



AN INTERLUDE, BEFORE THE NEXT MOVEMENT

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In this essay Horace Maxile explores the historical significance of two journals: *Black Perspective in Music* and *Black Music Research Journal*. Highlighting the work of the founders of those journals, Eileen Southern and Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., Maxile discusses the broader missions of those journals and their relevance as groundbreaking journals that positioned Black music studies as a bona fide field of scholarly inquiry. In homage to the legacies of Southern, Floyd, and their respective journals, Maxile also offers a brief analytical-interpretive vignette on Olly Wilson's *Sometimes* for tenor and tape (1976). Both the historical overview and analysis serve as calls to continue work beyond the agentive streams forged by earlier generations of Black music scholars.

[*The Black Perspective in Music*] seeks to become a source of current history of Afro-American and African music and to provide information periodically about the past of this music. It seeks to improve conditions for the performance, publication, and recording of an important area of American and African music that hitherto has not received its *due* share of attention.

—Eileen Southern, “An Editorial”

The thinking and writing of John Wesley Work II and John Wesley Work III reached fruition long before black music scholarship attained its present level of sophistication, yet their assumptions and deductions remain sound. Long before it was fashionable, or even acceptable in some quarters, they emphasized the importance of extolling and preserving the musical heritage of black Americans. This journal [*Black Music Research Journal*] is dedicated to their memory.

—Samuel A. Floyd Jr., “A Dedication”

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IN thinking through the promise and potential of *Black Music, in Theory*, one considers the breadth of scholarly contributions to Black music studies over the last five decades, bodies of work that engage various theories, concepts, and methodologies with myriad forms of sonic realizations spawned through Black imaginations and experiences. One also reflects on two groundbreaking journals that opened writerly spaces that positioned Black music studies as a bona fide field of scholarly inquiry: *The Black Perspective in Music* (BPiM) and *Black Music Research Journal* (BMRJ). These two journals and their founders, Eileen Southern and Samuel A. Floyd Jr., respectively, not only broke ground but also provided platforms for the development, promotion, and perpetuation of scholarly discourse in and on Black music. This essay seeks to highlight the aims and outputs of both, situating them as vital forerunners in the field. Furthermore, additional comments on my rationale for suggesting *Black Music, in Theory* as the journal's title will serve as both a precursor to an interpretive vignette and an invitation to embark on and continue the timely and much-needed work of this journal.

The first epigraph above is drawn from the editorial in the first volume of *The Black Perspective in Music*. Southern's stated aims highlighted documentary and promotional outcomes, as the journal was "concerned about all kinds of music and writings produced by black musicians."¹ In challenging colleagues who suggested that there was nothing more to Black music than "just jazz and spirituals," BPiM was audacious.² Furthermore, the curation of the first issue shows an intentional retort to establishment ideals that fed her colleagues' contention by featuring the vast scope and types of music of the African diaspora. In focusing on the inaugural issue, the first articles engaged the work of established scholars and composers, covering African, Black American, and Caribbean music; some of them were invited submissions of papers presented at a "Symposium on African and Afro-American music [that] was held at the University of Ghana" in 1972.³ Current histories, for Southern, involved not only documenting interviews and conversations with leading musical contemporaries from various genres but also robust review sections devoted to new music, recordings, books, and listings of current research and dissertations.

Even more central to this review was BPiM's aim to provide information about the history of Black music. Presented as "In Retrospect" essays and articles, the "periodic" pieces on historical figures and topics in BPiM undoubtedly contributed to defining Black music historiography. Histories were uncovered, and others were revisited and reconsidered. This research, in addition to analyti-

1. Eileen Southern, "An Editorial," *Black Perspective in Music* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 3.

2. Samuel A. Floyd Jr., "Eileen Jackson Southern: Quiet Revolutionary," in *New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern*, ed. Josephine Wright (Harmonie Park Press, 1992), 6.

3. Eileen Southern, "Report on the 1972 Symposium on African and Afro-American Music," *Black Perspective in Music* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 6.

cal pieces, laid foundations for branches of scholarly discourse where authoritative voices presented ideas, readings, and research—a body of work within and from which concepts could derive and be tested. By advancing foundational scholarship on spirituals, contemporary concert works, soul, funk, gospel, blues, Black composers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, African music, and Caribbean music, the founding of *BPiM* was as pivotal as it was pioneering. The range, depth, and volume of output in *BPiM* along with the numbers of books and dissertations that were written during the 1970s surely contributed to Samuel Floyd's declaration about the "present level of sophistication" (from the second epigraph above) in Black music scholarship at the time he began the *Black Music Research Journal* in 1980.

Floyd's dedication of the *Black Music Research Journal* to John Wesley Work II and John Wesley Work III is revealing. Not only were the Works deeply ingrained in the musical and institutional histories of the university that inaugurated the institutionalization of his work—Fisk University Institute for Research in Black American Music—Floyd cited Work II's *Folk Songs of the American Negro* as the earliest work by a Black scholar that affirmed "the cultural importance and legitimacy of Afro-American music." He continued, "being based on close observation as well as careful analysis and reasoning, it represents a thoughtful and informed approach to black music scholarship."⁴ Obviously aware of the work of *BPiM* and not wanting to infringe, Floyd wanted *BMRJ* to focus on "philosophical and speculative topics." Like Southern's inaugural issue, Floyd's first volume explored various genres and forms, including concert music, gospel, and rhythm and blues, while engaging issues related to aesthetics, history, analysis, and criticism. Indeed, those issues fueled the journal's run of thirty-six years.

BMRJ's expansion into speculative and philosophical topics opened even more spaces for dialogue and discourse that further shaped the field of Black music studies. A scholarly haven for research on music of the African diaspora, myriad theories, concepts, and approaches were explored through intra- and interdisciplinary perspectives. Themed issues touched on topics such as Black British Jazz, Harry Burleigh, Prince, and Melba Liston, and critiques and interpretive stances on Black music and musicians were framed with theories of literary criticism, feminist theories, and concepts related to cultural memory, among others. This work tilled the ground, bore fruit, and ripened the field for succeeding generations of scholars. Carrying the torch lit by Southern and *BPiM*, voices

4. Samuel A. Floyd Jr., "A Dedication," *Black Music Research Journal* 1 (1980): i. See also Samuel A. Floyd Jr., "Ruminations on the Center for Black Music Research: The 2008 Trotter Lecture," *College Music Symposium* 49/50 (2009/2010): 12. Floyd recalls Eileen Southern encouraging him to "institutionalize" his work in 1976. That challenge initiated his move to Fisk University, a Historically Black University, in 1978 to "establish a black music institute."

of composers, musicologists, ethnomusicologists, music theorists, music educators, performers, and scholars from other disciplines were not only encouraged to promote their work through publication in *BMRJ* but were also empowered to test ideas and, in some ways, to *theorize*.

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So, why *Black Music, in Theory*? When discussing the idea of the journal with Philip Ewell, we touched on many issues such as the legacies of *BPM* and *BMRJ*, the current state of Black music studies, and the service and investments of stakeholders from decades past. The discussion ended with Phil asking about a title. My answer, “Black Music, in Theory,” was initially an attempt at something pithy that would give a small nod to music theory (a field in which we both work), but my thoughts kept moving toward a journal that would continue the tradition of the work accomplished by the two journals reviewed above: a place where theories around and about Black music can be developed, tested, and interrogated; a place where analysis is relegated not only to considerations of musical structure but also to formations of contextual readings and interpretations that position social, historical, and cultural considerations as framing agents as well as examinations of spaces and places where Black music is realized; and a place where we might venture even further into the theoretical work that offers grounding for effective Black music criticism. This is only a glimpse of what came to mind when “in Theory” was posited, but aspirations flow toward *Black Music in Theory* (*BMiT*) being a junction for solid scholarship on Black music that engages various voices and modes of inquiry. In honor of the historical and speculative forings in Black music scholarship through the visionary journals of Southern and Floyd, and as a call for all interested in pursuing and continuing the work in the field of Black music studies to seize the opportunities and potential of this journal’s endeavor, I offer the following analytical-interpretive vignette on Olly Wilson’s *Sometimes* for tenor and tape (1976).⁵

Olly Wilson (1937–2018) was one of the leading American composers of his generation. Among his notable distinctions include the 1970 Dartmouth Prize (the first international competition for electronic music composition) and being considered the “founding father of electronic music at Oberlin.”⁶ He composed for

5. See Eileen Southern, “Conversation with Olly Wilson,” *Black Perspective in Music* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 57–70. See also Samuel A. Floyd Jr., “Troping the Blues: From Spirituals to the Concert Hall,” *Black Music Research Journal* 13, no. 1 (1993): 31–51. Both Southern and Floyd discuss this composition in their respective pieces.

6. Thomas Jefferson Anderson, “Wilson, Olly Woodrow,” in *International Dictionary of Black Composers*, vol. 2., ed. Samuel A. Floyd Jr. (Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1999), 1247. See also Erich Burnett, “Olly Wilson, Founding Father of Electronic Music at Oberlin, Dies

various mediums (orchestral, chamber music, electronic, vocal, solo instruments, etc.), citing influences ranging from Duke Ellington to Igor Stravinsky. His compositional voice spans many genres and styles; some compositions have a few Black cultural emblems on the musical surface while others display more adroit manipulations of those emblems. Then, there are others (primarily earlier works) that do not utilize emblematic references to Black musical culture at all. Wilson grew up in a musical household. His father was a church singer and encouraged Wilson and all his siblings to study piano. According to Wilson, his father most likely wanted accompanists who ultimately played for church choirs and his solo renderings for local congregations.⁷ Hymns, spirituals, and gospel were a part of Wilson's musical life during those formative years, as he considered childhood music-making experiences at church and at home an introduction and "early education" in music.⁸ The Black musical genre from which Wilson gleaned the most inspiration was the spiritual. His attachment to the spiritual can certainly be traced to his childhood years, but its function, as source and inspiration in his compositions, was apparently revitalized in the 1970s. According to composer Thomas Jefferson "T. J." Anderson, Wilson began to consciously incorporate elements of Black American musical culture into his works in the early 1970s after returning from a Guggenheim residency in West Africa.⁹ Taking into account the prestige of the Dartmouth award and a rekindling of a vernacular muse spawned from the Guggenheim, it seems fitting that *Sometimes*, his first attempt at composing for voice and tape, was dedicated to his parents "who taught him how to sing."¹⁰

Wilson's intention was to recreate "the profound expressions of human hopelessness and desolation that characterize the traditional spiritual" while also reacting to "the desolation that transcends hopelessness."¹¹ His reinterpretation and revision of the original spiritual tune in *Sometimes*—and in several subsequent works—embrace contemporary techniques while also preserving the character of the source material. The text and tune of "Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child" are reimagined through Wilson's use of melodic and text fragments as well as extended sections that highlight prerecorded words (such as "sometimes"

at 80," *Oberlin College & Conservatory News*, April 4, 2018, <https://www.oberlin.edu/news/composer-olly-wilson-founding-father-electronic-music-oberlin-dies-80>.

7. Olly Wilson, "Composer and Professor of Music at the University of California, Berkeley," interview by Caroline Crawford and Nadine Wilmot, Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2014. The interview was conducted between 2002 and 2003.

8. Olly Wilson, interview by Vivian Perlis, Oral History of American Music: Major Figures in American Music, Yale University Library, Oakland, CA, June 18, 1997.

9. Anderson, *International Dictionary of Black Composers*, 1246.

10. Olly Wilson, *Videmus: Works by T. J. Anderson, Donal Fox, David Baker, and Olly Wilson*, program notes to *Sometimes* for tenor and tape (New World Records, 1992).

11. Wilson, *Videmus*.

and “mother”) spoken or sung by tenor William Brown. (A link to a recording of *Sometimes* is shown in Figure 1.) The electronic media available to him at that time assisted in creating sonic phenomena that were unique, innovative, and practically boundless. Such modernist approaches typify, and in some ways amplify, the essence of Floyd’s Signifyin(g) concept, where troping occurs by way of “the rhetorical use of preexisting materials as a means of demonstrating respect for or poking fun at a musical style, process, or practice through parody, pastiche, implication, indirection, humor, tone play or word play, the illusion of speech or narration or other troping mechanisms.”¹² Amid the new and imaginative soundscapes created by Wilson’s treatments of tape techniques and synthesized sounds is an emblematic pitch scheme that aids in shaping the work’s expressive trajectory.¹³ Many of the tenor’s vocal lines and fragments, from the beginning through the middle of the work, feature A-flat minor pentatonic pitch collections that highlight $\wedge_4$, D^b , the subdominant.¹⁴ The minor pentatonic scale is also prominent in the vocal utterances captured in the tape accompaniment. Whereas an ethereal quality emanates from Wilson’s setting of the text, Brown’s virtuosity and sensitivity to the ethos of the source material establishes a transcendent air through which the vernacular emblems speak. Wilson’s setting recalls Black American singing traditions ranging from melismatic renderings to subtle timbral distortions that highlight Brown’s brilliant and bronzed upper register.

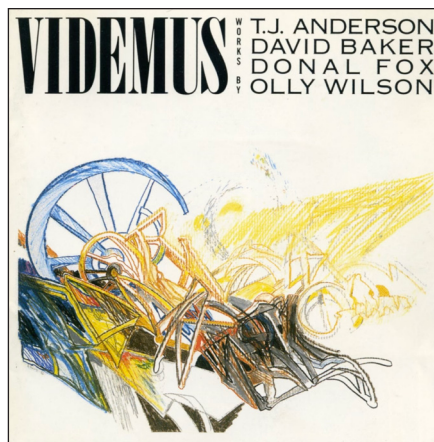


Figure 1: Olly Wilson, *Sometimes*, William Brown, tenor.

12. Samuel A. Floyd Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 8.

13. My comments on this piece are based on Wilson’s score and time points from the *Videmus* recording (1992) featuring tenor William Brown.

14. Excepting an episode centered on $C\sharp$ of a little less than two minutes (6’35” to 8’20”) and sparing chromatic embellishments, thirteen of the seventeen minutes on the *Videmus* recording feature an A^b minor pentatonic centrality.

Wilson's performance instructions and directions for staging also offer compelling points for interpretive stances. Figure 2 shows the stage position diagram that is provided in the score. The piece begins with the singer in Position I (stage right). The tenor is to begin singing in Position I and should be in Position II when he sings the first high D^{b5} (at 4'20" on the recording in Figure 1). Extended vocal techniques such as tongue trills, hisses, and splibuttz are featured from the tenor's initial statements and dramatic rise to the apex.¹⁵ Melodic fragments meander around the pentatonic collection, beginning around A^{b3} , and gradually increase in pitch level and intensity for two minutes until the apex. Following the intensified D^b , the extended vocal techniques cease momentarily. Wilson's release from the subdominant arrival features a slightly more florid vocal line, as the tenor is to sing in his "normal" voice after the arrival to center stage. It appears extended vocal techniques blend more so with the electronic sounds at the beginning of the piece, allowing the more discernable text to become the focal point after the singer reaches center stage. Wilson's careful attention to singer and voice at this structural high point is also evocative because the first complete statement of the text "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child" occurs soon after the arrival on the locally emphasized subdominant pitch.

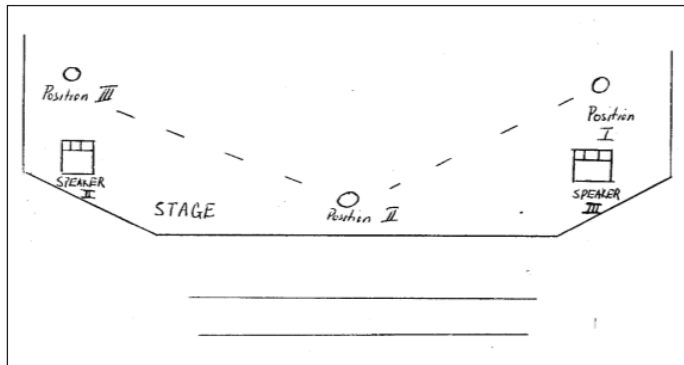


Figure 2: Olly Wilson, *Sometimes*, stage diagram.

The moment at center stage, which occurs in the middle section of the piece, also features the tenor in a duet with a recorded voice. The result yields a "mythic quality" where William Brown "is a caller, and also a crier, both 'live' and on tape."¹⁶ Bearing in mind the time spent in the studio preparing the tape, the mix,

15. The performance notes to the score of *Sometimes* define splibuttz as "an explosive non-pitched sound produced by rapidly forcing air through the closed lips." Tongue trills are "produced by rapidly forcing air through the tongue while it touches the upper palate of the mouth." Other notation symbols and extended techniques are detailed for the performer in Wilson's notes.

16. Floyd, "Troping the Blues," 44.

and the score, it seems reasonable to extend the concept of musical Signifyin(g) to experience Brown, at least in the *Videmus* recording, as the signifier and the signified—as one troping upon the recorded fragments of the spiritual tune that serve as cues for the performance and recording.¹⁷ Recalling Floyd, “In African-American music, musical figures Signify by commenting on other musical figures, on themselves, on performances of other music, on performances of the same piece, and on completely new works of music.” Thus, the signifying process in general, and as exemplified in the expressive duet, is both dynamic (Brown commenting on *Sometimes*) and intertextual (Brown commenting on himself).¹⁸ The final move to stage left (Position III) is even more intriguing. According to Wilson’s performance notes, at the point of a climactic “fortissimo clang” the tenor “should move rapidly to the rear left side of the stage.” He also notes that the remainder of the piece should be performed in this position. Immediately after the “clang” the tenor hums melodic fragments and whistles—an extended technique withheld until this charged episode. The only text that accompanies this move from center stage to stage left is “a long way from home,” which is centered loosely around F# minor over a C# pedal. Furthermore, the word *home* is only stated toward the end of the work.

Moving toward interpretation, why, after a dramatic rise in pitch and full statements of discernable text, does the subject immediately move away from center stage and begin to whistle and hum? Is the fortissimo clang symbolic of external or oppressive forces? Was center stage “home” for the subject, at least momentarily? Home could very well be center stage for the personified subject, as that is the place where the most notable of troping revisions take place (subdominant emphasis within the minor pentatonic collection, Brown’s troping “duet” with more discernable words, etc.). Furthermore, the primary pitch center or home of the subject for over two-thirds of the work is A^b—which is sung at and between stage right and center stage. There is a gradual increase in musical tension leading up to the fortissimo clang, as Wilson layers complex rhythmic activity in the voice with myriad effects and electronic sounds. The arrival of the clang is sudden, perhaps signaling an interruption of a chorus striving to transcend the downtrodden essence of the text. The immediacy of the clang could be interpreted as Wilson’s pointing listeners to extramusical distractions, struggles, or “clangs” that accompany, and perhaps attempt to muffle, refrains

17. Wilson, “Composer and Professor of Music at the University of California, Berkeley,” 216–18. Wilson recounted the composition process involving multiple recording sessions of Brown singing extended lines from *Sometimes* and spending time manipulating the material. Wilson was inspired by Brown’s unaccompanied performance of a traditional spiritual at a conference and composed the piece with Brown’s voice in mind.

18. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 95. See also Horace J. Maxile Jr., “Signs, Symphonies, and Signifying: African-American Cultural Topics as Analytical Approach to the Music of Black Composers,” *Black Music Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (2008): 128.

of transcendence in journeys toward solidarity. Indeed, the tenor continues with inaudible moans and whistles that signal persistence, even when words are imperceptible and when home, on stage and in terms of pitch center, is not as certain. The hums and moans might also signify the power and position of faith in such persisting—or maybe a sense of resolve, because “when you moan, the devil don’t know what you talkin’ about.”¹⁹ Inspired to “reaffirm the [transcendent] essence of the early spiritual” in a “post-Civil Rights Movement”²⁰ context, Wilson’s modernist revision, and Brown’s singing within and around the complex electronic setting of “Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child,” effectively extended the concert spiritual tradition into the late twentieth century while also challenging convention and affective domains for listeners and performers alike.

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The reflections and analytical vignette in this essay serve as a call. How will we respond? Whereas *BPM* and *BMRJ* were highlighted here, the contributions of *Lennox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* and the *Black Sacred Music: Journal of Theomusicology* must also be acknowledged when considering the growth of Black music studies as viewed through history of Black music journals. The runs of these journals, along with incremental acceptances of monographs on Black music topics by academic presses, gave agency to those who ventured to follow scholarly interests that (for some in the music academy) might have been considered marginal but, ultimately, advanced the field. The approach taken in the vignette hopefully invites *all scholars* to challenge *Black Music, in Theory* to serve as a venue for the (re)writing of histories, for speculation and theorizing, and for solid contributions that further Black music studies. The promise of this journal will be realized with all who are invested in promoting careful, solid scholarship in Black music and charting new paths beyond the agentive streams forged by those who have come before.

Who got next? *BMT*, you’re up.

19. Most often uttered by a minister or an elder in the church, this is a saying that I have heard many times in Black religious communities and gatherings across the South.

20. Wilson, Crawford interview, 144–45.