

George Lewis / Barbara Held / William Russell

# Jailhouse Scholar

By Kyle Gann

"Belief has wings; knowledge walks with a limp," counsels the unnamed prisoner of George Lewis's *The Empty Chair*, performed at the Kitchen's Winter Music Festival February 24 and 25 (I attended the latter). He should know; the black prisoner's troubles stem from an institution not often portrayed as a villain except in frat-house comedies, the university. How our protagonist ruminates of his alma mater never becomes clear. All we hear is how his relatives wanted to know whether he was going to become a doctor or lawyer, how proud they acted in front of his fancy white professors, and how he blew the whistle on some underhanded scheme that it turned out the dean was in on. Academic asses are covered by lawyers, and now our hero's in jail, starved for reading matter, and enduring the sarcastic title of "professor" from his fellow inmates.

Having been misled myself by lies coming from a university whose motto touted *veritas*, I find the plot refreshing. Bernard Mixon plays the part brilliantly, too, his delivery frank, impassioned, and real. "Speaking a language is like putting on a costume," he says, and switches freely back and forth between Black English and elegant Standard. He's confined to a six-foot square marked on stage, and plenty is going on around him. For one thing, Douglas Hart, wearing a transparent mask, is improvising across stage on a wooden flute, saxophone, bells, even a plastic soft-drink bottle. Ewart squeaks, croons, and pops, and seconds later his sounds are shadowed by a network of electronic melodies, now plucked, now brassy, all fairly ominous.

There's more. Two people with video cameras (Stella Verrier and Daniela Zehnder) circle the performers. Their images, twisted in a profusion of strange angles, appear on the screen above the stage, overlaid with shapes that suggest cages. Like the music, the images are suavely manipulated in real time, by Don Ritter and Ray Edgar. A TV monitor up front shows footage of cooped-up chickens, a butterfly under a glass, and an incongruous (because so unimprisoned) picnic party. Natural sounds—the clucking of the chickens, for instance—murmur beneath the synthesized ones. From time to time cynical warnings flash on the screen: "Do not say right away what comes out of your heart," and "The god leaves the town during the rule of an evil master." These are anticipations, it turns out, of an Egyptian scripture the prisoner reads to understand the spiritual purpose of his confinement.

Lewis has been working with this kind of video/synthesizer/improv counterpoint for years, usually driven by his own trombone. In solo concerts the results have dazzled with their expertise, but have remained rather abstract. Allowed by a NYSCA grant to expand his resources, he's found in



George Lewis's video/synthesizer/improv counterpoint makes for riveting theater.

*The Empty Chair* an emotive focus for all that technology, and his MIDI systems are the waves over which a touching story glides. My one problem with this production was that, once I got caught up in Mixon's monologue, the long, textless music soliloquies delayed the action and made me impatient. The dramatic curve rose, Ewart's sensitive energy rose with it, but the pacing kept in the mode, leisurely groove. Such delays made the video images redundant; we saw a latticework superimposed over Mixon more times than it took us to get the point.

All this means, though, is that *The Empty Chair* is too long and not yet finely tuned. Lewis's story is well-written and compelling, Mixon's sardonic bearing invites comparison with James Earl Jones, and the counterpoint of video and electronic tones—Cagan multimedia with a '90s focus—gives you plenty to pay attention to. Water a brainy performer with enough money and his work will blossom into riveting theater. (Nicolas Collins's *Dark and Stormy Night* on the same festival prompts the same observation.) The prisoner's problem is never resolved, only felt; Mixon saunters offstage laughing, Ewart dances away playing the flute. It was a haunting end to the Kitchen's best music event in ages.

I stiffle a shudder when a performer belatedly takes up the pen, but flutist Barbara Held's *Inscriptions for a Cylinder Seal* was too simple and unpretentious to fail. She and pianist Joseph Kubera are two of new music's most valued performers; she's been associated with Robert Ashley's music, he with Steve Reich's, and both with New York's Bowery Ensemble. In lieu of a regular season for the ensemble this year, the members have been organizing their own concerts, and Held, assisted by Kubera, gave a pleasantly atmospheric recital February 27 at

Greenwich House. Though not yet known as a composer, she included the concert premiere of a work she wrote for choreographer Nancy Zendora.

*Inscriptions* was inspired by Morocco. Held played a soft, undulating melody using just C, D, and E-flat, and eventually a tape echoed her with prerecorded bass flute and a sultry Sahara flute recorded by novelist/composer Paul Bowles. Also on the tape were a distant street conversation in Arabic, a wailing Persian *kamaneche* violin, and the gritty noise of gravel being dug, shifting from speaker to speaker. Desert ambience was the intent; red heat lamps shone toward the stage from the audience, and in a closing theatrical gesture, Held pointed a fan at the audience to materialize the hot breeze her flutes evoked. (Nicely synesthetic gesture, though if you sat off to the side like I did, you missed it.)

The concert's center of gravity was *Vari* by Bowery Ensemble director Niis Vigeland. Flute and piano started out by pulling away from each other, playing a minor-mode melody at different tempos. A line of sharp clusters appeared, some harsh serialist gestures, dissolving into rocking parallel thirds, neither tonal nor atonal. Vigeland had studied with Morton Feldman, and there was much that was Feldmanesque in *Vari*'s somnory repetitions, independence between flute and piano, and linear movement from one texture to another. But Vigeland sacrificed a little of Feldman's sense of rightness to gain much in the way of freedom and variety. A hint of blues appeared, an occasional ostinato, and for 25 minutes the piece wandered into continually new territory with insouciant confidence. Perhaps what Feldman taught most of all was faith in one's instincts, the courage to inhabit and explore time.

The remaining flute-and-piano work was *Kata* by Romanian composer Violeta Dinescu, a sen-

sitively written example of a gestural atonalism we've heard many, many times before. It's possible that that style represents something in present-day Romania that it long ago ceased to represent here.

Even die-hard 20th century music fans may have trouble placing the name William Russell, and you won't find it in music dictionaries. He was a percussion music pioneer; his *Three Dance Movements* (1933) and *Three Cuban Pieces* (1935) predated and helped inspire similar experiments by John Cage and John Becker, and were recorded (with works by Cage and Cowell) on an old Mainstream disc that's now a collector's item. In the '30s he worked



William Russell

as the percussion-accompanist for Chinese shadow plays, and collected jazz records. After 1940, however, he largely gave up composing. From 1944 to '57 he recorded historic jazz on his own American Music label, he curated the jazz archive at Tulane University after '58, and has written an unpublished book on Jelly Roll Morton. He still plays the violin almost nightly at Preservation Hall with the New Orleans Ragtime Orchestra.

John Kennedy and Charles Wood, directors of Essential Music, are percussionists devoted to

the American experimental tradition, and it was their inspiration to revive Russell's entire output—eight works—February 24 at Florence Gould Hall, two days before the old guy's 85th birthday. Russell, tall, dapper, and cantankerous, was present to blow out the candle on his cake afterward, and the sizable audience was divided between his jazz friends (who applauded after impressive solos) and curious new-music fans (who didn't). Russell's Caribbean-influenced works were a 1940s staple of Cage's percussion orchestra, and Cage walked around during intermission telling everyone within earshot how exciting it all was. The social event threatened to drown out the music.

Yet what was exciting was that Russell's music transcended its curiosity value. True, the *Three Dance Movements* (expanded to four by a 1990 tango) and *Three Cuban Pieces* are charming but trivial works, their Latin rhythms filling only a minute or two per movement. But the Trumpet Concerto (1937) and Voodoo ballet *Ogou Badagri* (1933), never performed before this concert, were far more substantial. In the former, Laurie Frink blew slow, soulful lines as a chaos of percussion erupted behind her gongs, drums, maracas, whistles. Lisa Moore played Asian patterns on a celeste, Edmund Niemann damped the strings with his hand as he played a piano melody, and Wood lowered a gong into water as Eric Kivnick beat it. Remember, we're talking 1937.

*Ogou Badagri*, named after a Haitian god, lapsed into a few tribal stereotypes in its 16-minute depiction of Voodoo rites. Its weird textures, though—slow piano chants underlaid with gourd rattle, unison conga drums, and forearm piano clusters—were startling, and showed Russell's influence on a sadly short-lived ultramodernism. A fugue from 1932 had been premiered on the same concert as Varese's percussion classic *Ionisation*. Yet Russell's sympathies were more bohemian than those of some of his Pan American Association colleagues. In the 1936 March Suite, the "School March" was intended "to show how someone full of life can be beaten down by the school establishment" with ritarding piano clusters, which did the forearm clusters, which did the "Wedding March" was positively macabre. The Gould Hall administrators understandably forbade the performers that an authentic performance of *Made in America* (1936) would have required, though coffee cans, trash can lids, a washboard, a suitcase, and conflicting tempos were present. One of Essential Music's premises is that America's vital experimentalism was squelched by World War II, the 12-tone row, and the arrival of the intimidating European masters such as Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Hindemith. Russell's explosive originality added dynamite to the argument. It was the first painfully loud concert I've heard that wasn't amplified.

ARTS AT ST. ANN'S PRESENTS  
The Real Folk Music of Hungary  
**MUZSIKAS**  
featuring **MARTA SEBESTYEN**

First New York Appearance!  
SATURDAY, MARCH 31 8:00 \$15, 12  
Clinton & Montague Streets, Brooklyn Heights  
Box Office: Tues-Sat 12-6 (718) 858-2424

ARTS AT ST. ANN'S DEEP CREEK  
Presented by  
**GARTH HUDSON & FRIENDS**

APRIL 6 & 7  
FRIDAY & SATURDAY  
TWO SHOWS 8:00  
\$12, 15  
Clinton & Montague Streets  
Brooklyn Heights  
Box Office Hours: Tues-Sat 12-6  
(718) 858-2424

**BIG BIRD MUSIC STUDIOS**  
PRESENTS  
A MUSIC WORKSHOP SERIES

BEGINS WEEK OF MARCH 25  
\$2000 PER COURSE  
PLAY WHILE YOU LEARN  
ALL INSTRUMENTS ALL STYLES ALL LEVELS

**ABSOLUT VODKA**  
Pat Phillips and Ettore Sottos

**ABSOLUT VOICES**  
An Evening With  
**JON HENDRICKS**  
And Special Guest  
**Al Jarreau**  
The Manhattan Transfer  
The Count Basie Orchestra  
Michele Hendricks  
Jon Hendricks & Co.  
Musical Director/Host: Jon Hendricks

**MARCH 29, 1990 • 8PM**  
**CARNEGIE HALL**  
Seventh Avenue at 57th Street, N.Y.C.

Box Office: \$38, \$22, \$14, \$10, \$10, \$10  
The Carnegie Hall Box Office (212) 247-7800  
or through Carnegie Charge (212) 247-7800  
All other prices include a \$2.00 service charge.  
An Equal Opportunity Employer Through TWA  
Carnegie Hall is a registered service mark of  
Carnegie Hall, Inc. Includes U.S. Department of ABSOLUT VODKA

**Concerts**

The New York University Program Board  
in celebration of Women's History Month  
proudly presents  
**BETTY**

With special guests: **Bad Attitudes**  
**FRIDAY, MARCH 23 8pm**  
Eaton & Lohm Auditorium  
Loeb Student Center 10th LaGuardia Place  
at West 4th Street, tickets \$5.00 on sale now  
for more info call (212) 998-0889

Star Auditorium presents  
**INDIGO GIRLS**  
plus special guest  
**Kris McKay**

**APRIL 23**  
**APRIL 24**  
8:00 PM  
10:00 PM  
Season Theatre  
10th & 7th St.

Available at Season Theatre box office (212) 998-0889  
at NYU's Box Office (212) 998-0889  
or call (212) 998-0889

**Dance**

**BALLETT BARBER**  
Reserve the box office  
tickets for **BALLETT BARBER**  
Call Your Favorite Dance School  
245-3605 - AR 11:30am  
Box Office: 8th Ave at the  
Spring Garden, 8th & 9th St.

**TRACHEA DANCING SOCIETY**  
is sponsoring the art of the dance  
in a **Benefit Gala 1990**  
Dance Performance  
Saturday, March 31, 7:30pm  
at the Spring Garden, 8th & 9th St.  
Box Office: 8th Ave at the  
Spring Garden, 8th & 9th St.

**PHOEBE NEVILLE DANCE COMPANY**

Choreography by: **REMY CHARLIP**  
**PHOEBE NEVILLE**, and **TRYNTIE SHAPPEL**

Thursday - Sunday, March 22-25th 8 pm  
**NIKOLAIS / LOUIS CHOREOSPICE**  
38 East 19th St., N.Y.C.

Contribution: \$10/TDF (TDF = \$3. Fri, Sat, Sun)

Reservations & Information: (212) 393-9422

WORLD MUSIC NETWORK PRESENTS  
**DANCE DRAMA OF JAVA**

from the great World  
stage, The Indonesian  
Dance Performance  
of Java

CALL HINDOYANTS & ENDANG WISNARDJATI  
SEN SUKARTO & WISNARDJATI  
with guest artists  
I.W. HARJO & SUKIRNO  
N.Y. Indonesian Consulate Building  
—FRI MAR 30 8 PM