

Unfolding the Pocket, Neutralizing the Lyrical: Contrabass Guitarist Anthony Jackson and the Aesthetics of Modernism

The American bass guitar player Anthony Jackson is known for his early promotion of the six-string ‘contrabass guitar’. This instrument, which has become more common since the 1990s, has served him to build a bridge between seemingly incompatible musical worlds. After presenting Jackson as heir to the tradition of the 1960s recording studios, in particular to Motown’s James Jamerson, the article explores the influence he claims to have undergone from the organ works of Olivier Messiaen. Operating inbetween the worlds of soul, fusion and classical modernism, it is argued, Anthony Jackson speculates on an aesthetics of exteriority that deconstructs both lyricism and the groove.

‘The enchantment [of the Sirens] awakened the hope and the desire of a marvelous beyond, and this beyond only represented a desert, as if the home region of music were the only place completely devoid of music.’ – Maurice Blanchot¹

In the history of jazz it is quite common for jazz musicians to quote classical music as an influence on their music. Miles Davis absorbing a record of Stockhausen’s *Telemusik* in his New York apartment or Bill Evans occasionally even sounding like Ravel: these are familiar things in musical circles where big ears are all important. The situation in popular music is slightly different as this genre gives less room for the construction of veritable cross-overs. Yet, here too we find examples of musicians who manage to insert ideas from elsewhere (and sometimes ‘elsewhen’) into their work.

A case in point is the New Jersey based bass guitar player Anthony Jackson, whose name means all to some and nothing to most. Jackson gained fame as a sideman on a great number of popular and jazz-fusion recordings, and is often hailed as one of the key players in the instrument’s short history. Having listened to his bass playing for many years, and following the development of his music with sympathy, I have always remained puzzled by certain aspects of his style. Jackson’s playing seems too sophisticated, too intellectual and too experimental for the – occasionally fairly banal – tracks he appears on, and the idiom he uses to voice his ideas bespeaks a mental attitude that contrasts with the often overly pragmatic world of bass guitarists.

The question of influence, as is well-known, is a precarious one. Therefore, rather than simply giving an account of the way Jackson construed his own musical position with reference to a number of colleagues from the classical world, I shall focus on more abstract aesthetic phenomena that, I believe, are the objects of a shared fascination among these musicians.

Hence, my aim here is, first of all, to do justice to Anthony Jackson who, so far, has not received the scholarly attention that I believe he deserves, by telling the story of his career and highlighting his importance for the bass guitar as an instrument. Second, I shall broach the analysis of his playing on the basis of early recordings by Chaka Khan, focusing in particular on Jackson’s development of a hybrid groove (‘pocket’) temporality.

1 Quoted in David Ellison, ‘Narrative and Music in Kafka and Blanchot: The “Singing” of Josefina’, in: *Yale French Studies* 93 (1998), p. 209.

Finally, bringing the discussion to a more aesthetic and spiritual level, the question shall be addressed how this novel temporality hangs together with one of Jackson's other major interests: the expressive mode of the lyrical.²

Emancipating a 'Bastard Instrument'

During the past decade and a half, Anthony Jackson's name has often been associated with the jazz and latin-jazz piano trio's of Michel Petrucciani and Michel Camilo. In recent years he has continued this tradition of trio playing by recording with the Japanese pianist Hiromi Uehara and Turkish pianist Fahir Atakoglu.³ Despite these and other long-term associations, however, Jackson has mainly operated as an independent session player.

Born in 1952 in New York, Jackson started his career at the age of seventeen in local clubs. He worked with various jazz and fusion artists. For thirteen months he played with Buddy Rich and he toured with violinist Michael Urbaniak. He appeared on Billy Paul's 'Me and Mrs. Jones' (1972) and recorded with Roberta Flack. In 1973 he caught attention with his bass line for the The O'Jays' hit 'For the Love of Money' which earned him an author credit. On the recording we hear Jackson playing in one of his typical styles using the flatpick and a *flanger*.⁴ As I will show, this bass vamp already displays features of his mature style as it developed in the early 1980s.

Because Jackson found himself increasingly in demand for session work in the New York and Philadelphia studios, he stopped touring. In 1975 he moved to Los Angeles to work as a session player and to collaborate with, among others, Harvey Mason and Lee Ritenour. Soon, however, he returned to his home base in New York, where he was engaged by a good number of artists, both in the fusion world (Al Di Meola's *Elegant Gypsy*, Chick Corea's *Leprechaun*) and in the pop industry (Paul Simon's *Greatest Hits*, *Etc.*, Quincy Jones' *Sounds...*, Steely Dan's *Gaucho*).

In spite of these high-profile engagements, Jackson remains less known to the wider audience which, since the mid-1970s, has come to recognize such outspoken players as Weather Report's Jaco Pastorius, Stanley Clarke from the Chick Corea band, Miles Davis' former sideman Marcus Miller and, in Europe, Level 42's frontman Mark King.⁵ Unlike these players Jackson seems to prefer to inscribe himself in the tradition of invisibility typical of the 'in-house' rhythm section players of the early studios, such as those of Motown (Detroit) and Philadelphia International Records.⁶ This low media profile contrasts with Jackson's high professional self-awareness. Being conscious of the short histories of the bass guitar and of the music he is engaged in (compared to classical music, as we shall see below), Jackson has made sustained efforts to raise the standard of his craft.

2 I would like to extend my gratitude to Jan Kuiper and David de Marez Oyens for sharing their music, experiences, and thoughts in view of this article.

3 On these trios see Chris Jisi, 'Simultaneous Combustion: Anthony Jackson's Partnership with Michel Camilo', in: *Bass Player* (May 2002), pp. 26-34. Jackson recorded with Hiromi Uehara on two albums, *Another Mind* (SACD, Telarc, 3558, 2003) and *Brain* (SACD, Telarc, 3600, 2004). With Atakoglu and drummer Horacio 'El Negro' Hernandez Jackson recorded the album *If* (CD, Far & Here Music, FH12005, 2005).

4 This was the first time, Jackson claims, a phase shifted bass guitar was used on a recording. Jackson, in: Chris Jisi (ed.) *Brave New Bass: Interviews and Lessons with the Innovators, Trendsetters, and Visionaries*, San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2003, p. 23.

5 At the time of writing the list of his credits (see www.allmusic.com) is overwhelmingly long and stylistically so diverse that it will be necessary to limit the discussion to a number of examples. These examples, which I have selected for their aesthetic qualities rather than their statistical relevance, will inevitably represent a limited tendency in Jackson. The particular tendency I am interested in here is by no means representative of the majority of the tracks he recorded.

6 Cf. Jackson's own tribute to his colleague Ronnie Baker from the Philadelphia International Records in-house rhythm section, 'If You Don't Know Him By Now', in: *Bass Player* (Jan/Feb 1991), p. 78.

The need for emancipation of the bass guitar and its (exclusive) players is rooted in the early history of the instrument. The electric bass guitar was invented in the mid-1930s but only became successful with Leo Fender's introduction of the Precision bass, in 1951.⁷ Initially, the Fender bass, as it was generally referred to, was slowly picked up by double bass players, who started playing it mainly for practical and economical reasons. As Jackson relates in one of his talks:

'Producers started to tell upright bass players, "Look, we've got a new artist we're recording next week and it's kind of a new thing. So, you think you want to try that new bass they've been talking about, that 'Fender'?" "Well, do I have to?" "Yeah, it's kind of the new thing. We want to hear that". So you had a lot of anger, a lot of resentment, as people who came up in the '50s were being forced to make this change. (...) This is what happened for most of these guys. And the result was, if you listen to session recordings from '64, '65, '66, you typically hear pretty perfunctory bass performances. You can tell most of the players didn't really know what to do with the instrument, and most of the engineers didn't really know what to do with it, either. Things went out to the pressing plant you wouldn't believe today. You could just tell people didn't have a clue what to do with our instrument at that time.'⁸

Over the course of the 1960s, the instrument gradually emancipated itself from the double bass through Joe Osborn, Chuck Rainey and James Jamerson. In the mid-1970s it further gained recognition as an all-round instrument through the talents of Jaco Pastorius and Stanley Clarke, who developed the bass guitar into a mature solo instrument (even though Clarke moved out the bass register by occasionally playing a 'piccolo bass').

In the relative quiet of his niche, Anthony Jackson developed the instrument along other lines. His concern was neither to render the bass guitar more 'sexy' and upfront, nor to affirm its purely supportive role as member of the rhythm section. It seems that from the mid-1970s onwards, he began to think of his instrument according to a twofold classical paradigm: the organ and the guitar. In his early years as a professional, Jackson played several Gibsons and a hybrid four-string Fender instrument consisting of a jazz bass body with a Precision bass neck.⁹ However, playing along Jimmy Smith's organ trio records, Jackson experienced limitations on the low end. Tuning the instrument down did not offer a solution because that caused him to lose the upper register.

The solution was to add strings to the instrument – a decision that opened a new direction for bass guitar construction. In addition to adding a string below the usual four, Jackson decided to add a string on top as well. This decision was based on his view of the bass guitar not just as a 'bass' (meaning an offspring of the four-string – electric – double bass), but as a guitar:

'When I was first starting to play, most of the older musicians I met were adamant in calling the bass guitar just "Fender" or "electric bass", and they treated it as a poor man's upright. But I consider it to be exactly what it is: a bass guitar. In the playing of the instrument, the bass guitar has more in common with the guitar than it has with the upright. True, the scale is longer than the standard guitar, but it's much shorter than the upright.

7 On the early years of the bass guitar, see Peter Blecha, 'Audiovox #736: The World's First Electric Bass Guitar!', in: *Vintage Guitar Magazine* (March 1999), online archive www.vguitar.com. The 'Precision bass' owed its name to its fretted neck. The name indicates that the instrument was from the very beginning conceived as a substitute for the double bass rather than as a guitar.

8 Jackson's talk at Bass Day 1999 on the occasion of Chuck Rainey's Lifetime Achievement Award. Transcribed by Chris Jisi (accessed on the Internet on 10 February 2005, now removed).

9 His 'career girl', as Jackson nicknames the instrument. *Brave New Bass*, pp. 19, 24.

And the way you hold the instrument is the same as the guitar. There's something to be gained from both areas of instruction, but the guitar has far more to offer. In 1969, I studied with Larry Lucie, who played both the guitar and the bass guitar. As far as I know, he was the first musician of his generation – he was active in the '30s and '40s – to refer to it as a bass guitar, and he really helped me cement that idea.¹⁰

Jackson is careful to construe the bass guitar as a full and permanent member of the guitar family, and more distantly, the lute family. 'To me, the ideal bass guitar sound has always seemed to be the sound of a standard guitar dropped an octave or more in pitch'.¹¹ Having had initial doubts about the playability of the extra wide neck of a six-string instrument, Jackson gained confidence watching the Spanish guitar player Narciso Yepes (1927-1997) perform on his ten-string guitar.¹² In 1975 luthier Carl Thompson completed the first six-string bass guitar (tuned B₂E₁A₁DGc), which proved to be the beginning of a long history of instrument reconceptualization, technical innovation, and performance experimentation.¹³ The systematic approach to the instrument's refining also lead him to introduce a new, organologically correct name, the 'contrabass guitar'. Today, Jackson plays a Fodera single cutaway, 36 inch long-scale instrument with 28 frets and a hipshot detuner on the sixth string, which allows him to descend below the standard B₂.

Playing unchangeably in a sitting position with one foot on a stool, Jackson fits the image of a classical guitar player. This leaning toward the classical paradigm is essential for his musicianship. Jackson prefers classical guitar techniques to slapping, popping, and tapping, he takes the technological innovation of the instrument to 'Stradivarian' heights, and he emphasizes the element of 'artistry' in his craft. The way Jackson hears his instrument is heavily informed by his experience with classical examples. The organ pedal played by Jimmy Smith, for instance, makes him refer to his youth experience with the church organ.¹⁴ He then recommends bass guitar players to go to organ concerts, because 'it shows you the power and majesty of what the bass range is about'.¹⁵

10 Jackson, in Jim Ferguson, 'The One and Only Anthony Jackson: Exceptional Talent, Outspoken Attitude', in: *Guitar Player* (January 1986), p. 46.

11 Jackson, in: *Brave New Bass*, p. 22. See also *ibid.*, p. 17 where Jackson relates his early impression of (Jefferson Airplane's) Jack Casady's 'curious guitaristic way of playing that I was immediately drawn to.' One of the best recorded examples in this respect is the introduction to a track called 'De Spiegel [The Mirror]' from Jan Kuiper's album *Podium Trio* (Radio Netherlands CD Series, RN006, 1996). Here we hear Jackson play on his own, in every respect sounding like a tuned-down guitar.

12 Jackson, in: Ferguson, 'The One and Only Anthony Jackson', p. 48. Yepes appears to have had a professional condition similar to Jackson's. He too battled against negative prejudices with regard to his instrument, and he too responded to these with an extreme perfecting of his playing technique and a progressive view of his instrument. Cf. Tom and Mary Anne Evans, *Guitars: Music, History, Construction and Players from the Renaissance to Rock*, New York: Paddington Press, 1977, p. 164.

13 This includes the infinite search for suitable round wound strings and the finest, high end amplification technology. Jackson is famous (or, according to some, notorious) for changing strings each new concert, and even more than once during single recording sessions. It remains a matter of dispute whether or not this was historically the first six-string bass guitar. Leo Fender already introduced a six-string model called 'Bass VI' in 1961, but as Eric Shoaf remarks in his article on this instrument, it was more like a 'baritone guitar'. See Eric C. Shoaf, 'Fender Bass VI: Rare Miss Proves Leo Was Ahead of His Time', in: *Vintage Guitar Magazine* (February 2002), online archive, www.vguitar.com.

14 As Jackson relates about his youth: 'My mom was teaching music at a kindergarten. There was a big pipe organ there, and I always liked the sounds, especially the wonderful sounds of the giant pipes which were played by big foot pedals.' In: Nakako Yamamoto, 'Special Long Interview: Anthony Jackson', in: *Bass Magazine* 27 (July 1991), p. 83. Translated from the Japanese by Makiko Sadakata.

15 Jackson, quoted from his clinic presentation at the Conservatory of Groningen, The Netherlands, 1994.

This classical frame of reference notwithstanding, however, Jackson never seems to have considered changing his electric instrument for an acoustic bass guitar, the instrument that gained popularity at the time of 1990s MTV's program series *Unplugged*. One of the reasons for his preference for the electric instrument, which does not seem to sit easily with his classical examples, is closely related to a musical concept that shall further be discussed in the next section. For Jackson, the solid body instrument has the advantage of a very long *sustain*. As he explains: 'The superior sustain of [an electric, solid-body] bass guitar is a direct result of the body being relatively non-resonant, and to increase the body's resonance would mean a decrease in the instrument's ability to sustain notes'.¹⁶

By positioning himself in between acoustic and electric traditions, and by venturing into the area between the classical and the popular (and jazz), Jackson as an exclusive bass *guitar* player sets a unique example for his peers. Watching him play is for many to experience his simultaneously restrained, 'sophisticated', and ecstatic commitment to his musical beliefs.¹⁷ In addition to setting an example, Jackson has promoted his vision by means of verbal articulation. In writings such as his six columns for *Bass Player* magazine in the early 1990s, Jackson's principal aim appears again to have been the emancipation of the bass guitar.

In these texts he makes ample use of classical-romantic concepts such as 'genius' and 'virtuosity' in order to raise the standard and to canonize certain musicians. Defining his concepts with academic care (which contrasts with the prose usually found in fanzines and instrument magazines), he uses them to highlight the – in his view – extraordinary musicianship of drummer Buddy Rich and Motown bass guitar player James Jamerson, comparing them to other 'first-rank 20th Century geniuses' such as Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Charles Ives and, in the same breath, Paul Hindemith, Jascha Heifetz and Pablo Casals.¹⁸ In a similarly innovative gesture, he defiantly compared the writing for the rhythm section by the New York based arranger L. Leon Pendarvis Jr. – with whom Jackson worked intensively in the mid-1970s – to 'the proficiency of a composer of string quartets'.¹⁹ In fact, one of the ways in which Jackson has envisioned to save the instrument's future has been to commission composers to write compositions for it. The idea was inspired by Julian Bream's album *20th Century Guitar* on which Bream features works written expressly for him.²⁰

If Jackson departs from the short lineage he comes from, it is because of this unusual, 'classical' approach to his instrument and his playing. However, so far Jackson has never actually crossed the line – as did for instance, among many examples, Uri Cane in his Mahler project. He has firmly stayed within the pop, fusion, latin, and jazz contexts he operated in

16 Jackson, in: Chris Jisi, 'Anthony Jackson – Ron Carter: Breaking Down the Boundaries', in: *Bass Player* (December 1994), p. 43.

17 In 1986 Jackson paraphrased the words of Messiaen at the premiere of *La nativité du Seigneur* on 27 February 1936: 'And this abundance of technique allows the heart to overflow freely.' Ferguson, 'The One and Only Anthony Jackson', p. 40. Nigel Simeone, 'Le Spirale and La Jeune France: Group Identities', in: *The Musical Times*, 143/1880 (Autumn 2002), pp. 11-12.

18 Jackson, on the second of the two audio cassettes that accompany the book on James Jamerson by Allan Slutsky (a.k.a. Dr. Licks), *Standing in the Shadows of Motown: The Life and Music of Legendary Bassist James Jamerson*, Wynnewood, PA: Dr. Licks Publishing, 1989. See also Billy Amendola, 'Anthony Jackson: Bassist Extraordinaire', in: *Modern Drummer* (October 2005), p. 133.

19 Jackson, in *Brave New Bass*, pp. 21-22.

20 Jackson, in Ferguson, 'The One and Only Anthony Jackson', p. 45. In his 1991 *Bass Magazine* interview he further comments: 'The music that I would like to play as my own work is actually concert music, so-called classical music. But I don't think the people who are recommending me to make a solo album want to listen to me playing classical music (laugh). Of course, eventually I would like to make my own work. But I don't have a concrete picture of it at this moment yet.' Jackson, in: Yamamoto, 'Anthony Jackson', p. 83.

since the beginning of his career.²¹ Rather than switching genres he seems to have managed to blend in elements that attracted him in the world of contemporary classical music and which seem so very alien to the African-American sensibilities which dominate these areas of the music industry.

A brief study of the development of his style will clarify how Jackson mediated the various traditions that have been important to him. I will suggest that this mediation is constituted by, first, the entanglement in Jackson's playing (and ensuing style) of seemingly incompatible kinds of temporality and, second, by the (arguably modernist) manner in which he turns the principle of lyricism inside out.

Folding Messiaen into Chaka Khan

An appreciation of Jackson's style should start with his appropriation of the African-American musical tradition that he found himself in as a bass player. At the time of 'For the Love of Money' he started to consciously integrate concepts from James Jamerson, the remarkable bass guitar player who had made his career in the Motown recording studios. Jackson relates as follows his first encounter, at the age of fourteen, with the music of Jamerson:

'The beginning of a lifetime of being knocked to the floor and stomped on came in the summer of 1966 when "[I'm a] Road Runner" by Jr. Walker and the All Stars was released. The song opens with a classic fill by [drummer] Benny Benjamin followed by eight bars of Jamerson at his best. At that point, I knew I had my mentor, although I didn't know his name. (...) A while later, in 1972, I discovered a 1968 performance Diana Ross and the Supremes album called *Love Child*, containing several major Jamerson performances and a consummate one – "How Long Has That Evening Train Been Gone?" – and was in a position to spend virtually every waking hour for several months playing along with and studying them. It was probably then that one of the foundations of my style took root.'²²

James Jamerson (1936-1983) belonged to the group of Motown studio musicians known as the Funk Brothers.²³ These musicians have been responsible for the majority of the instrumental music heard on records of vocal stars such as the Temptations, the Four Tops, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, the Jackson Five, and many others.

Jamerson's unique style is analyzed by Jackson in his contribution to Allan Slutsky's 1989 tribute to his 'mentor', *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*. The key terms Jackson uses to characterize the style are *ambiguity*, *contrast*, and *dissonance*. Jamerson often dislocated metric accents by slurring over the bar line, or by shifting the accent to various parts of non-accented quarter notes. The resulting ambiguity is expressed by a syncopative tension, which could also result from deferring tonic affirmations. Jamerson's use of contrast – Jackson's second key term – references the abrupt transitions between static and dynamic movement, and to frequent alternations between horizontal and vertical motion. These destabilizing elements, which both affirm and challenge the traditional role of the bass line as foundation, express a preference for playing 'outside'. Jamerson lines contain many 'wrong',

21 Since the 1970s there has been an increase in the use of the bass guitar in contemporary classical music. Louis Andriessen wrote challenging parts for the instrument in his ensemble piece *De Staat* (1974-76). Sofia Gubaidulina used two of them in *Zeitgestalten* (1994) as a representation of hell, i.e., the perpetual sound of booming basses from the other side of one's neighbor's wall.

22 Jackson, in: *Brave New Bass*, p. 17.

23 See *Standing in the Shadows of Motown: The Best-Kept Secret in the History of Pop Music*, dir. Paul Justman (DVD, Region 2, Momentum Pictures Home Entertainment, 2004).

dissonant notes that give his style an effective angularity and edge.²⁴

Around 1980 Jackson worked on a number of recording projects with Chaka Khan. The second of these, the 1979 sessions for the album *Naughty* (1980) in New York, Jackson regards as having had a decisive influence on his musical development. Referring to these recording sessions Jackson relates: ‘When I reflect on the *Naughty* experience, I realize that it was right at a time when I started to develop my own style, and by the project’s end I had solidified many of my concepts.’²⁵ When Jackson had finished the initial two-week process of molding his parts for the six tracks he appeared on together with the other members of the rhythm section (among whom Leon Pendarvis), he told the producer Arif Mardin that he could improve upon his bass lines if he was given extra time. Exceptional even in the late-1970s heyday of studio session work, he was allowed to do so. ‘I was given absolute license, with one exception, and an unheard-of amount of time – three months – to recompose the bass parts.’²⁶ ‘Rather than putting together a collection of slick licks, my goal was to wrap each part around and through the music, in essence, treating them as bass guitar compositions.’²⁷

Interestingly, the transcription of the track ‘Move Me No Mountain’ as published by Chris Jisi and Jackson shows that – at first sight – Jackson finding himself, is Jackson finding himself *as a Jamersonian*, that is, in his ‘Jamerson self.’²⁸ To a great extent the track can be assessed in the terms provided by Jackson in his Jamerson analysis.²⁹ Jackson makes ample use of ‘abrupt transitions between busy, dynamic motion and inactive, sustained passages’; ‘abrupt transitions between horizontal and vertical motion’; he carefully undermines chordal definition by using chromatic ‘bold passing tones’; he displaces the regular metric accents by means of anticipation; and so on.³⁰ In fact, Jackson seems to have used these means ever since the contrasting sections that make up his introduction for ‘For the Love of Money’.

There are, of course, differences – superficial ones to start with, such as his use of an additional low range and his Jacksonian downward runs starting on a downbeat and using tone repetitions.³¹ More important differences lie in the overall suspension of the playful economy of silence, displacement, and ambiguity by means of an aesthetic concept that is *alien* to the Motown paradigm. Here we touch upon the meaning of Jackson’s remark that ‘those [Chaka Khan] recordings are among the best examples of blatant commerciality infused with high art.’³²

In the ‘Move Me No Mountain’, Jackson infuses a *static temporality* into the propulsive quality so typical of Jamerson’s musical language. The music becomes, as it were, suspended. The cause of this suspension seems to lie in the excessive precision with which Jackson controls the *duration* of his notes. The measure of this is to be found in the

24 Jackson’s discussion of Jamerson, notably his comments about Jamerson being a genius in the proper sense of the term, clearly belong to Jackson’s efforts to construct a solid, historical-canonical ground for his instrument, and to emancipate its present players. Judging by Jamerson’s present popularity, the publication has performed its function to canonize him well.

25 Anthony Jackson, in: Chris Jisi, ‘Chaka Khan’s “Move Me No Mountain”: Anthony Jackson hits a Career Peak on this 1980 Classic’, in: *Bass Player* (August 2004), p. 80. See also *Brave New Bass*, p. 24.

26 *Brave New Bass*, p. 24. It remains to be guessed what the exception was. Unfortunately, Jackson could not be reached for comments on issues such as these.

27 Jackson, in: Jisi, ‘Chaka Khan’s “Move Me No Mountain”’, p. 85.

28 *Brave New Bass*, p. 23.

29 Slutsky, *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, pp. 92-95.

30 Jisi, ‘Chaka Khan’s “Move Me No Mountain”’, pp. 81-84, b. 7 and b. 76; in slurred variation, b. 78.

31 Jackson played this part on a heavily tuned-down instrument, as yet having no six-string instrument at his disposal. Jisi, ‘Chaka Khan’s “Move Me No Mountain”’, p. 85.

32 Jackson, in: *Brave New Bass*, p. 24.

articulation of the *endings* of each note which, incidentally, explains why, for Jackson, the sustain of his instruments is so important. Jackson's duration management, cutting as he does lengths from an unchanging flow, creates a heightened sense of discontinuity. Such discontinuity enables Jackson to make multiple use of the musical space, almost in a Baroque manner, breaking up his lines and distributing them across his fingerboard.³³ Near the end of the track, the bass patterns become less discontinuous and the part starts to move around in a temporal plane which to the ear makes a completely homogeneous and continuous impression. It opens onto an abstract and, so to speak, 'flat' music – a *planar music*.³⁴

Seen from this angle, 'Move Me No Mountain' shows Jackson coming into his own by going *beyond* the aesthetics of soul. The source of this temporal concept is never mentioned by Jackson, but it arguably refers to classical modernism, and to Olivier Messiaen in particular.³⁵ As I stated above, this reference is not so much in the notes as in the *temporal plane* evoked by the *articulation* of the notes.³⁶ Jackson recounts in several interviews his discovery in 1967 (although at an other occasion he dates it 1972) of the organ works of the French composer Olivier Messiaen. These works, he relates, sparked off an exploration of new harmonic and rhythmic directions:

[The organ cycle] *La nativité [du Seigneur, from 1935]* totally and instantly changed the way I heard and played music. The effect was so shattering, so ecstatic, that all my other sensual perceptions were subtly altered as well. Although there are many other composers whose music inspires in me sensations that can only be directly associated with the divine, Olivier Messiaen, alone among them, persists in having a voice, along with Jamerson and [Jack] Casady [from Jefferson Airplane], in every intuitively creative decision I make.³⁷

The organ works Jackson refers to span almost the entire career of Messiaen. In these works, all of the major techniques Messiaen developed are used, such as the organization of pitches in 'modes of limited transpositions', quasi-serial orderings, synaesthetic 'sound-color' complexes, and all the usual and unusual colorings that the grand organs of Cavaillé-Coll offer. Jackson was particularly struck by the recordings of the composer himself playing his works on the pre-renovation organ of the Saint Trinité. Messiaen was always very strict about the performance indications in his scores, but on these recordings, we hear a particularly free rendering which evokes the spirit of Messiaen's weekly improvisations on Sunday morning. Messiaen considered himself a 'rhythmician' and 'ornithologist' rather than a composer. It seems that Jackson was particularly struck by the temporal plasticity in the organ works, which is due to such devices as the 'added durations' or *valeurs ajoutées*.³⁸

Jackson's most explicit remarks about the influence of Messiaen on his playing point towards the title track of Al Di Meola's 1982 *Electric Rendezvous* album. 'My solos on *Electric*

33 See for instance his playing on Lee Ritenour's *Overtime* (DVD, Region 2, Video Arts Music Inc., EREDV479, 2004), disc 1, from 59'17" (track called 'P.A.L.S.'), during the piano solo.

34 Although this term evokes the Gregorian *musica plana* (i.e., the 'lower music'), I use it to refer to an aesthetic effect of 'flatness' only.

35 Chris Jisi refers to Messiaen in the context of b. 26 of 'Move Me No Mountain', but unfortunately he does not qualify this claim to influence. Jisi, 'Chaka Khan's "Move Me No Mountain"', p. 85.

36 This space is not to be confused with the homogeneity produced simply by playing tightly. Jackson's playing can always be called tight, but he does not always speculate on 'planar music'. Cf. for instance his work on the sessions with Lee Ritenour (cf. note 33 above), where he uses both this aesthetic mode and more intimate types of playing.

37 Jackson, in *Brave New Bass*, p. 18. Cf. Yamamoto, 'Anthony Jackson', p. 83.

38 See Olivier Messiaen, *Technique of my Musical Language* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1956), pp. 16-17.

Rendezvous [this refers to the track rather than to the album, SvM] were directly inspired by Messiaen.³⁹ These solos, however, in spite of their being ‘well-considered statements’, also seem to be understandable, and perhaps even more adequately so, in terms of Hindemith’s concepts of voice leading and chromatic tonality (see Ex. 1 and 2).⁴⁰



Example 1

Anthony Jackson, solo 1 at 5'22" in: *Al Di Meola*, *Electric Rendezvous*.



Example 2

Anthony Jackson, solo 2 at 5'30" in: *Al Di Meola*, *Electric Rendezvous*.

A better place to show Messiaenic elements in Jackson seems his work with Steve Khan's 'post-fusion' quartet *Eyewitness*.⁴¹ In the title track of *Eyewitness*'s album *Casa loco* (1984) several of these elements make their latin-jazz appearance. 'Casa Loco' is a long track which includes an extended drum solo by Steve Jordan. During this solo, Steve Khan on guitar and Jackson on bass guitar play a looped vamp.⁴² The bass part is arguably an example of the way Jackson appropriated Messiaen's ideas. He plays on his second Ken Smith contrabass guitar, using the instrument's typically long sustain efficiently.⁴³

The bass part continuously avoids the downbeat by anticipating and slurring, thereby shifting focus to the notes' durations. Midway the eight-bar pattern, the slurring *itself* also shifts, causing the anticipation to include the full fourth crotchet. This suggests a forward shift of the downbeat which, however, is not affirmed by the vamp's interval content. The predominant intervals are the tritone (A flat-D; F sharp-C) and the deceptive leading tone tensions between the F sharp and the final F natural. These relationships only reinforce the impression of a free floating movement which relies on the proportional and quasi-additive play of durations. In Messiaen, this is a common device, as is also the sense of

39 Jackson, in: Ferguson, 'The One and Only Anthony Jackson', p. 45. Cf. his remarks on *ibid.*, pp. 40-41: 'Although I took no more than a couple of breaks on the title track of *Al's Electric Rendezvous*, it was one of the most satisfying albums I've done. And those solos were worked out; I feel they were well-considered statements.' These solos appear on the album's track 2 at 5'22" and 5'30" (CBS CD 32674).

40 It is important to note that on several occasions (e.g. Ferguson, 'The One and Only Anthony Jackson', p. 45, and also at his 1994 clinic at the Groningen School of Music, The Netherlands) Jackson stated that, for him, the main lesson of Messiaen's music was the equality of all notes in the chromatic scale. Strictly speaking, this contradicts the modal approach of Messiaen and his abhorrence of Schoenbergian dodecaphony. Hindemith also rejected the strict twelve-tone equality; he even subjected Schoenberg's approach to his own concept of tonality.

41 Bill Milkowski, 'Steve Khan: Post-Fusion Guitarist', in: *Down Beat* (December 1983), pp. 27-29.

42 Steve Khan, *Casa Loco* (Antilles CCD 1020) track 2 from 7'27". See page 4 and 5 of the lead sheet of 'Casa Loco', at Letter F ('Drum Solo'). Published on Steve Khan's website, www.stevexhan.com/casa4.htm (accessed 21 August 2008). The website contains a recording of the track.

43 Cf. Ferguson, 'The One and Only Anthony Jackson', p. 49. A few years after this recording, Jackson would switch to extra-long scale instruments (36 inch rather than 34 inch) for more stability, sustain, and overtone richness.

inversion each time the vamp comes full circle. Hence, although Jackson uses patterns which are derived from the latin style, the treatment of these patterns places them in a temporal plane – a *planar music* – which effectively ‘denatures’ them. Tonal propulsion and syncopation are inserted into the general tendency of twentieth-century ‘new music’ to conceive music in terms of space.

Early in that century the loss of tonality led to a shift from linear-temporal organizations of pitch to geometrical, that is, spatially represented permutations of series. In the 1950s the eradication of directional temporalities reached its high point in the organization of music ‘outside time’, as Iannis Xenakis called it.⁴⁴ However, rather than simply moving outside of time, music installed a new type of temporality; one which enabled composers to practice surgical operations on time as such, similar to Glenn Gould’s cutting and splicing of recorded time in the studio.

At particular points in his music, Anthony Jackson evokes the novel temporal space that is presupposed by such compositional and editing procedures. His preference for ‘playing outside’, that is, the audacity to go outside the tonal and rhythmic structures as defined by the lead sheet, in the spirit of Jamerson and the former Miles Davis sideman Ron Carter, has forced him to also reconceive the role of the bass guitar.⁴⁵ Whenever Jackson evokes an ‘outside’ temporality he suspends the bassist’s traditional musical contract to be in a certain tonal place at a certain metrical time. He enters a plane of immanent transcendence in which he can move diagonally with respect to the foundation-and-upper-melody structure and its metrical underpinning.⁴⁶

Neutralizing the Lyrical

Jackson’s introduction of folding the contemporary spatialization of musical time into the ‘pocket’ of groove-driven music – unfolding the pocket – is by no means a merely technical operation. It also intervenes in the cultural, religious, and philosophical debate, as is exemplified by his models from the world of classical music. Messiaen’s temporal manipulations, for example, represent a religious ‘technique for the end of time’, as critic Paul Griffiths aptly summarizes the composer’s early musical projects.⁴⁷ These manipulations not only emphasized the metaphysical dimensions of religious experience. They also implied a socio-political program, aimed at a Christian and humanistic revitalization of the 1930s musical practice.⁴⁸ Similarly, the works of Paul Hindemith – which Jackson counts among those having the most decisive influence on his musical development – require a combined technical-metaphysical interpretation.⁴⁹ These works not only exemplify Hindemith’s innovative musical theories but they also engage with Christian and neo-Pythagorean themes (*Das Marienleben*, *Die Harmonie der Welt*). Jackson’s examples, that is, typically use their musical means to a spiritual end.

In his writings Jackson, too, frequently aspires beyond the musical-technical aspects of his craft. In a *métier* plagued by mindless virtuosos, his vocabulary stands out by its theoretical knowingness. Discussing spiritual values he speaks of ‘transcendence’ in reference

44 Iannis Xenakis, *Formalized Music: Thought and Mathematics in Music*, Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 1992, p. 183.

45 Jackson, in: Ferguson, ‘The One and Only Anthony Jackson’, p. 45.

46 The slippage in this sentence between, on the one hand, the ‘outside’ as tonal and metrical concept, and other hand, the ‘outside’ as an aesthetic concept, is intended. The two dimensions are related but do not necessarily follow from each other. As I argue below, Jackson’s music on occasion enacts the transition between the two.

47 Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1985, pp. 90 ff.

48 Simeone, ‘Le Spirale and La Jeune France: Group Identities’, *passim*.

49 Jackson, in: Ferguson, ‘The One and Only Anthony Jackson’, p. 45, where he expresses his admiration for Hindemith’s melodic technique.

to metaphysical experience and to the romantic-idealistic concept of the ‘transcendent genius.’⁵⁰ It should, however, also be noted that, for Jackson, these realms of the transcendent are immediately related to the practice of music making itself; artists, according to him, are ‘metaphysicians.’⁵¹ In one of his *Bass Player* columns Jackson encourages his readers to practice meditation, and he describes how this both helps (quoting Rachmaninoff) getting to the musical ‘point’ and to enter creativity. ‘When all the necessary outer and inner conditions are in perfect harmony,’ he writes, ‘we experience the ecstasy of the saints – Hindemith’s ‘Angelkonzert’. (...) You can’t “grab” ecstasy – but you can practice getting *close*, and the closer you come, the easier it will become to solve difficult musical problems.’⁵²

The preferred expressive mode of many musics Jackson helped create as a side man, such as the vocal performances of Chaka Khan, Diana Ross, and Randy Crawford, is the lyrical. In soul music this expressive mode is often regarded as a vestige of the Pentecostal tradition this music is rooted in. The lyrical, being an expression of the soul rising to its paroxysm is characterized, according to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, by ‘the very experience of *transcendence*, in the active sense of the term, or, if one prefers, the *metaphysical* experience par excellence.’⁵³ As a rhetorical device, the lyrical typically uses a combination of hyperbole and apostrophe along with images of elevation, (sense) transfiguration, illumination, and intensification. The lyrical mode integrates religious, musical, and aesthetic registers to produce an experience, and an expression, that transcends the verbal. Because of this transcendence the lyrical lends itself easily for expression in the instrumental realm as well, and Jackson is often heard ‘singing’ on his instrument in what appears to be more than mere melodicism. His lyricism carries within it an element of excess that differs from the method of intensification commonly found in soul music. What is the nature of this excess?

Surprising for a musician working in a context like his, the key reference for Jackson’s lyricism is again Messiaen, but now as a lyricist rather than as a ‘rhythmician’. As a poetic device, the lyrical is used by Messiaen at crucial points. Lyricism is the mode through which Messiaen turns his melodic creed – ‘Supremacy to melody!’ – into a metaphysical device. In his opera *Saint François d’Assise*, for instance, the angel whose violin playing overwhelms and transports Saint Francis in the fifth scene plays an extremely intense lyrical passage. This passage is performed by the orchestra and three ondes Martenot, an early monodic electronic instrument that Messiaen used regularly since his 1937 *Fête des belles eaux*. The instrument is used by Messiaen mainly for its rich timbre possibilities, some of which, such as the *timbre métallisé*, produce, according to the composer, ‘effects that are absolutely terrifying, even harrowing, at full volume and, conversely, are ethereally haloed when used softly.’⁵⁴ As Griffiths comments, ‘Messiaen seems to have heard the wail of the ondes Martenot as that of a disembodied human agency, a voice of the spirit.’⁵⁵

Jackson uses similar expressive traits when he combines the metallic sound of his strings with cathedral-style reverb and a volume pedal.⁵⁶ As he explains: ‘I use [the volume pedal] as an expression pedal, which is what it’s called on a pipe organ. I confess to imitating one instrument: the ondes Martenot and its main player, Olivier Messiaen’s

50 Amendola probably misquotes when he makes Jackson speak of a ‘transcended genius’. Amendola, ‘Anthony Jackson’, p. 133.

51 Jackson, ‘Getting to the Point’, in: *Bass Player* (Fall 1990), p. 78.

52 Ibid.

53 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica Ficta (Figures of Wagner)*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 25.

54 Olivier Messiaen, *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, Portland: Amadeus Press, 1986, p. 58.

55 Griffiths, *The Music of Time*, p. 75.

56 The best recorded examples to date include the introduction to Jan Kuiper’s ‘De Spiegel’, his introduction to ‘The Suitcase’ on Steve Khan, *The Suitcase: Live in Köln '94* (ESC Records, CD 3722-2, 2008), and the album with Fahir Atakoglu referred to in the notes above.

sister-in-law Jeanne Loriod (...). She was my inspiration for using the volume pedal.⁵⁷ Jackson's volume pedal intensifies the lyricism of his playing – not just in the high register but typically also in the depths. Yet, however sweet his lyricism becomes, bordering as it sometimes does on the excessively sweet often found in Messiaen (cf. the *Saint François* passage), it always remains inscribed in the spatialization of time, that is, the planar music described above. This planar music comes to interrupt the intensive flow of the lyrical by marking it, from within the fabric of soulful lyricism, with a sense of reservation.⁵⁸ Far from destroying the lyrical this reservation uncovers the essence of lyricism as an experience of emptiness, of an intractable neutrality. The latter element is found within Jackson's lyricism and, furthermore, it occasionally surfaces in its own right, such as in the 'diagonal' groove playing discussed above.

In such instances, Jackson does not stop at playing *great* grooves, which can be thought of as based on tropes of intensification (the slapping technique being their principal vehicle). Rather, he speculates on the *grand*: the extended, the cosmic, the infinite. The inner experience of the soul in the medium of time is transformed into a spatial experience in the modality of the mathematically sublime. In Jackson, the lyrical soul and all that it stands for in terms of naturalness, substantiality, inwardness, and spontaneity makes way for a soul that is marked by distance. For example, his playing in the first 'vamp' section of 'Sisé', a song released on Steve Khan's 1990 album *Public Access*, shows how the grand tone consists of more than just the flowing presence of an affirmative bass line.⁵⁹ It also implies a certain negativity, a reservation that impresses by means of its terrifying evocation of infinity. This forbidding quality is reminiscent of the vertical aesthetics used by Messiaen in his organ work *Livre d'orgue* from 1951. Here too the spatiality of the church acoustics is used, now to evoke a distance that penetrates the soul without suggesting the continuity of lyrical fullness and contact. The aesthetics of the neutral interrupt the lyrical aesthetics of presence – the 'Pentecostalism' of soul music – by means of a play with various qualities that are associated with the neutral.⁶⁰

The reverse, it should be added, is also true. For this neutrality not only deconstructs the lyrical by uncovering its desert within. It is also the place where passion, that is, the impulse to sing, finds its origin. Thus, the answer to the question what the intense lyricism of, for instance, Chaka Khan is about, is answered by the planar music in the accompanying bass guitar, whereas the latter's lines – played on the instrument literally devoid of soul (that is, not having the soundpost found inside hollow body instruments) but with 'superior sustain' – can only release itself into the former.⁶¹

57 Jackson, in *Brave New Bass*, p. 26. See also Ferguson, 'The One and Only Anthony Jackson', p. 45.

58 This reservation may be explained as a consequence of Jackson's ethics of good accompaniment (the Chaka Khan track is a good example), i.e., never wanting to interfere with the lead vocals. However, this may also be just the origin of the novel and singular approach to bass playing that I intend to describe here.

59 Steve Khan, *Public Access* (GRP-9599-2), track 1 from 0'30", and the lead sheet of 'Sisé', page 1, section 'Vamp'. Published on www.stevexhan.com/sise1.htm (accessed 21 August 2008). The website contains a recording of the track.

60 Among the qualities is the exteriority associated with the technical, which opposes – but only apparently so, I believe – the pure inwardness of the lyrical soul. I cannot pursue this line of inquiry here.

61 The soul (*âme*, *anima*) or soundpost is 'a small spruce dowel inserted vertically between the belly and back in bowed string instruments, located under the treble side of the bridge.' J. Dilworth (with J. Woodhouse), 'Soundpost', in: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, online edition (accessed 12 August 2008).

Confidence and Despair

The story of Anthony Jackson is in many respects a twentieth-century story. It is about the coming of age of a newly developed musical instrument, and about the role played in this development by one of its most remarkable players to date. The story is situated in an interspace between rigid genre distinctions that, thanks to the creative efforts of many musicians, has largely been bridged. It addresses the aesthetic stakes involved in such a bridging effort, and it shows why it is necessary to work across genres (contemporary, popular and improvised musics; commercial, art and religious music, and so on) if we wish to understand the course of recent musical developments.

Concepts from musical modernism, Jackson's story suggests, can shed light on subtleties in the structure of popular styles that could easily be passed over in popular music studies. Working in the opposite direction, the example of Jackson enables the study of the exploitation and reinterpretation of modernist concepts of time and expression in popular and improvised contexts. These contexts create opportunities for further development of these concepts and, accordingly, to follow the ways in which classical modernism is reinterpreted and re-used outside of its domain proper, and into the future.

As regards the bass guitar, this instrument has done surprisingly well to survive the age of digital music (re-)production. Recently, in an unexpected move that calls for further interpretation, Anthony Jackson has ventured to sell the sound of his instrument, as played by himself, to a company which now makes it available in a series of digital samples to anyone who is ready to pay for it.⁶² From a bass guitar player who has lived through the collapse of the session scene in the early 1980s, and who has tirelessly endeavored to raise the stakes within the domain of his instrument, no greater act of confidence in the future of his art can be expected.

This in spite of his pessimism – which is typical of the strained idealist and believer that he remains – regarding the bass guitar's chances to survive the next hundred years: 'I have questions whether or not it will survive. It is hard for me to imagine, a hundred years from now, that there will still be electric bass players. I just don't see that. The instrument is going to wind up being very much a specialty, like the sackbut [a distant forerunner of the modern trombone, SvM], and other medieval instruments which a few people play.'⁶³ Until these days come, it seems, the bass guitar, as a new offshoot on the tree of lute instruments, has a future that is longer than its past.

62 See www.basssix.com (accessed 21 August 2008).

63 Jackson, quoted from the recording that underlies Marten Schulp, 'Interview: Anthony Jackson', in: *De Bassist* 5 (July-September 2008), p. 14. Thanks to Marten for sharing this original material.