FEATURE

The Ethereal Genius of Craig Taborn

He has become one of the best jazz pianists alive — by disappearing almost completely into his music.

The New York Times Magazine

FEATURE

The Ethereal Genius of Craig Taborn

He has become one of the best jazz pianists alive — by disappearing almost completely into his music.

By Adam Shatz

June 22, 2017

The jazz pianist Craig Taborn often goes to museums for inspiration, carrying a notebook to record ideas for compositions and song titles. He also sometimes performs at museums, becoming a sort of art object himself. This is a complicated situation for Taborn, who is very private. His mother, Marjorie Taborn, remembers seeing him at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York, where he played a recital to a full house at the debut of his solo album “Avenging Angel.” After the show, she was chatting with his friend Tim Berne, a saxophonist, while her son signed copies of his album, smiling graciously and patiently fielding questions. She and Berne looked at each other, because they each knew how much effort this required from Taborn. “Look at Craig,” Taborn’s mother recalls telling Berne, “he’s getting everything he never wanted, all the attention he’d never seek.”

Taborn, who is 47, is used to attracting attention he’d prefer to avoid, and not just because of his extraordinary musicianship. He is an African-American man from Minnesota with features that often draw curious looks: a very pale complexion, reddish-blond curls and hazel eyes. “I have never had a day when someone does not look at me with an openly questioning gaze, sometimes remote and furtive, sometimes polite, sometimes in admiration or awe and sometimes with disgust,” he told me. “It comes from appearing as I do, and not fitting into anyone’s preconceived category.”

Taborn’s music, too, has an elusive aura, both in its spectral, moody textures and in its proud refusal to cater to expectations about what jazz, or even music, should be. A lot of advanced jazz today has the feel of a self-conscious hybrid, combining (take your pick) punk rock, hip-hop, Indian rhythms or Middle Eastern modes. Taborn is a musical omnivore, too, but his

explorations of other forms never sound willful: He has so fully absorbed his influences as to camouflage them, in a musical language of casual authority. The beauty of his art resides in large part in his ability to discover new sounds in the piano, from the keys to the strings; his playing inspires something rare in music today, a sense of wonder. Taborn is revered by other pianists and considered by many to be one of jazz music's few contemporary innovators — a judgment likely to be reinforced by his stunning recent album, "Daylight Ghosts." Yet he is not widely known even among jazz aficionados. A resident of Brooklyn for the last two decades, Taborn still has the unassuming, somewhat bashful demeanor of a native Midwesterner, and a Midwesterner's discomfort with self-advertisement. He does not have a website, handles his own bookings in the United States and is barely present on social media. He admires his better-known pianist friends like Vijay Iyer, who started a doctoral program at Harvard, and Jason Moran, who presides over jazz programming at the Kennedy Center, but says he has no desire to shape an institution, being "leery of the impact this would have on my creativity."

Taborn's habit of vanishing, both literally and figuratively, has perplexed, if not frustrated, some of his friends. They wonder why he still performs as a sideman and why he doesn't take longer, or more fiery, solos; they fret over the long pauses between his recording projects as a leader. The pianist Ethan Iverson, of the popular jazz trio the Bad Plus, speaks of Taborn's control of harmony with something like awe but complains that Taborn "serves the music to a fault," disappearing into the music when he could be "playing some burning piano." Another admirer, the pianist Matthew Shipp, who produced two of Taborn's early records, wonders whether "he is creating a name for himself as the ultimate sideman or as a leader." The saxophonist and MacArthur genius fellow Steve Coleman has urged Taborn, who used to play in his band, to focus more on his own work and to document it more consistently. "If he wants to make music, go out to the desert and never have it documented, I'm fine with that, but Craig wouldn't have heard a lot of the people he likes if they hadn't documented their work. Documenting the music is a part of the process, because if you're the only one who knows about it, why even go out and perform?"

I first approached Taborn about a profile in the fall of 2015. I felt somewhat reluctant about it: Taborn's father had died that summer, and he was still in mourning. I proposed that we try our own process, a series of informal, open-ended conversations that I thought might put him at ease. We could meet up whenever he was in town and correspond by email when he was on the road. Sometimes we met at museums, where he would freely muse on the relationship between visual art and music. Tim Berne speculated that Taborn might secretly be "dreading" the article, but I never saw any sign of it. As long as we were talking about the process that informs his music, that is. Whenever I tried to talk to him about his personal life,

he would quickly steer the conversation back to topics that feed his art: cinema, contemporary painting, Javanese shadow plays, Egyptology, the survivals of ancient African practices in black American culture and, of course, music.

On a sweltering day in August, we went to the Museum of Modern Art with Dave King, the drummer in the Bad Plus and a member of the quartet on “Daylight Ghosts.” Taborn was wearing a black polo shirt and Top-Siders; King, who was in town from Minnesota, looked more like a retired punk rocker, in a T-shirt that exposed a riot of tattoos all over his arms and neck.

Taborn and King grew up together in the Minneapolis suburbs, and they have been playing together since they were teenagers. With Reid Anderson, now the bassist in the Bad Plus, they gigged at house parties, watched Hüsker Dü and the Replacements at local rock clubs and studied visiting jazz musicians at the Walker Art Center. Taborn was “effortlessly mysterious,” King recalled. “He appeared to toss things off, but his aesthetic was dialed to the smallest particle.”

Taborn grew up in Golden Valley, just a few minutes by car from downtown Minneapolis, not far from the childhood home of the filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen. His father, John Marvin Taborn, was an academic psychologist and chairman of the African-American and African studies department at the University of Minnesota. His mother, Marjorie, who still lives in Golden Valley, was a social worker in the Minneapolis public schools. The Taborns moved to Golden Valley shortly before the birth of Craig’s older brother, John Gregory, a psychologist who works as a career counselor at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md., and they became part of the small, tight-knit community of black professional families who integrated the Minneapolis suburbs. (One of Marjorie’s acquaintances was Mattie Della Shaw, the mother of Prince.)

Race, roots and identity were frequent topics at the dinner table. John Marvin was raised in Carrier Mills, a township in Southern Illinois that provided a sanctuary for freed slaves (and later runaways) who had fled the South. A quiet yet very determined academic who also served as a captain in the Navy Reserve, he specialized in the study of institutional racism and instructed his children, Taborn told me, not to be “dominated by anyone’s attempts to limit your identity based on their own crises or failures of imagination.” Craig inherited his father’s shyness and his passion for learning; he also inherited his father’s pale skin tone. “We come in all shapes and colors,” Marjorie explained to her son. “Some of us look white, but we are not.”

'Music functions as a means to "call down" those spirits, so in a very real sense I am not doing anything when the music is truly being made. It isn't really me doing it.'

Taborn seemed headed for a career as a leader, but not for the last time, he revealed an unusual hesitance. He waited seven years to release his next trio album, "Light Made Lighter," and his third album, "Junk Magic," was a radically fractured piece of electronica. Taborn told me he has been tempted to make more albums like "Junk Magic" — the title is a line from Sam Shepard, who once described the rusted old Southern California towns of his youth as having "a kind of junk magic" — but it's hard to imagine him abandoning the piano. He has always been drawn back to its physical majesty, the power and variety of its sound.

More than any musician of his generation, Taborn knows how to turn the piano into an 88-key drum, as Cecil Taylor called it, and drummers have always been particularly keen to play with him. At MoMA, while we were admiring "Glenn," an enormous canvas by Jean-Michel Basquiat, a bald, muscular black man in his early 70s walked up to Taborn. "You a pianist?"

Taborn nodded, sheepishly; he vaguely recognized the man but couldn't quite place him.

"Craig, it's William Hooker!" the man exclaimed, with a wide smile. Hooker is a free-jazz drummer, celebrated in downtown circles for his high-energy style; he was practically bouncing in the air. "Let's play! How can I find you?" They exchanged email addresses.

On a freezing day in December, I met Taborn at the Guggenheim. He apologized for being a few minutes late; he had run into an old friend, the avant-garde harpist Zeena Parkins, in the lobby.

Taborn had suggested that we see the Agnes Martin retrospective, and soon I understood why. Her pale, austere, meditative canvases, based on slight variations of the grid, exhibited a faith, very much shared by Taborn, in the radiant effects that can be achieved by the subtle play of repetition and difference. In Taborn's account, Martin emerged as a kindred spirit: an unclassifiable artistic loner who had placed her trust in patience, precision and process. He looked worshipfully at her rendering of the pencil line in a 1979 series called "The Islands." "She used different rulers to get different lines, but if you step back, you wouldn't notice this. There's an infinity of details, but you have to get very close to see them." He walked up very close to a 1958 painting called "This Rain," in which two square forms, one violet, the other cream, float upon an off-white backdrop — so close I thought we might attract the attention of the Guggenheim guards.

"There's so much evidence of the hand here, and I'm sure it's intentional," he said, admiring her brushwork. "It's not performative, or only in a very subtle way, not in some swaggering Abstract Expressionist way. The colors aren't ultravibrant, but the varieties of shading are so subtle." I asked him if he saw any parallels between her work and his own. "Martin thought of music as the ultimate art, because it's so nonreferential, and there are similarities in terms of process. When you improvise, you're observing and creating at the same time. To make the next move, you have to really get close to what's going on. A lot of jazz musicians never get close enough to find out."

At the Lugano session, he recorded more than enough material for a sequel to "Avenging Angel," which Eicher would have been happy to release, but Taborn chose instead to shelve it, perhaps for a retrospective release later on. "My concept and playing had moved on," he said, and he wanted to develop his ideas further in live performance.

In April 2016, I traveled to Cambridge to hear him give a solo concert, also titled "Avenging Angel," at Harvard, where his friend Vijay Iyer had organized a festival. Taborn had been preparing for the concert for weeks. He practiced compositions by Bach, Shostakovich and Thelonious Monk, and wrote passages that he could invoke in a moment's notice in performance. He read poetry, watched old avant-garde films by Stan Brakhage and Kenneth Anger and kept a record of his ideas on a chalkboard that he couldn't avoid looking at. For several hours a day, he conducted a grueling set of exercises designed to cultivate finger independence and dexterity. In one of those exercises, he held down one finger while playing a series of notes with another, a move that can be very damaging if executed too quickly. The purpose was to improve his command of dynamics, attacks and releases, something he admires in Cecil Taylor, a pianist with "complete control."

His final form of preparation was listening to his iPod in the rental car he drove to Cambridge. It contains about 45,000 tracks, and Taborn prefers to listen to it on shuffle. "Moving from Xenakis to some metal thing creates a space where you don't know what you're listening to anymore," he told me in his dressing room. "You're making inferences and connections, and that's really what composition is. So I don't worry what I'm listening to. I just like the experience, the change in moods, the feeling of going from a 20-minute composed track to a 30-second blast of metal. Even the discontinuity creates its own logic."

At the John Knowles Paine Concert Hall, Iyer introduced Taborn as "one of the greatest living pianists." Wearing a blue suit and red Uniqlo socks, Taborn sat down at the piano, struck two high notes with his right hand and pounded a chord with his left, creating a stop-start minimalist groove. He played for more than 40 minutes, without pause. At times, he seemed to be battling the piano (Taborn is a man of medium build but has very powerful forearms); at others, to be caressing it. He was inspired, he told me later, by the "beauty of the instrument," and "things just flowed," leading him to linger for longer than usual in "a more

romantic space." Young people in the audience bobbed their heads as Taborn concluded his performance with a fast, jagged sequence of dancing, interlocking rhythms — a variation on a theme I'd heard him use before in concert.

By the time Iyer returned to the stage to sing his praises again, Taborn had vanished into the night.

A month after his concert at Harvard, Taborn was at a studio in Hell's Kitchen, recording "Daylight Ghosts," his third album for ECM. For this record, Taborn had put together a quartet with the drummer Dave King, the bassist Chris Lightcap and Chris Speed, who plays tenor saxophone and clarinet. Four years had passed since "Chants," his previous album as a leader, was recorded, and after the death of his father, he wanted to make a more direct and melodic statement, something "simple and clear." The sheer beauty of his playing is abundantly present — the clarity of touch, the rhythmic invention, the mastery of harmonics — but Taborn hardly takes a solo. It is the interplay of the quartet that interests him: The music on "Daylight Ghosts" highlights the process of mutual creation, rather than any single voice, including his own. In "Ancient," for example, the quartet snakes around a bass vamp in C, in a series of contrapuntal variations, before (in Taborn's words) "falling together," as if the four instruments had fused into one.

Except for Roscoe Mitchell's "Jamaican Farewell," a slow, plaintive waltz in 3/4, all of the songs are Taborn's, and they feel at once unpredictable (composed in distinct sections, often moving between different time signatures) and inexorable. Their taut energy and brooding propulsion imbue them with a diamondlike beauty. Illuminated by discreet, painterly touches of electronics — Taborn also plays the Farfisa organ and synthesizer — the music reflects an imaginative quilt of influences: minimalism, African rhythms, punk and kraut rock, among others. Yet it never feels contrived.

On the day that I visited Taborn at the studio, the band was working on a floating, ruminative ballad called "The Great Silence." Speed began with a swirl of long, sustained tones on clarinet that reminded me of French Impressionist composers like Francis Poulenc. Taborn played piano with his right hand and the Prophet 6 synthesizer with his left, creating firefly effects as King and Lightcap joined them in a lush, atmospheric melody.

"The bandleader has found his glasses!" Manfred Eicher declared in the sound-check room. "That reminds me of Arvo Part, the tintinnabuli!" This was high praise coming from Eicher, who introduced Western audiences to the Estonian composer's mystical minimalism. Eicher is a sometimes-tempestuous producer, with very strong views of what he wants from his artists, but he was tender, even humble, in his dealings with Taborn. Later that afternoon, the

two men listened to the playback of another section of “The Great Silence,” a gorgeously spectral piano solo that did not make it onto the record. “Is that piano or synthesizer?” Eicher asked. “I left the room when you were playing the cadenza.”

“Piano,” Taborn replied.

“It sounded so remote, like it was coming from a different perspective, so I couldn’t tell if it was piano or synthesizer. It was like a slow falling star, hitting the ground and blinking!”

Eicher, who seemed almost giddy, revised the metaphor. “Like a distant star that falls and then disappears.” He then suggested they try a “sparse improvised piece based on listening.” Taborn led the band in a sublime short piece that had the quiet intensity of the best chamber music, with Speed’s tenor evoking memories of Wayne Shorter’s work with Miles Davis. (It didn’t make the cut, another casualty of the process — Taborn told me it would have “unbalanced the architecture of the album.”) “Good form, good length, and the ending was beautiful,” Eicher said.

When Eicher left the room, Taborn said, “Manfred isn’t often that cheerful, so I’m really pleased he’s glad.”

Craig Taborn’s friends often described him to me as a mystery, but this usually turned out to be a polite way of expressing their frustration that he has chosen not to be better known than he is, or ought to be. Many of them told me how relieved they were that someone, at last, was profiling him, as if he were being forced out of hiding.

Steve Coleman, his former employer and still a great admirer, remembers hearing Taborn play at the Village Vanguard, where he was leading a trio with Gerald Cleaver and Thomas Morgan. He was astonished by the degree of innovation that he was hearing. “It’s finally going to happen for Craig,” he recalled thinking. “He’s making a real contribution, he’s not just doing a gig, and you can say that about only a small handful of people.” The trio toured widely and made a brilliant album, “Chants,” but Taborn soon went back to his work as a sideman, joining the bassist Dave Holland’s band. “Momentum is the real thing, and you can gain momentum in a situation, like he had with Gerald and Thomas,” Coleman said. “But you can’t recreate something once the time is past.”

When I mentioned this argument to Taborn, he conceded that Coleman had a point about focusing on your own work, and said he “might be on the verge of doing just that.” But he added: “I’m not always sure what momentum is, exactly. I’m not always sure where people think they’re going and if they ever get there, anyway. To some extent I think it’s all an illusion.”

What Taborn means, I think, is that he is deeply involved in his process, no matter what music, or rather whose music, he's performing. As he sees it, his body of work includes the music he has made as a sideman as much as his music as a leader. What matters — all that matters, really — is his presence in the moment of musical creation; the rest is commentary. If this attitude seems a little perplexing to some, it's because we live in an age of incessant commentary, when instrumental music invariably is discussed in relation to personality and worldly ambition, or some nonmusical experience, culture or history that it supposedly reflects or expresses. As if music without words weren't enough; as if it could refer to something beyond itself.

I still had trouble imagining that Taborn's process could be so simple, so pure and self-sacrificing. After all, a lot of musicians pay lip service to these ideas. Was it really possible to live them? Surely there must be some secret, a story that might expose, or at least account for, this surrender to the process of music making. Yet I've come to believe that if Taborn has a secret, it's hiding in plain sight: his faith in what Stravinsky called music's "essential being," its radical self-sufficiency, its nonreferential nature. Taborn has remained loyal to this principle, sometimes at the expense of his own career. His apparent selflessness may seem strange, but the whole point of his process has been to avoid projecting "a self," for the sake of a higher musical goal. This is what other musicians find so compelling and yet so peculiar — so mysterious — about him. It's what makes Taborn's musician friends highly protective of him, as if to speak about anything other than his music would be tantamount to betrayal.

Taborn's musician friends were, in fact, so unforthcoming about (or simply unaware of) his life offstage that I asked a fellow writer, his friend Wendy Walters, whether she could tell me something about him that didn't pertain directly to his music. She thought about it for a minute. Several years ago, she said finally, when Walters was going through a difficult divorce, Taborn sent her a witch-hazel tree, a breed that blooms in winter. The tree reminded her of Taborn's relationship to his practice, and his need for solitude. "Music is almost life-giving for him. It's the way he survives the things we're trying to deal with."

A few days later, I asked Taborn what he meant by the gift.

"Wendy's house was beginning to feel like a cell in many ways, and it was uncertain when or if she would be in a position to move," he remembered. "I thought it would be good to have something in the yard that would blossom with color. It was symbolic of hope, renewal and healing." He paused. "But Wendy is, I think, hitting on something deeper about why I make music. All the things people say when they talk about music have to do with entertainment, or some kind of aesthetic advancement. Yet when they talk about how music moves them, they talk about other things: feelings, times of life, etc. So I suppose that for me, music is one of the things we use to get ourselves through life." By giving Walters a tree that had not yet blossomed, he was giving her not so much a thing as a process, and waiting for it to reveal

itself, to blossom with color over time, was central to realizing its mysterious power. “The witch-hazel tree was doing the same thing that a piece can do. Just saying: Here is this piece of music that you can have and listen to, and enjoy. Some day it may blossom for you, and you may find that it gives you something that you may not even know you need.”