: I hear that in everything you do because you approach everything very earnestly and seriously.

Group Mentality

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: Mutable Music just reissued The Psyche which the Revolutionary Ensemble recorded in 1975. Did you record that here in New York?

Leroy Jenkins: We could have done that in Europe. We'd go places and sometimes people would give us tapes. This tape was evidently a good one…

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: It sounds great …

Leroy Jenkins: At the time, we were flush. I met Sironé at the old Boomers on Bleecker and 10th Street. It was a jazz place.

I was kinda weary of staying at Ornette's 'cause all I was doing was answering his phone. I was losing my identity there, so I thought I better get out before I turn into Ornette. So I left. He was really gracious. I bolted, 'cause I didn't know how to be gracious. He recommended the Renaissance Hotel on 11th Street. I had about $500 in the bank. I had this room there and stayed until the money ran out.

My friend Kunle owned the Liberty House on 10th and Bleecker across the street from Boomer's. Abbie Hoffman just gave it to him. Kunle was working for him. In those days, that's the kind of things that were going on. So evidently he was leasing the whole building, not just the store but the floors up above. So Kunle said just come on down and I moved there. I worked in his shop. It was a crafts shop where people came in and sold us stuff and we sold it for double. It was really kind of a '60s thing: incense, rare albums… Cecil Taylor came in and Miles Davis. I remember Miles Davis came in and asked, "This your store?" We used to go across
the street to hang out at Boomer's sometimes. Sunny Murray, the great drummer was there and Sirone was working with him. So I was telling Sirone my philosophy which was the AACM philosophy. We at the time all had a group mentality. No leaders. We thought the leadership thing was corrupting jazz. You could always take one guy and pull him a certain way, but with three guys or four guys, you can't do that. So we had these co-op groups, and I had been involved with a lot of groups like that starting out with Braxton and Leo…

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: That was the Creative Construction Company…

Leroy Jenkins: Sirone liked the idea. He felt the same way. At the time I was rehearsing with a drummer and a guitarist who I won't mention. They're not on the scene now so it won't matter, but I was so frantic I just grabbed the first musicians I could find. Sirone came up and started playing with us. After the rehearsal he said (he called me Lee), "Look here Lee, I like you man, I like the way you play and everything, but those guys, we can't make it with them. You get rid of those guys, maybe we could do something." And he was right, so I dissolved the group. Well, not exactly, I told the guitar player I was trying to pull another way…

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: When did Jerome come in?

Leroy Jenkins: Jerome came to New York from Chicago. He's maybe 15 years younger that I am, so I didn't really know him, but he knew about me being here, so he called me up. He came down and he was terrific. That was the biggest find of the year as far as I was concerned. So that's how we started. Then Sirone got interested and he donated his floor-through apartment on 13th between A and B. That was a drug-infested neighborhood. Sirone's apartment had gates on windows and everything, 'cause we kept all our instruments there. And he gated everything. You could not get into that place. We rehearsed there from 1971 to 1975, every day. We started 11 o'clock and we stayed till about 5 when his wife Katie came home from work. Everyday except Saturday and Sunday we took off. It was like our job. We did everything together.

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: You can really hear it on the record. The record has some really long improvisations, with solos as well as different combinations. How did that work? Did you plan it?

Leroy Jenkins: We planned everything. We'd run down everything. We figured it was important in this improvisational thing to know where you're coming from and know where you're going. That's how I describe it, because if you know that, in between you've got free flight do what you want. You can detour and can go all kinds of ways, 'cause we kept all our instruments there. And he gated everything. You could not get into that place. We rehearsed there from 1971 to 1975, every day. We started 11 o'clock and we stayed till about 5 when his wife Katie came home from work. Everyday except Saturday and Sunday we took off. It was like our job. We did everything together.

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: So within that time it frees you.

Leroy Jenkins: Maybe we wanted the tune to be a certain amount of minutes, so if we go 50 minutes on one section, we know we're going to have to cut the others. Not cut, but cut down, 'cause we have to do the whole thing. I'm exaggerating 'cause that didn't happen. Sometimes it did, we overplayed but that was because we were a very spiritual group. When we were improvising, we were one. After we'd get through a rehearsal, we'd reach some points together and it was like getting high. It was really a great period and these guys were fine musicians. Sirone was an excellent bassist and he could play with the bow; and when Jerome played drums, he had a motion and it wasn't a regular beat…

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: The third piece has a pulse but there isn't anything you can count. It's hard to describe.

Leroy Jenkins: I know I have a certain inner beat when I play, so I go my way. And Sirone and Jerome, they go their way. They're sure I'm gonna go my way and they're free to do what they want to, no matter what, even on the heads. I'd be going straight ahead with the melody and Jerome would just be hitting all over the place, banging and bopping. I was steady in my direction, so he was able to do that.
Opening People to Improvisation

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: I want to ask you about the operas you've been writing...

Leroy Jenkins: Basically I write the same way. I think in terms of a bebop singer. When I write, I don't know if that's so operatic or not, because opera's more legato, I mean it's stretched out, but mine is word for word, note for note. A lot of people don't go to operas, because maybe they don't understand what's happening. I know that used to happen to me when I'd go to some of the older ones. Now I know how to prepare, but if you were just off-handedly checking out opera, you probably wouldn't understand...You have to tell the story; that's the main point.

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: What do you think of the venues in which your operas are being presented?

Leroy Jenkins: When I first did The Mother of Three Sons, I went to Europe. Hans Henze was instrumental in this. We had this classical conductor and he didn't know what was happening. It was written there as plain as day, but he was worried about it so he went to Henze and told Henze, "I don't know if this is going to work." He was really worried. I didn't even know any of this was going on. So finally Henze called me up and told me about some things and he had made some changes he thought would help the conductor. Of course, I changed it right back. I didn't go for what he said even though it was Henze. I started talking to the conductor. He could speak English and everything. I said, "Let's just get into it. I always have trouble with my music when somebody first sees it. Let's just work with it; it'll come out. What you're doing now is not at all like what it's supposed to sound like."

I was scared just like he was. After rehearsals, I'd go home and shut the door and think, "They paid me all this money and my stuff is not up to par." It was my first opera. I did my homework and everything. In all my musical career I'd never studied it, so I just did a crash course here in New York and what a place to study opera. I mean all the libraries and the opera houses. And so many operas... I was going to operas like an opera buff. You can do anything in music if you set your mind to it!

After we spent a lot of time, the conductor loved the piece. He finally understood everything and it worked out fine. This was with Bill T. Jones; he was the director. Even Bill was nervous because it was my first one and he recommended me. We have a beautiful tape of it. It worked out really great.

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: I think in general with new music it takes some understanding and cooperation to try out things.

Leroy Jenkins: Right now I'm involved in orchestrating improvisation. The Relâche group in Philadelphia commissioned me to do a piece, and it was all based on improvisation. I just had little motifs spread around in the piece, and it opened with the viola doing some series of improvisations in different modes. [The violinist] had a fit on me. He thought it was awful to do that to him, because I had him improvising right off the bat. Man, he was outraged. So I told him, "What do you expect from me? I'm an improviser, that's my thing. If I don't have improvisation in my music, then I'm not valid; my philosophy is not valid." Well, I have to say he did great. In fact, he started overdoing it. Once he got into it you couldn't hold him back, he took up too much time, too much freedom. You've got to learn how to manage freedom too. Everybody talks about freedom. Once you get it, it's a very volatile thing; it's not something you can just take lightly. It can lead you to the pit of hell in fact. [laughs]

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: When you're teaching, how do you encourage people to some other level, for instance, to get beyond improvisation to spontaneous playing?

Leroy Jenkins: You just have to practice improvisation actually. When I teach, the person comes in and takes out his instrument and we just start playing. We try to make music. And then after we play, I'll try to remember where some key things went down, negative or positive, as to what I think would help. I always say, "Think in terms of counterpoint when you're improvising with somebody, because it sets up this motion." Because that's
what you need to generate—a swing. You need that motion. That's the ultimate result, to be able to swing in that way. What Duke says will always be true. [laughs] I think not only in jazz or whatever but in all music. I listen to stuff like some of the Bach Sonatas the way some of the guys play it. This guy I used to know played the complete Bach Sonatas on the violin, and he played 'em. He just swung. And that's way back, you know how far we go back, and he was swinging then. Duke knew what he was talking about. So that's the way I look at it—all good music swings.

"Blue" Gene Tyranny: You've developed techniques that I've never heard anybody ever do on a violin. I don't even know how to begin to describe them. In the last solo I heard you do, I couldn't believe you were getting the sounds you were getting. I guess they've developed over time. But in the midst of playing, do you spontaneously discover a sound?

Leroy Jenkins: A lot. A lot of that is spontaneous. I wish I could just keep going but I'm afraid that I might dissociate from the people who are listening to me. I could just go for sounds, period, and not sound like a violin at all. That's where I want to go, and I know I have to. The next solo album I do is going to go into that because it's the only way. The music of tomorrow has got to be sounds like that. We've done all kinds of harmonies. We've worn out all of it. The only other thing we can do is what a lot of the electronic musicians do. But I'm talking about playing the violin in the 21st century or whatever you want to call it. It seems like to me, I might have to be the sacrificial lamb, because I like that idea. And the idea of improvising completely, not even having a score...