

THE BIG DIG: JOE MCPHEE & CAULEEN SMITH

NATION TIME THEN & NOW

At the tail end of 1970, multi-instrumentalist Joe McPhee assembled a group of musicians to play original material for students in his class at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. These recordings, together with an additional track performed without an audience a day earlier, a free-funk barnburner called “Shakey Jake,” were released the following year as the LP Nation Time, now a certified classic of improvised music. With its rallying cry – “What *time* is it?!” – and its four-note motif, the title cut has resonated across the ensuing half-century, making it as relevant today as it was in the turbulent era of its creation. McPhee, who turned 80 in November, has never looked back, in fact makes a point of looking ever forward, his music today fresh and urgent, his poetry and his presence a spur to personal action, to shit-goddamn-get-off-your-ass-and-jam. Exactly the same impetus he sought to stir in his students that momentous day 50 years ago. Artist Cauleen Smith has heard the call of McPhee’s music. In film and video, pop-up processions, drawings, neons, ceramics, and sprawling installations, Smith’s work has many parallels to McPhee’s – the depth of feeling, the organic form, the necessity of collaboration, the precise deployment of intuition, the spontaneous analytics, the profound openness and generosity. Although they’ve collaborated on one another’s projects – she used his music for the soundtrack to an installation; he reproduced an image of hers on the cover of one of his CDs – the two of them had never laid eyes on one another before this June Zoom summit, which linked Smith’s Los Angeles house and a leafy backyard in Poughkeepsie where McPhee was enjoying an early evening libation.



Joe McPhee in 1970, during the *Nation Time* recordings.

JOE MCPHEE AND CAULEEN SMITH IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN CORBETT

Joe McPhee: Cauleen!

Cauleen Smith: Joe!

JM: You look beautiful!

CS: Oh thank you!

JM: You are beautiful!

CS: (laughs) So are you, Mr. McPhee, so are you.

John Corbett: So, friends, the occasion – maybe the pretext – for this esteemed gathering is the 50th anniversary of Joe’s classic LP *Nation Time*. I wanted to maybe start by reading just a few lines from the beginning of Amiri Baraka’s poem *It’s Nation Time*...

CS: Mmhmm.

JC: ...which is also from 1970, and maybe Joe can talk a little bit about that.

CS: Yeah.

JM: Okay.



JC: *It's Nation Time*

Time to get

together

time to be one strong fast black energy space

one pulsating positive magnetism rising

time to get up and

be

come

be

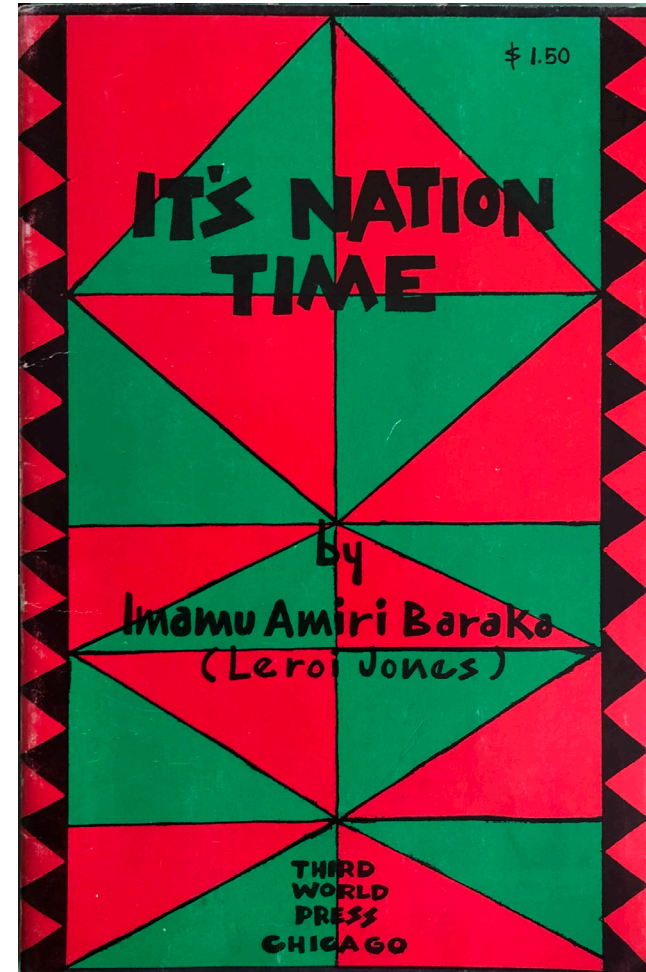
come, time to

be come

time to get up be come

JM: Back in the day, when I was here at Vassar, this very same area where I am right now, I heard a speech that Amiri Baraka gave about "Nation Time." It touched me. I was teaching in a Black Studies program here, so for one of my classes I rounded up all the musicians I knew in Poughkeepsie and brought them up to Vassar, and we played music that nobody in the bars wanted to hear. That's how *Nation Time* started, right here at Vassar. It was one of my classes. It was never intended to be a recording.

CS: Mmhmm.



JM: And much later I found out that Amiri Baraka hated the idea. I don't know if he really hated me, but I think he thought I was usurping his Nation Time thing. His piece that you read was "It's Nation Time," which is quite a different thing from what I was saying at that moment. I was trying to get my students to just scream and yell, yeah it was time to do something. This was 1970. By May of that year it was Kent State and we're not that far from it now with that thing in the White House who wants to shoot people and gas people and do stuff like that. So we've come quite a ways in this 50 years, and we haven't moved an inch. We've got a long way to go. It's Nation Time for real this time. I'd like to share something with you, a poem called "It's Nation Time For Real This Time." If I can get it up on my phone, doop doop doop, one moment, dup dup, here we go, let's see, come on now, where is it, Nation Time, okay:

Nation Time For Real This Time, In the Error of Trump

Cops in patrol cars, cops on the beat

We'll be standing on the corners, we'll be marching in the streets

Helicopters overhead, another brother shot dead

What time is it? Nation time.

A racist fascist in our White House, neo-nazis in our street

We got miles to go and promises to keep.

Culture vultures in our beds, another bullet in our heads

What time is it? Nation time

Our greatest generation must be spinning in their beds

They fought and died for liberty, our democracy they saved

Children dying in our schools, and nothing changes the rule

What time is it? It's nation time

To our LGBTQ brothers and sisters

To our Black, brown, and beige brothers and sisters

To our white and indigenous brothers and sisters

To our Asian and immigrant brothers and sisters

To our poor and working-class poor brothers and sisters

To our chemically addicted and politically conflicted brothers and sisters

To all victims of sexual abuse

To all victims of police brutality

We hear you, we see you, we believe you

Black lives matter

No justice, no peace

No justice, no peace

What time is it?

It's nation time.

What time is it?

Nation time.

What time is it?

It's nation time.

It's nation time for real this time.

CS: Oh, yes. Yes! Thank you for that. I was thinking about Amiri Baraka's "It's Nation Time," and he even, I think, pressed a record, which, based on what you're saying, I feel like was probably a response to your initiative in some ways. And there is a distinct difference between what you are doing and saying in your *Nation Time* and his, and I think actually this poem that you just read sort of speaks to that expansiveness in that piece of music, that again, expands even more in this moment and in this movement and through your words. The time that you take to include and see everyone, you know, which is something that's happening in this movement in a way that it didn't happen before. I personally believe that's because Black women are leading the movement this time. And this is why I think it's gonna work, because I think that from the position of Black women you have to actually kind of see the panorama of humanity and the conditions. It's easier, somehow, from our position to see that and intuitively respond to it. So that was a perfect way to begin the conversation, because I've been reflecting so much on the movements of '68 and onwards and then this moment now. I don't think it's a mistake that there's a 50-year cycle between these movements, and I don't think it's a mistake that this movement right now is shattering, shaking the world the way that one did as well, where we can actually feel and know that tangible change is gonna happen. I haven't felt that way in my lifetime. I was born in 1967, so my life is basically the cycle...

JM: Whooooooo my God you just a baby! When I was born they'd just invented water.



Joe McPhee, *Nation Time* (CJR Records, 1971), original cover with sticker; audio clip of "Nation Time."

CS: (laughs) ...so my life is basically the cycle of waiting for Nation Time, in some respects. And then that idea of time in itself and the way, for Black people, this sense of arrival is something I've been thinking about. We are still attempting to arrive at some point. And then, I was listening this morning I was listening to your record, the one that my photograph is on the cover, the one that you made with Hamid...

JM: Which I love, your photograph is absolutely fucking incredible.

CS: No, your record...that record, *Keep Going*, is incredible. And it starts with you saying: "Keep going, keep going, keep going." Which is to me just this wonderful epilogue of *Nation Time*, this is like decades later, right here, where we need to be, saying this is the moment to keep going. I felt that connection.

JM: Wow.

JC: It's so nice because that record was the follow-up to a record called *Emancipation Proclamation* which was the first duo that Joe and Hamid made together. *Keep Going* felt like it took that declaration and said, using Harriet Tubman's words, we've gotta go forward, we have to keep moving, this isn't done, this is not static, this this is dynamic.

CS: Yes. I mean that, to me, is the thing. I was like, woah, maybe the process of going is the thing itself. There is no arrival point, there is no destination, there is this constant expansion of our idea about what justice looks like, and it just keeps expanding.



Joe McPhee & Hamid Drake, *Keep Going* (Corbett vs. Dempsey, 2018), cover image by Cauleen Smith; audio clip of "Keep Going."

JC: Cauleen, I loved that you brought it back to time. Let's take those two words, "nation" and "time," and unpack them. I'd love to ask you both what *time* means in this context – like timeliness, the time has come, that sense of an urgency, right? Because nation time doesn't just mean any old time, it means right now.

JM: Now is the time. Now is the time.

CS: Yeah.

JC: Which is a Charlie Parker concept, right? I mean, "Now's The Time."

JM: Yes. Now is the time.

JC: So there's that sense of time being something quite specific; time is not a throwaway part of it. But I also want to ask you about nation, and what nation means here. Joe, what did nation mean in Nation Time? Because *Nation Time* in Amiri Baraka's sense of it really had to do specifically with Black Nationalism, right?

JM: Right.

JC: It had to do with a sort of a separatist idea, categorically opposite the inclusivity that you've drawn up in the "Nation Time For Real This Time."

JM: Well, the things I mention in "Nation Time For Real This Time" – it goes beyond color and race to be more inclusive. I think about the LGBTQ community. We're all together. We're all together. When I see the young people in the streets today, they get it. They get it and they're doing it. It's a very powerful image, it's a very powerful message, and nation means the nation of humanity, of all of us. We are all together. This planet is spinning around, going out of control with its virus and that thing in the White House, my God, you know, he brings it all right to the forefront. We're not getting off this planet, not alive, anyway. You know? I'm at a very vulnerable age, I never thought I'd ever live to be the age that I am now, that's when I see Cauleen, she's such a young, beautiful person. And I say, oh my God, I'm so lucky to be around to see her, to know her, and to experience her art.

CS: I'm the lucky one. I know that Amiri Baraka was responding to the All-African People's Conference, so it was a very specifically Black nationalist moment, but you know I've always thought of Blackness, in America in particular, as being somewhat threatening because it is totally absorptive. Because it can absorb and it can accommodate anything and anyone, and it always has. That's part of the reason that I think we're terrifying – when Black culture absorbs other cultures, it actually organically integrates, it doesn't actually expel or separate, so I think I've always been a Black nationalist because I thought, well, organically, you know, everybody in America is Black anyway, to some extent. The culture that we practice here is American because of us to some extent.

JM: Yeah.

CS: We absorb all of this and we actually can because it's not just a matter of what is done, it's about capacity, and Black culture has the capacity to expand and absorb. I think that the elasticity of it offers so much strength. But ironically, on the other hand, Black nationalism has always been like a big problem for me personally because it was really patriarchal and very homophobic, and because of that I think it limited its ability to liberate us. You can't really liberate when you're really busy asserting dominance and power. It's just a contradictory position.

JM: Absolutely.

CS: I so agree with you Joe when I look at the young people. This is something that they, at least, understand. We have a shot this time because none of these groups is out here trying to assert dominance over the other. They're actually trying to do this together. They're taking the concept of allyship very seriously and they're trying to work through it, as opposed to asserting a kind of paradigm or social structure into which we should all conform. Which is a lot of what Black nationalism was doing, unfortunately.

JM: Yeah. Wow.



Cauleen Smith, *Sojourner* [video still], 2018, digital video, 22:41 minutes.

JC: That's so interesting, that's such an interesting analysis, Cauleen, because Black music is in general such an amazing digester and reconfigurer of other things. It has all of its own original components and then it's able to ingest things around. I've always thought that way about the existence of, for instance, the Asian-American jazz movement of the 1980s, let's say...



Joe McPhee's Survival Unit II on New Jersey Public TV, 1972 (with Byron Morris, reeds; Clifford Thornton, baritone horn; Mike Kull, piano; Harold E. Smith, drums; and an unknown bassist).

CS: Yeah, like Fred...

JC: Yeah, like Fred Ho and musicians around him, for example...

JM: Yeah, yeah, yeah, sure.

JC: ...and I always wondered, what is it about jazz that makes it the ideal medium for all of these other cultural entities to use it as a platform? The reason is that it's incredibly flexible. It's exactly what you said: it can absorb.

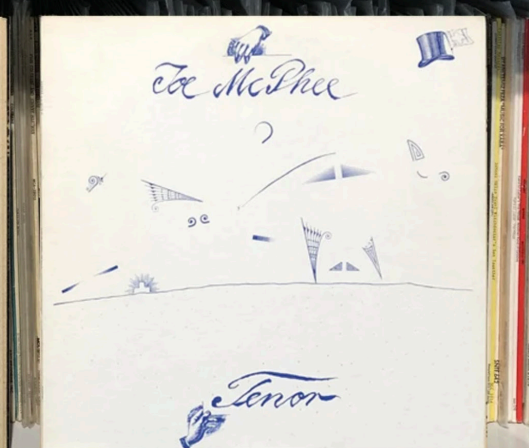
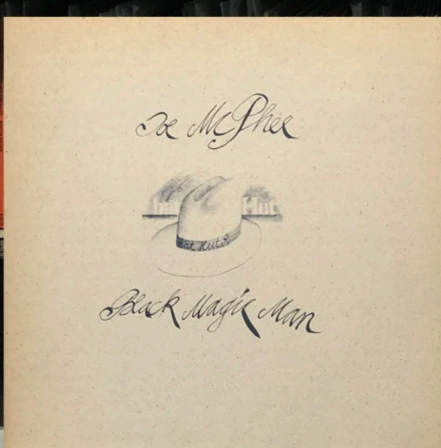
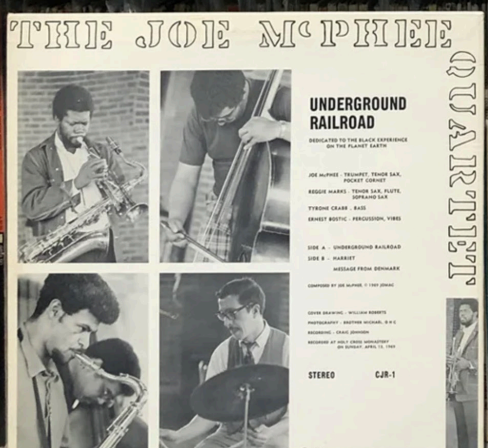
CS: It can absorb it, and there's still space, there's still more space. So you can consume Black culture and extract it, but if you're actually practicing it, like I feel Fred Ho was through his music, there's just so much space there to do the work you need to do, how you need to do it. I think that could be America's redemption. My dear friend Lui Shtini told me once years ago, we were talking about racism in America and movies being racist, and he was just listening, you know. He was just like: "You know, I'm from Albania and I have no idea. When you talk about race, it's so confusing to me." He said: "And you know what's really confusing to me is, I always loved American movies because of Black people." He was like, "Those very stereotypes that you are talking about, to me, that's what made American films American, this whole other presence and culture that isn't anywhere else." That just blew my mind.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Extraordinary possibility that hasn't existed anywhere else on the planet. It happened here and it's continuing to happen, in spite of all of this, in spite of racism, just keep rising above it. As my friend Alton Pickens, who was a very fine artist living here in Poughkeepsie, would say: "You just put one foot in front of the other, test the ground to see if it's secure, and then you move on." I think that's what we do. You know? We're not stuck.

CS: Right.

JC: Yeah.

CS: Yeah. Well, stability is not an expectation. It's just enough stability to get to the next thing. Yeah. So, I mean, in sound in particular it produces a kind of dynamism. I've



always listened to experimental music, what people call 'jazz,' because, to me, inside of that music is all of what's possible, even in a material realm. So I'm always trying to think of the forms – like the structure of "Nation Time" this morning, I was actually trying to break it down structurally, like, what's happening here, what's happening there. There's this moment where it's just you, and then the rhythm section comes in and changes the shape of what you had done before, and it meshes with it and then I understood the shape, like it becomes like an architecture. We were just talking about the structure of the theme. Even in terms of filmmaking, how do you do that with images or with materials?

JM: It becomes a living thing. Things are changing and you are just going to adapt. And it's how we as human beings have gotten to this point; I don't know how far we're going to get now with this bug going on that's about to kill us, but, we've been able to adapt and to move on and to grow. Jazz was...I don't even know if jazz is what I do.

CS: Right.

JM: I try to play music. I try to be as honest as I can and keep searching for people to have a conversation with, like you, and like John, and in a musical sense Michael Zerang or Fred Lonberg-Holm or Peter Brötzmann or whoever. All my life I've been finding people. Davey Williams, my god! Birmingham, Alabama, you know? An incredible guitarist who could do anything. I've found these wonderful people and keep building on that. That's what I've been doing all my life, that's what I try to continue to do.

CS: Yeah. You know, it's funny because I feel like my most crucial collaborators are always musicians, even though with film I have so many people I work with and depend on, but the ones that keep coming with me, that I don't switch out, are the musicians. (laughs) I just accumulate more and more. Other things I can shed really easily, but not the music. I just learn too much from it. Yeah, and that's true, it's an endless and kinda boring conversation, probably, "what do you call the kind of music that you play." I mean it's probably not an interesting question to you, but it's important to me because language is so important.

JM: Yeah.

CS: And I want a way to describe this music – improvisational music, creative music – I want words to describe it and talk about it, you know?

JM: I'm a little bit afraid of that, because I think if I can name it, then it disappears.

CS: Yeah.

JM: You know, it becomes something else. It's gonna be elusive anyway and I'll just keep following it. I'll never catch it, I'll never understand it. Never. But I'll always be looking for it and almost catching it by the tail and then it'll flip me somewhere else. (laughs) I hope. Buckle up.

CS: You know what, I'm going to tell my students that. That's what they need to be always doing. Just keep following it.

JM: Yeah.



Photo of Lord McPhee (Joe's nephew) at Blank Forms' benefit honoring Joe McPhee; audio clip of "Nation Time Remix" by Lord McPhee.

JC: Performance is a common medium for both of you. Processions have been such a central part of what you have done, Cauleen, and your films, very often, most often, have a performance component where there's an open quality to the performance, it's not entirely choreographed or scripted, there's some element of improvisation within it, or even to the camera work. And Joe, obviously, improvisation and performance are what you do. Making records is a pale side project of that, relative to live performance. The real thing is being in the space together and making stuff up, making something, and having conversations, and it's interesting because that seems like that's also what we're talking about here, an idea of the procession, an idea of transformative music, music that takes you from one place to another, and the idea of marching in the street. There's not a big difference between all three of those.

CS: Oh, I mean, protests are fascinating because of the improvisational nature of them. Like everybody at least will arrive at a certain point, and you might even agree on a particular path, but there's absolutely no guarantee that anything is gonna occur in that way, and nobody is even that invested in it occurring exactly that way. So the second everybody gets out there in the streets, they got their signs, the noisemakers, they have the masks on, they're ready for the tear gas, it's all bets are off. And the organism itself just starts to respond. The way I was thinking of processions was always as an attempt to organize this chaos. It's an attempt to put a pressure on it, to restrict it, and that's so interesting because actually it's so hard to control a lot of people doing one thing. So it just starts to evolve right before your eyes and that becomes a beautiful sight in and of itself.

JC: Well there's always something unpredictable, like even if the marching band in your piece *Space is the Place* was completely choreographed you couldn't predict the rain!

CS: No. And even, I mean, look, we tried! I tried to choreograph it, but it's a rhythm section, it's clarinets, it's flutes, and they're teenagers! So there's like, limits! (laughs) Even as they were forming, I was like: "Wait, that's okay, whelp, we're gonna go with it."



Caileen Smith, *Space Is the Place (A March for Sun Ra)* [production still], 2011, HD video, 10:56 minutes.

JM: Yeah. Here in Poughkeepsie, this little city where I live, there was a protest march that came past my house. There were all these young people, so beautiful, in masks; they were organized and disorganized at the same time. If I thought it was totally organized and controlled, I would be afraid of it.

CS: Right.

JM: They were discovering things with each step that they took. They started out going someplace, they didn't know where they were gonna end up, and I have no idea where they finally did end up, but they were on their way, and I thought that was extraordinary. And that's the way that I feel about the music that I play, or the people who I contact and organize and say: "Let's do this gig." I never tell them what to do. I don't give them a score. It's a blank canvas. But somehow we find each other and we know instinctively where to move. How did human beings get to be where we are? Why are we dominant on this planet? Why did the dinosaurs die off and we're still here? Maybe we'll be next, cause the bug might get us. But at the moment, we're still moving and changing, and we're in an extraordinary period. I'm very excited about it. I'm glad to be alive right now, to have an opportunity to see what's going on. George Floyd died a month ago and we have moved in that month like we haven't moved in 50 years.

CS: Fifty years! In 50 years. Ugh, it's so amazing.

JM: It's amazing, it's extraordinary.

CS: It's amazing. But, you know, I have to say, I think a lot of reasons why I love improvisational music is out of a desire, as a filmmaker, which is a very codified, hierarchical, structured, controlling medium. There are so many moving parts and then someone has to control it all and make it do something. I've always hated that. I love making moving images, but I've always hated having to control everyone. So about seven years ago I started putting together smaller crews, and then telling everybody what I was going for but leaving it at that. The sound person, the camera person, wardrobe, even the performer, me as a director, we have a sense of what we're trying to achieve, but I'm giving almost no direction. As little as I can.

JM: Yes! I love that.

CS: It's a fun way to work when everybody is on board, but I've learned that unlike music, where improvisation is just the language musicians speak with each other, in filmmaking people really like their roles. It's more like the military. They don't like you messing with how they do it and they don't like having to think for themselves, because that means that they are vulnerable and exposed. So if I hire the wrong camera operator and I say to them: "Just stay wide. That's all you gotta do. You just stay wide," and then I tell the other one: "You stay close. That's all you gotta do. Just find anything interesting to look at that's up close, find anything interesting to look at that's wide. Go!" Sometimes they can't do it. They panic.

JM: Yeah.



Cauleen Smith with Marshall Allen of the Sun Ra Arkestra.

CS: And so my whole life's work right now, in terms of every time I crew-up to make a film, is finding the right people, until it's like a band, like a quintet. And we can actually trust each other enough to work together in time, instead of me structuring everything, waving the batons, you know?

JM: I know. I've been extraordinarily lucky. I have chosen the people. I don't give them very much instruction. They pretty much know who they are and where they're going and they have an extraordinary amount of trust in me, which I think is amazing. I don't know why they would trust me, you know, I'm completely mad, but they do. And I never tell them what to do. We listen, and we feel, and we have, I can say for the most part, been in sync. Not always, but when it works, it's fine. With filmmaking, I can see what you're talking about, my goodness.

CS: I mean, it's not even in the training, like, the ability to listen that musicians have. There's something that I love about going to see live music because I love just watching it happen, how it happens. The moment that the bass player hears that flute player on the other side doing something and they suddenly click into it, they don't even have to look at each other, you just see them suddenly create this frequency. That is the most beautiful thing to me.

JM: It's amazing.

CS: It's beautiful.

JM: It's why we were born. I have the feeling that's why we were born.

CS: Yeah! I believe that, that's why I look for it. But in my craft it's just, phew, I realize I have to keep working with the same people over and over until they trust me. A lot of the time I show up in a city, I hire a random group of people, they're like: "Oh, she's crazy, she doesn't know what she's doing." But if I have time, I'm just saying, like, now I work with these two guys from Baltimore, and the beauty is that they never went to film school, they were never trained, they taught themselves. So because they taught themselves, and I love what they do, I don't have to worry about telling them how to do it, because I know what they do I'm gonna love. And they don't know that I'm supposed to be telling them what to do, because they didn't get trained. So when I'm like: "Yeah, yeah, just go out in the desert, and make sure you keep stuff in the foreground." I may say something like that, because I have a particular idea of how I need to edit something. They're like, "Okay!" And off they go. I get the footage back and it's beautiful. And they had a great time! So I have to keep working with these fellows, because they don't even know that I'm doing everything wrong and that's why it works.

JM: Yeah. There's also something curious about editing in real time without letting anybody know you're editing.

CS: Exactly.

JM: You know.

CS: I know.

JM: And you can feel certain things. Now I don't know everything and I certainly wouldn't suggest that I do, but how do you, what's the word? *Edit*, control?

CS: Yeah.

JM: You see things moving in a certain direction. And you can do it. It's just a slight movement of the head...

CS: Exactly.

JM: ...something, you know, you had baah in here (points to head), a note you play, somebody picks it up and they know exactly in the moment what you're talking about, without saying it. That's amazing.

CS: That's what I'm trying to learn how to do as a director. "Which one of these elements do I need to tweak to make everything go in the direction I need it to go?" It could be just giving one person in this group of twelve people some encouragement, like: "Oh my gosh, your hair looks amazing!"

JM: Yeah.



Cauleen Smith, footage from a procession that took place at the Whitney Museum of American Art, April 11, 2017, directed by Cauleen Smith, featuring Smith's "In The Wake" banners, which the museum allowed her to remove for the day from the Whitney Biennial. Music composed by Avery R. Young with lyrics incorporating the text of Smith's banners.

CS: All of a sudden, the energy goes somewhere! It's random, but it makes something happen that I need to have happen. Everybody moves. It's been something that I'm trying to learn and I've learned it from musicians. That's the only place I know to look.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

JC: It's inspiring hearing you guys talk about this because I feel like it's one of the things that has always drawn me to both of your work, this sense in it of unfolding. Joe, I remember when you started having some of the health problems over the last year-and-a-half, and when it became clear you were gonna need some new choppers...

JM: Horrible. Oof.

JC: I just thought to myself, in any other saxophonist's mouth, I'd be thinking: "Oh shit, this is real trouble." In your case, I knew for sure, new teeth or whatever, if he plays

kazoo, it will be incredibly musical.

CS: It's still gonna be amazing.

JC: There's no difference between the music and the way you are in the world. The way you are with people, the way you are with animals, the way you are with the space around you. And Cauleen, I think that comes through in your films, it's the same kind of thing. I know you have to marshall other people's talents and proclivities and things like that when you're making a film, but it feels the same way to me, it's that kind of unfolding as we're watching it. Viewing *Sojourner*, especially at the Whitney, to see it in that context, it had that unbelievable, magisterial, celebratory quality – radiant people, the space, the incredible Noah Purifoy installation, unbelievable, and yet totally believable – there was just nothing about it that seemed false. Joe, you used the word 'honest,' and I feel like it's the same way. It's that sense of honesty at the basis of both of what you guys do.



Cauleen Smith, *Sojourner* [video still], 2018, digital video, 22:41 minutes.



Joe McPhee and Hamid Drake at the recording session for *Keep Going*, Experimental Sound Studio, Chicago, 2018.

CS: Wow. That's so kind!

JM: Well, John, I have to tell you, the problem that I have with this dental thing – the saxophone worked, I don't know how it worked, but it's still a work in progress. In one year I have not been able to play my trumpet again. I'm working on it, I don't know if I'll ever be able to do it, but I gotta try. But let me just say something about the experience with Hamid on that second recording, after the *Emancipation Proclamation*. Twenty years later, Hamid and I played for the first time. And he started playing a rhythm, and John, you will remember this, I immediately recognized its connection to Max Roach's solo thing, and I said: "Hamid, could you slow that down?" He slowed it down. I said, "No, can you slow it down more?" And he did, and that was the impetus, that was what started "Keep Going." It all started from that. Hamid knew immediately, and he did it, so when you listen to "Keep Going," that rhythm, slowing it down slower than a heartbeat is what makes it happen. And Harriet Tubman's words.

CS: Oh, man! I can't wait to listen to it again now with that on my mind.

JC: I mean, that's so interesting too, because that's that thing, it's not about necessarily directing other people, but it's also not about not saying something. Right?

CS: Right! It's about listening and responding, right? It's about responding to what's there and what's happening.

JM: But also Hamid knew because he'd been there. He'd been listening. He knew from the very first moment when I said that. I didn't have to say anything more than: "Slow it down a little bit more. Let's take it to another level. This is you, Hamid. This is you, not interpreting Max Roach, this is you being Hamid." And that was just like...I've got goosebumps right now, just remembering what that was like.

CS: Yeah. That's it, that's it right there.

JC: Wow.

CS: Wow. I just got chills because now I'm thinking about like, woo! I'm ready to get back to work! Oh, Mr. McPhee, thank you! I've been in a slump, this Corona has really messed with me. It's hard to make films when you can't touch people and talk to people and be with people.

JM: Oh, I know. I know.

CS: It's really hard, so.

JM: What are we gonna do? How are we gonna do this? This is just...

CS: I don't know!

JM: I don't know.

CS: I don't know how to do it, and I'm struggling right now, trying to figure it out. But you gave me some things to think about.

JM: You gave me some things to think about! I'm so happy to see you, I can't tell you, man. This is absolutely great. Absolutely fantastic. Thank you, John.

CS: Long time comin'. I mean, we could talk about you very generously giving me some recordings to use in an installation in Portland. First of all, I made this installation, Joe, and there was sound, like I'm all about sound, so there's always ambient sound, there's birds, there's water, there's sound, and I thought this was what I wanted, but I needed something else. And so I just called up John: "Do you think Mr. McPhee would mind...?"

JC: I think I said: "Give me ten minutes."

CS: Right? That was all it took! Like, in the middle of installation, they're hanging stuff up, I'm on my computer, dropping in the sound, re-exporting the video, popping it in the player, next thing I know, the whole room changed. It was incredible. And there was a maintenance guy working there, he walked in, and he had been really gruff. Just like, ah, you're the artist, you probably don't wanna talk to me, I don't wanna talk to you. And he walks in and stands there. "This Joe McPhee?" I said: "Actually, it is." He said: "I thought someone was messing with me, but it is Joe McPhee!" And then he just walked out, and I thought: "Yep, that was it. That was the move."



Installation documentation of Asterisms, an installation by Cauleen Smith incorporating objects from the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Craft, Portland, Oregon with objects from Smith's personal collection together with recorded and CCTV video. Music by Joe McPhee. Exhibited at the Pacific Northwest College of Art November 3, 2016 - January 6, 2017.

JM: Cauleen, can I ask you something about the image that John selected for the cover of *Keep Going*?

CS: Yeah.

JM: The moment I saw it, it just knocked me over. What, where, where, what, what?...tell me something about it.

CS: Oh sure. I did an artist residency in Florida on a little island in the Gulf called Captiva, known for seashells, even though because of too many people and too much climate change there aren't that many seashells on the beach anymore. The only seashells left are these ugly - well, people think they're ugly - oily, black, pin-shells that have barnacles on half of them and the other half is like this iridescent black which I thought was beautiful. So I was picking up these shells because I'm not very good at artist residencies, I like to be at home. All the stuff that I use to make stuff with is at home, so being on an island, a lot of people think of it as a luxury, and I'm just homesick and

kinda bored. I'm trying to just hang out with these people, and I'm like, well there's super nice people here, but I really would rather be at home. So every morning, I would get up and just go pick up seashells and pelican feathers and coral, whatever I found, bring it back to my studio. And then I started to learn about the history of the island. It was inhabited by the Calusa, indigenous people, and they got run off, between the French, the British, the Spanish, fighting over this territory.

JM: Oh, man.

CS: They fled most likely to Cuba. But before, this island was their paradise. These giant conch shells, like this big (gestures), would wash up on the beach. This was their home. And now it felt haunted. Because all that's there is like golf courses and little fishing resorts. They've erased any presence of the people there, but you can see piles of conch shells that they would toss away.

JM: Woah.

CS: And then you sometimes find conch shells with holes drilled in them that were tools. This is like a 200-year-old seashell you can just find on some of the less populated parts of the island. This place is haunted, you know what I mean?

JM: Wow.

CS: So in my studio, with all these seashells, I just started organizing the shells and this creature emerged. And I thought oh, this is kind of like an Egungun. This is an ancestral masquerade. This creature is making itself in my studio. I've never made a costume or anything like that, it was just what had to be made there. And then I spent five weeks collecting the shells, it took a lot of shells, sewing them on, and then I was like: "Well, I gotta make a film!" And the creature has to come out of the ocean. Something comes out of the ocean on that beach and what they find is golf courses, tourists. There's nothing there. There's stuff there, but, if you journeyed all the way from the bottom of the ocean and you roll up on this beach, you're gonna be disappointed, in my opinion. Unless you like golf. So I had that creature in this film.

JM: I'd love to see it.

CS: Yeah! And it's just this sad, sad little creature that eventually buries itself back underground on the island. To me it was just a little bit of an homage to the people who inhabited that island and everything that has just kind of been removed from it. It's puzzling to me that you would go all the way out to this island just to play golf. It doesn't make much sense.

JM: Yeah.

CS: I just felt like all these ancestors were speaking to me.

JM: Well, yeah, I didn't know that aspect of it, but when John showed me the image, I immediately felt something very strong about it. My family comes from the Bahamas.

CS: Ah, uh-huh.

JM: So the conch shells and the island and all of those things resonated with me immediately, you know, without knowing this extraordinary story that you just told. And now I feel even more close to it.

CS: Ooh, but you know, I forgot something which I learned. One episode on the island was a period when they raised sugarcane, and the man who was helping run the residency pulled out something, saying: "I found this, out in the jungle." They have this unpopulated area that they protect. "I found this when I was digging up the road." It was a cane cutter: oak handle and steel, all rusted. He was like: "Do you wanna use this?" I was like: "Man, just set it over there. Yeah, I do, but that is a heavy, heavy, heavy object, you know what I mean?" He hadn't even taken the rust off of it, he just sort of left it. And that's what the creature is holding as a staff, its cane. The sugarcane cutter.

JM: Yeah. Okay.

CS: Yeah, so, the Bahamas, you know, like sugarcane was going down there. That's a real connection.

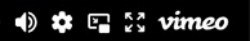


Egungun: Ancestor Can't Find Me

Corbett vs. Dempsey



05:19



Cauleen Smith, Egungun: Ancestor Can't Find Me, 2017, 16 mm color film with sound transferred to digital, 5:19 minutes. Filmed while in residence at the Rauschenberg Foundation, Captiva Island, Florida.

JM: Yes.

JC: One of the reasons that that image seemed so resonant was the quality of the figure, which has a warrior-like ceremonial quality, and then also its relationship to science fiction and horror movies. Like, *The Thing*, right, films like that, like *The Swamp Thing*, which, I mean, there's a long history of horror being associated with Blackness, as well. There's a lot of really interesting literature about the idea of the cinematic "other" and the alien and and Blackness...

JM: Yeah.

CS: Absolutely.

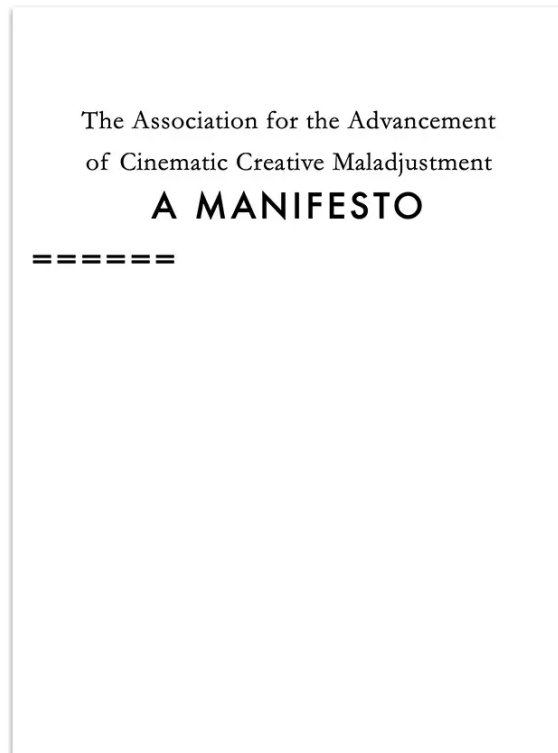
JC: ...and representations of Blackness, and so when we were looking for an image I was thinking about that. And Joe, I know you're super interested in those movies, you and Mats Gustafsson and Paal Nilssen-Love and Ingebrigt Haker Flaten – the band that's actually called *The Thing* – you watch alien and zombie and horror movies together.

JM: Yeah.

CS: Absolutely, that's my jam too.

JM: *The Thing*, the original movie, I remember I was eleven years old, and I went to see *The Thing From Another World*. It was about the Thing that landed someplace in Antarctica and so on like that, and I think it turned out to be like a giant carrot that went around killing stuff. And after the film, I went out of the cinema and there was a big truck, and you go in there and you could see the Thing, they said. So I went in there, stepped on something and they went *raaghraagh*, like, you know. But the last words in the film were "Watch the sky!" And the date was November third, it was my birthday, and I thought, oh, this is it for me, man. I'm from another world. Ha! *I'm The Thing from another world!*

CS: Yeah, exactly! Totally. I'm the Thing. I'm the *Thing*.



EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP



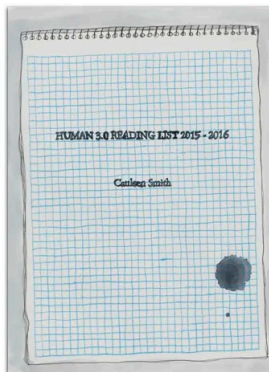
JOE MCPHEE, BLACK IS THE COLOR, LIVE IN POUGHKEEPSIE AND NEW WINDSOR, 1969-70 (2X CD)



JOE MCPHEE, NATION TIME (CD)



JOE MCPHEE & HAMID DRAKE, KEEP GOING (CD)



CAULEEN SMITH, HUMAN 3.0 READING LIST 2015-2016 (BOOK)



CAULEEN SMITH, PIGEONS ARE BLACK DOVES (10-INCH LP)



CAULEEN SMITH, GIVE IT OR LEAVE IT (BOOK)

