

Anthony Braxton and the Utopian Tradition in Jazz

Lecture at John Szwed's Columbia University graduate seminar
"The New Thing:" Jazz 1955-1980 and Beyond

It's an honor, delight, and real thrill to be John Szwed's guest at Columbia to speak to this particular group on this particular subject. I looked over your course syllabus, and it made me wish I could be here for all the classes as a student myself. John's books, especially on Sun Ra and Miles Davis, have been an important influence on my own work.

The German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen wrote these words, which I used to preface one of my first book's chapters on Anthony Braxton: "I view my entire life, my entire work, in such a way as to ask myself, 'How, as you become older, do you set about integrating everything that previously happened?'" That is just the challenge I feel I face at the prospect of talking about Braxton and the idea of Utopia at this point in his life, my life, and in the ongoing history of the public life of the planet we share.

The challenging and interesting thing is that Braxton has been developing his body of work for a long time, and it is a project that the word "utopian" has fit almost as long, and that in public discourse. He himself has developed his music consciously and diversely down one utopian line after another, has written and spoken about it voluminously in utopian terms, and has provoked the unusually large number of people who have chosen to write about his work, me included, to do the same.

As one who has been involved with that project from its beginning in the late '60s--first as a serious listener and reader of his press coverage, then as a fellow player, then as a journalist and scholar covering it in depth myself--I've reached a point of so much water having come and gone under the bridge that I have to reassess all this intellectual property and personal history.

Let's start by reviewing the utopian concept and tradition in Western intellectual and cultural history, and the relationship thereof to music. Then let's overview the course of Braxton's history, my history with him, and the literature his music's engendered. This will be a quick run through the ages and decades, just to get the lay of the land, using the thread of utopianism to blaze our trail. Then we'll gradually come in for a closer view, through some of my own most

recent unpublished work and interviews with him, to see just how or whether those most current details have fulfilled, compromised, betrayed, fallen short of, expanded, or simply wandered off from the promise of the earlier work. In other words, let's try to see whether and how Braxton the musical utopianist has himself risen over time to the challenge of Stockhausen's words.

Utopia: Nowhere/NowHere

A glance at your syllabus situated the term "Utopia" for me in the context of your work here; I'm familiar with John's sources, and I know this is week 2 of 2 devoted to the Utopian tradition in jazz. I'd like to launch into my subject by noting the distinction between the intellectual and the cultural histories of the rubric, one I will work as I proceed. Both histories are deep and rich, and interestingly distinct, however loose and elusive their ties.

The first and strongest tie between them is, I think, best described by a line Graham Lock used as a lede in his first book, from the Egyptian mystic/mythic Hermes Trismigestus: "As above, so below." Utopias that exist only in imagination, and/or in some medium of the arts and letters--in other words, nowhere in the real world, per the original Greek meaning of the word--are often matched by some kind of attempt to treat them as practical blueprints for a real community or social system. The reason I call the ties between those two things loose and elusive is that invariably the people who try to do that think it possible, even easy, and just as invariably find it just the opposite, in infinitely more ways than one. Thus the standard dictionary definitions of "utopian" include first a positive, idealistic followed by a second, negatively quixotic, often dangerously or destructively naïve, impractical connotation. Which spells out another clue as to the nature of Stockhausen's challenge (that it is easier said than done).

I've opened up your handout with a little encyclopedia blurb on the Utopian tradition in the West.¹ I would add to it for our purposes here, starting with a fine-tuning of it into the image of a city. That image has been developed by religious and secular scholars and artists, starting with Plato's *Republic*, then the New Jerusalem in the Bible's book of *Revelations*. It was developed later by Augustine's *City of God*. Both Plato and Augustine, by the way, had much to say about music's role in it, when music was high cosmic science as well as art, not yet in the West but throughout the then civilized world. Thomas More was himself a church man addressing the issues of good and evil in the human community; by his time, in the 16th century, Western music was entering a liminal phase, a mix of the old Medieval cosmic science and the new Renaissance humanism--which period Gary Tomlinson, who also writes about jazz, has documented in a way that speaks to this course in his book *Music in Renaissance Magic*,

listed in your handout.²

After More we get a decline in the religion and magic and a rise in the Utopian schemes and dreams in both literature and new religious creeds, in occult literature, and fantasy and, later science fiction...as also in the disastrous attempts to make some of them earthly social systems. I'm thinking, of course, of the Marxist-Communist utopias of Stalin and Mao, the racist-fascist ones of Hitler and Mussolini, the 19th-century utopias of the cultish offsprings of Christianity and free-thinking communards in America, most obviously--but I'm also thinking of the American Revolution and new governmental charters themselves, the French, and English challenges of church and king before and after those, and the German Lutheran one before them, and the Christian and Moslem conflicts before them.

This history has been a story of many different things, of course, but one of those things has consistently been a utopic mythical vision of some Golden Age of perfect peace in the past that has to be restored, or some truth and good and beauty that has to overcome and either kill or convert some powerful evil and corruption and ugly injustice in the present, and/or establish some mythical-millennialist vision laboring to be born into the future. Looking back, this utopian project can hardly be said to have succeeded on the grand scale of universal and enduring harmony to which it has aspired, and is still aspiring so bloodily today.

So--let's name the game of Stockhausen's challenge so: you think of the highest thought you can, regardless of practical concerns or experiential lessons, all the way to the edge of your envelope, beyond which is only inconceivable mystery; you try to make that thought a reality in your life and the world; AND (this part is key) you keep tweaking it in both mental and material arenas to keep it from turning from dream to nightmare, and from good force to evil force in the world.

That gameplan is drawn from my distillation of many different conversations Braxton has had in print with others and with me. It's one that pretty much has compelled and served me too, both in my life in general and in that part of it that has overlapped with his. It's also one, as I observe it, that continues to compel and serve him.

As to the question of music's relationship with utopianism, let me just sum it up as the idea that sound is a force that can be marshalled in ways constructive or destructive to psychological and social reality, and that the musical utopianist knows and takes responsibility for that fact. Beyond that, let me refer you to my own work on the subject as it pertains to the music I'm involved with, and to a few books that have helped me develop my work along those lines--on the handout--to add to John's reading list.³

Now to get into the details of Braxton's musical utopianism, and bring it up to its current state,

I'd like to start with a brief and subjective account of his history in the public arena up to the time the first book on him came out, in 1988, Lock's first. I'll do this via my own exposures to him then, foregrounding the utopian aspects that really did make an impression on me. As it happened, Lock's book came out around the same time as I met and began working with Braxton; Braxton's own self-published writings came out shortly before that. Both represented the culmination of something in serious print that had been gestating in lesser print--the more transient stream of articles, interviews, record reviews and liner notes from 1965-85--and all of that marks a turn in my particular story here. So first, the early years.

Utopical soundworlds

My first intimations of musical utopia in the jazz tradition came by way of a few live and recorded musical events in my teenage years. First came a live performance by Charles Mingus at the Monterey Jazz Festival, a piece called "Meditations on a Pair of Wire Cutters." That and a recording by the Modern Jazz Quartet called *Fontessa*, and Miles Davis's *Sketches of Spain*, all evoked for me a utopia I would describe as that of the European composer's tradition coming together with the African American jazz tradition in a world where the two married each other in a workable way rather than fighting each other as two incompatible beasts (others, of course, had done that earlier--most notably, Duke Ellington--but these were of my time).

The next was John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* and his song called "Alabama," which evoked Martin Luther King's "Letters From the Birmingham Jail," utopically suggesting the white lion lying down with the black lamb in America. Then records such as Coltrane's *Om* and *Kulu sé Mama*, Sun Ra's *Heliocentric Universe*, Pharoah Sanders *Thembi* and Julius Hemphill's *Dogon AD*, all of which evoked a kind of archaic Afroasiatic-Edenic Golden Age; and Albert Ayler's *Ghosts*, which sounded out a kind of American folk grassroots utopia growing up through the cracks of the racist overground.

What made them utopic? They evoked both mythic and historical time and place, and the affect thereof. Not everything those artists did did that for me; also, they weren't something shared in common with all the players associated with free jazz--such as Cecil Taylor or Ornette Coleman, who generally just struck me as delivering more purely musical gestures.

The utopic ones seemed to me a higher plane of the musical experience. I was very familiar with sheer musical delights and their power, but when this utopic thing happened, I understood it as an exponentially different power, such as you might feel in a church service, or, in my case, the burgeoning rock festivals taking place around me in Berkeley and San Francisco. So I was already attuned to the concept and reality when I first noticed it. And Braxton, it was clear,

had himself gone through similar transitions through musical universes, such that what he was trying to create was not only beyond music as conventional entertainment, or as puzzle-play virtuosity, or even as echoes of some previous step beyond those things. What he was trying to create was something beyond and/or distinct from Coltrane's, Coleman's, Taylor's, and Ayler's gestures; something that had taken all of those in, among others, as well as the deaths of many of them--of Martin Luther King, and the Kennedys and Malcolm, and of Coltrane and Ayler. Whatever dreams had fuelled those utopias--the dream of religious pacifism and integration that seemed evoked by much of Coltrane's work, or of a more fiery baptism cleansing social and spiritual sin sounded by Archie Shepp and Ayler, or a return to the utopic innocence of childhood or a mythical "folk" culture suggested by Coleman and Ayler, or the occultism of light and dark invoked by Sun Ra--would now also feed into Braxton's oeuvre, but they wouldn't define it. He was clearly standing on the shoulders rather than in the shadows of those masters, and reaching for his own place in the sun.

Next in my handout is the publication info for Graham Lock's *Mixtery: A Festschrift for Anthony Braxton*, published for his 50th birthday, along with my essay for it.⁴ It's only a few pages long, and recounts the details of my personal history with Braxton and his work both before and after I met him. In keeping with our focus on the utopian, I would point out a couple of things about it that you can take to your reading of it later, if you're interested.

- 1) it's written like a science-fiction story, calling up tropes unique to Braxton's musical utopia, such as scientific technology's utopian promises and aspects, and an aesthetic kinder and more human than the one he's labored and spoken out against throughout his career; and

- 2) I see my line in the essay "by treating me like an equal he made me one" as akin to the aforementioned "as above, so below." That is, there are certain things one does to make one's dreams come true, and one of those is generosity in the quest to make the dreams of others come true. There is no meritocracy or democracy as such, even when those ideals are professed; there are only kindred spirits who recognize and help each other, or not.

Braxton said somewhere that his way of finding musical collaborators was to go into a city and find out who was the one that all the hip, top-dog musicians and their followers were saying was the real nowhere man, doing nothing in his nowhere land--an apt description of utopia, come to think of it--which pretty much described my reputation among my fellow jazz "local matadors" and their presenters in Eugene, Oregon: a real musician worthy of respect, but also too idiosyncratic and eccentric to trust with a real gig, much less a coherent career.

In my essay, I mention the early Braxton recordings that initiated me into his universe. I think my reaction to them then, through the '70s and '80s in Oregon, was much like that of a lot of jazz buffs who never got past it, as I did, who made it a first and only impression of an off-putting, coldly cerebral musical gamester who could be put in that box and dismissed.

The recollections that pertain here: having personally encountered and survived the rise and fall of the hippy utopias both mental and physical, and the Marxist utopia of the Black Panthers in my hometown of Richmond, near Oakland, California, and of my own young-adult vision-quest forays into and out of various organized religions and creeds and political parties and dogmas, I had turned to my own little earthly garden, away from the world, to cultivate there my own little life's utopia, as family man, working man, creative and intellectual and spiritual man.

I had encountered on that part of my path two African-American friends doing much the same thing in Eugene. For years, our kids played together, and I hung out with one, a bassist named Arzinia Richardson, during his jazz show at a local radio station. Both he and the other, Malinké Robert Elliot, were founding members of the Black Artist Group, St. Louis' version of Chicago's AACM, Braxton's de facto alma mater. AACM and BAG were pre-eminent among several other collectives of their time that sprang up as self-initiated independent alternatives to the major record companies that had released music under the "jazz" or "race" rubrics all along. I mention them in passing because they clearly pertain to utopianism in their concept, design and history, which you can read about in the books on Braxton and his peers listed on my handout.

My points here are that it was in the company of these guys, as earlier with Chicago-born bassist/reedsman Donald "Rafael" Garrett, who had cofounded AACM with Muhal Richard Abrams before moving to San Francisco to anchor the growing free-jazz scene there that I came up in, who had personal and professional ties with those groups and people, that I explored and discussed their recordings and the nature and significance thereof. That personal context speaks to my idea and experience of the utopic as much as do the intellectual tradition of religious and philosophical and imaginative/creative literature from ancient times to now, and as the musical utopias I mentioned above. The Indo-European root word for "free" means "kin," or "dear one," leading to the word "friend"--suggesting the utopia signaled by free jazz is a world where brotherhood is not just an ideal but is actual. My personal connections to the people who represent this utopianism in the music have always seemed to me like an essential component of my own engagements with it, on a par with the more abstract ones. It's also very much in the fore of Anthony's approach, in the way he always refers to his fans and bandmates as family.

As we start to make our descent from the general to the musical particulars of Braxton's utopia, let me just tick off a few key parts of my own first forays into it.

1) Two things about his 1968 recording *Three Compositions of New Jazz* stuck in my mind: one was that the liner notes included a line from Braxton saying that we were on the verge of the fall of Western civilization's ideas and values, in the process of replacing them with more meaningful and humane ones, and that his music was a direct expression of this. I remember this as a bracing and brash follow-up to all the turmoil of the '60s that had gone before, especially in that year; when retreat and disappointment seemed to be seeping into our utopian youth movement, here was an up-and-coming new voice seeming to say we have only just begun to fight.

I also remember reading something that initiated me into his great sense of humor, to the effect that he thought that record would sell a million copies and have all the kids dancing in the street. Not all that farfetched a fantasy in Paris circa 1968, the scene of that record, when you recall the student riots there--but also a glimpse of Braxton's quixotically utopian side. He's generally and genuinely, and not disingenuously, unaware of how eccentric and idiosyncratic he is perceived to be, for better or worse. He really believes in and feels comfortable with his work when others find it impenetrable and solipsistic. But of course, still others find it as exciting and satisfying as he does, those he speaks of as his family in the music.

Lock opens his section on Braxton in *Blutopia* with a reference to four areas of Braxton's music that trumpeter Leo Smith, bandmate on this record and others, says were key to his seminal influence; the one that would capture and hold my interest the most is what Smith called Braxton's new conception of musical time and rhythmic field. That, and the African-inflection of Schoenbergian atonality, as also with Cecil Taylor, is what seemed most brilliant and radical to me and most at the time, whether they liked it or not.

2) Moving up in time, his recording with the group Circle, presented as a collective rather than a bandleader and sidemen. That was noteworthy for this particular group, with pianist Chick Corea, bassist David Holland, and drummer Barry Altschul; Corea and Braxton would have been the most logical leaders, both because of their instruments and their role as composers, in the Western conventions of such things. The co-op arrangement they presented was something like a marriage of the lyrical-romantic with the cerebral-experimental, and as such another sort of utopic gesture. I recall hearing with curiosity and interest that the band had its troubles gelling, and one part of its saga made me sympathetic to Braxton. That was his account of meeting with a representative of Scientology, which Corea was into, and rejecting the appeals of the man when, in some skyscraper office building, he pointed at the people on the street below as ants to be risen above by the more enlightened parts of humanity. Braxton was working toward his own utopia then, and it was not to be exclusionary or hierarchical, not by racial criteria, or intellectual, or dogmatic or

ideological certainty, or gender or ethnic or age or any such identity markers, like so many others in the air at the time.

I remember hearing of similar flak he was taking for being an Uncle Tom, or an Oreo player, because of his unapologetic embrace of the whole of Western music's composer tradition, and of the white jazz musicians he liked. After years of seeing angry black militancy up close and personal, sometimes feeling threatened or excluded by it myself, this was a breath of fresh air, coming from one whose style and substance was the stark opposite of an appeaser type.

When I learned that his wife was white, that he had kids and was kind of a reclusive family man, I got a further sense of his utopia as probably being more universalist than ethnocentric, and probably more woman- and child-friendly than macho-land at its core. All of this, including the interracial family, spelled out a place I could live in.

The Arista 5-record deal in 1974 got a lot of press and buzz for being decidedly utopian, first on the part of producer Michael Cuscuna, who brokered the deal--a risky venture for a mainstream jazz label to take on such an adventurous and noncommercial talent, but at that time many in the music industry were fishing for the next big thing in both rock and jazz without a clear sense of what it might be--and also utopian on Braxton's part, for his choice of material, a mix of what was expected and what he cared about, which was too far out for them. This episode is documented well in Lock's and Radano's books; the point I would make here about it is that it seemed like one of those moments that were utopian in the sense that one of the good guys, so to speak, got past the radar and into the belly of the beast. The material Braxton chose, especially his piece for four orchestras, had the effect of something like Noam Chomsky and Michael Moore sneaking in somehow to substitute for Rush Limbaugh while the latter was off doing rehab. Or even like the phenomenon of Nelson Mandela moving from prisoner to president of his country. The interest it held for me, beyond that sheer gesture, was that it suggested a real synthesis of free jazz and modern, post-serial art music, on a par with the previous most successful melds of jazz and classical music traditions, only farther down the road.

By the end of the '70s, then, I was ready to get way down my own road. Jazz had settled back down into its old ruts, the fusion thing Miles Davis had kicked off seemed like part of an assimilated, commercialized rock scene, and America and American music generally seemed like a less interesting, less forward-looking, less profound and fully human place. I was ready to immerse myself in Braxton and find out just what was there, like I'd done with my favorites like Monk, Coltrane, Miles Davis, and Ornette Coleman before.⁵

The Ghost of Utopia Past

Now we move into the next period, when Lock's first book came out and I started working with Braxton as a musician and writing my own book about him. During that time, Ronald Radano was also kind enough to share his manuscript with me before it was published, so I could have a real conversation with both of those two colleagues.

What is interesting to me about Lock's book is the fact that I was reading it around and partly during a time that I was doing what it was describing--which was touring with Braxton, having nice long conversations with him, and hearing his music. Only I was doing so not as a writer interviewing him for a book, but as a fellow musician coproducing projects for us both to play in. Our relationship was very clear and straightforward and fun; whatever might have been enigmatic about Braxton's music and thoughts to the rational part of me was addressed nicely by Lock's book; our conversations were thus more personal and more like those between equals and likeminded people enjoying getting acquainted.

I do recall him being very generous and open about things he must have known would be important to me, whether I voiced them or not--things having to do with musicianship, with organizing and managing and furthering one's creative work against all odds, of cutting loose psychological/spiritual ballast that would interfere with your mission as an artist, such as America's racial soap operas, and suffering fools and other frivolous distractions or attachments.

I also remember identifying strongly with him as a guy who was devoted and responsible to his family, struggling to provide and care for them, though his natural destiny and personality seemed to be that of a do-or-die starving artist doggedly ahead of or bucking the trend of his time. His three kids ranged around the age of my one, and all four were of mixed race. Again, all of these details surfaced later in the Braxtonian musical universe-cum-utopia, as I would see.

One thing that struck me about Lock's book then and now was how obsessed he was with cracking the code of Braxton's metaphysic, and how frustrated. Braxton always comes off as cooperative and forthcoming to Lock, but also ambiguous and elusive in his speech. Reading all this while I was having such a normal give-and-take with the guy, immediately struck me as the result of Braxton being put on the spot to put words to what was, by definition, ineffable. One response to that demand is to say nothing about metaphysical issues, to simply let the music speak for itself. Another is to put it into a creed of some sort, a this-is-my-story-and-I'm-sticking-to-it kind of thing, having decided that's as far as words and positions will go.

But the one Braxton naturally gravitates toward, as did Sun Ra--and the one I think is the bravest and most responsible and interesting myself--is to tackle the subject as best as one can at any given moment, with one's own improvised creativity with language, knowing one will

never really nail it, and will always have to keep rolling that stone up the mountain forever. That approach most truly reflects the human potential and condition, generates the most and best collateral fruits as side benefits of the futility, and keeps one growing and ready for and alert to anything. It also keeps the nature and power of human language in proper place and perspective vis-à-vis both different and greater forces.

Braxton once said that words were one of the white man's greatest weapons; and he obviously decided to fight that fire with the same fire in his own life and mission.

Still, Lock did what I would have done in his shoes. He brought in all the stuff he knew and was most fascinated by to explain the phenomenon of Braxton's music, which also fascinated and compelled him. His presentation of this explanatory material is peppered throughout the main stream of his interviews, and descriptions of performances and material, but it is presented most directly in Postscripts 1 & 2. PS 1 is a survey of information about music in the ancient world and early Western cultures that accord it a high place as a high art and technique of reflecting, maintaining, and nurturing psychological and social and even cosmic health and prosperity.

The survey extends into the West's disastrous turn away from such cosmic balance and depth and toward violence, oppression, and materialism, roughly from the 17th century on. PS 2 paraphrases Braxton's *Tri-Axium Writing* that cover the same 3 millennia or so of world history, foregrounding the plight of Africans, of women, and the role of musicians in the bloody saga.

When I looked over Lock's book again recently, in the light of this talk's theme, I jotted down the parts that jumped out at me as those I had retained and internalized and worked into the picture I'd drawn of Braxton's work as a utopian project over the years since, when I was working with him on it.

The first thing I noticed was Braxton's unflinching sense of self-determination and self-reliance as the proper and only way to serve humanity and life, however it might seem to go against the common wisdom and good and mutual support, to go rather straight into a stubborn individualism and isolation.

This signaled to me the anarchist's utopia, which is so only when we assume that self-government and self-fulfillment is the road to the only tolerable collective government and fulfillment. It also smacks of Adam Smith's invisible hand, in the economic realm, and of the whole idea of American exceptionalism, when we expand the domestic utopia to its bid for a place in their international arena. This is not my projection onto Braxton; I would hear straight from him in my interviews with him a decade later, this sense of American identity as unlimited possibilities in his music.⁶

Another bit from Lock in fact gives that individualistic position the balance of responsibility it needs. On page 240, Braxton explains that when you rise to the challenge of defining your own terms and rules to play by, it can't be a merely reactive thrash against some other set of definitions and rules; it has to be constructive rather than only deconstructive, or destructive.

So we get a picture of his freedom as that of one who's doing what he loves; of a well read student of both conventional intellectual and cultural, as well as of occult history; of one who has no illusions about the dark sides of human nature, but also no shortage of enthusiasm for the eternally springing hope and wonder and innocence of the child that is father to the man.

Finally, on p. 211, Braxton's words about creativity being a reach for the highest thought you can have, and then a reach for the one beyond it, once it is grasped, and so on, comprise a methodology for better inner living that I would chew on for years.

The passage on 207 about the piece for four orchestras, likening it to a city, is one that really stands out loud and clear from 1985 to this moment and this particular talk, because it is the most obviously utopic image from that period, and one just beginning a development that would blossom over the course of the decade I worked with and wrote about Braxton. The city first glimpsed here is Braxton's and his music's version of every such city in Western mythological thinking since, again, the New Jerusalem, or Plato's *Republic*, or Augustine's *City of God*, right down to Karl Marx's socialist utopia, or JFK's Camelot, or Star Trek's Federation, or Reagan's Shining City on a Hill, or even the Bush family's New World Order--a fullblown utopic vision fed by and feeding the other kinds of utopias I've thrown out so far. It stands in Lock's first book as a future-bearing seed born of the past utopias of ancient wisdom systems that he dwells on the most, vis-a-vis Sun Ra and the various ancient mystery schools of Lock's Postscript 1.

I think of these as Golden Age utopias. Braxton's so-called Tri-Axium is the process of drawing on such past information, calibrating it with present circumstances, to come up with new information and wisdom to forge the best future (thus the "Tri"--past/present/future). The city is Braxton's image of that tripartite eternal Now in its fullest flower--and it was the city that I worked on and in with him the most, more than the subcomponents of it that had been slowly but surely building it up before I came along, simply because most of my work with him as a musician and music business person would be in large ensembles, which are the real-world musical constructs of the city. (I would refer you to Lock's *Blutopia* Chapter Six for a comprehensive discussion of Braxton's full, future-oriented utopia.) ⁷ Those, more than his smaller groups, have also been the most elusive and difficult utopias to actualize, because of the sheer personal and financial logistics involved. But because of Braxton's entry into academia, first to Mills College in Oakland in 1986, then to tenure at Wesleyan University in 1990, his ability to do more of the kinds of projects he and I did first together exponentially increased.

Which brings us to Radano's book, and to the idea of academia as utopia.

The Ghost of Utopia Present

Radano's book--then a manuscript in my hands as I worked on my own during my Master's Degree work at Antioch University, and did large-ensemble projects not only with Braxton but with Oliver Lake, Andrew Hill, Vinny Golia, Ursula Oppens, and with John Carter and Julius Hemphill's bandmates after each of them died during the course of projects underway with them--was a different beast from Lock's. Lock's work certainly evinced a culturally literate and academically discursive set of writerly sources and approaches, but it was much more the journalist's and the European fan's testament than the professional American academic's. It was more inclined and attuned to the musician's experience and perspective, thus its treatment of the past-oriented utopian dimensions we've been discussing was much less self-consciously critical and aloof, even if at times to the point of uncritical zeal.

As such, it spoke loudest to me, who was then more an informed journalist and active musician than an academic myself. But as I was going back to graduate school not long after Braxton got his first academic job, and under his professional sponsorship, I was very interested in transiting from the familiar terrain of Lock's book--that of the intellectual maverick covering the musical maverick--and into that of Radano's, where his subject was situated in the larger arena of professionalized interdisciplinary academic discourse on culture.

Consider for a moment the tradition of academia as utopic. Just as the Christian church has been intended as the real-world actualization of ideational images such as the New Jerusalem and the City of God--a utopia whose city charter, if you will, is the service of an ever increasingly well-defined God--so have the first groves of strolling scholars led by Plato, and the great libraries of Egypt, then of Islam, then the great universities of Europe and America, been attempts to actualize a utopia with a chartered mandate to develop human arts and letters and science. Just like the churchmen, of course, the academies have been problematic in practice in their pursuit of their ideals, mostly around the same dynamics of power and elitism. Both the promise and the problems would come into play in the turn Braxton and I took together from freelance music into professional academia, and they started doing so on paper as I contemplated Radano's book, and then my own, in the thick of this new turn's beginning.

Let's look first at what Radano said that speaks to the utopic trope, then what utopia his book as a whole represented, distinctly from the Golden Age, past-oriented one of Lock's book.

The thrust of Radano's information paints a picture of a man moving from his South Side of

Chicago neighborhood and musical roots in popular music, jazz, and formal Western music lessons into the social turmoil of the '60s, and developing a body of written and recorded work that drew on African-America identity and tradition to produce something that fell into the realm of the experimental and avant-garde, next to John Cage and similar postmodern mavericks. Neither ethnic identity nor evocations of the occult--such as were both foregrounded in Sun Ra's musical mythos--were at the center of Braxton's work, as Radano saw it, so much as this more present-oriented gesture of contemporary culture.

When I reread him now for what does speak specifically to the utopic theme, what I see also steers me more into the present than the past, as an intellectual subject. Pages 169-71 offer an insightful look at how a utopic ethos--in this case not ancient occultism, but the contemporary construct of Scientology as practiced by Chick Corea--ignites and shapes a collective free improvisation. Radano captures well the way musical expressions of social hierarchy or the subversion of them really do grow out of the conscious application of such an ethos to music-making. Braxton himself, on 179, gives voice to his part in this, one also more present- than past-oriented.

The next bit that pertains here is the latter part of Chapter Five, where Radano covers in 8 pages the terrain of Lock's 12 pages of two postscripts, the terrain of ancient wisdom and of Braxton's own Tri-Axium manifesto. Where Lock foregrounded this throughout the rest of his book, Radano just glances at it here as at one patch on a quilt he calls the Black Vanguard Aesthetic. Then, to close his book, he has a nice account of Braxton's Arista experience. He portrays that as a moment when Braxton could have broken through to mainstream; Clive Davis, in fact--who, Braxton tells Lock, was the overseer he was trying to slip by, through his employees Cuscuna and Steve Backer--does have a reputation in the business for trying to get artists to do what they want, rather than what he wants; and Radano suggests he was out of the business himself by the end of Braxton's five records.

It sounds strange to imagine this now, but then those records did seem to suggest that Braxton's work could indeed lead the way and set the tone and direction for the future of the music, much as something as unlikely as Schoenberg's music did for 20th-century contemporary art music for so long--thus opening up an aesthetic and agenda that was the complete antithesis of the one that did come to prevail, through Wynton Marsalis and company, and with just as much force and corporate backing and promotion and public following as that one got.

For those of us who had come up with Braxton through the same years of Coleman and Coltrane and Ayler, and Sun Ra and Cecil Taylor, that would have been a real resurgence of the musician's utopia as demonstrated by the similar breakthroughs to mainstream effected especially by Coleman and Coltrane. When it did not go that way in the culture's music or its politics or social trends, when the Carter gave way to the Reagan years, and the Civil Rights

and Black Nationalist Movements to the rise of a black middle class, and when the American music industry went global by the mid-80s, Braxton's career took its turn into Europe--where Lock encountered it--and then into academia, where Radano met it. And academia seemed the next best thing, maybe even the better one in the long run, to that mainstream breakthrough success.

Take a step back and consider the way I'm looking at the utopian trope in Braxton and his tradition as cultural rather than intellectual history here for a moment. By the intellectual history of utopia, again, I mean the way the idea works its way through arts and letters; both Braxton's work itself and the books about that work are his part of that history, and what I mean to present at the center of my talk, especially through the sources for your own future, more in-depth research listed in your handout. The intellectual history is the "above" part of the "as above, so below" equation; the cultural history is the below part, the real-world expression.

At one time, it seemed utopian, both in the idealistically positive and the quixotically negative sense, to suggest that slavery should and could be abolished in America; with Emancipation, that egalitarian dreamworld became the law of the land. At one time, the idea that African-American music would be *the* American music, or that its players would be revered and rewarded as great artists, was utopian, becoming reality only rather recently. In the same way, the idea that Braxton's ideas and music would move from the eccentric margins to the central core of American culture was and is utopian; it was only natural for those of us who felt we understood why it should do so would be excited when it seemed to have gained a new lease on life in academia.

I remember feeling that Radano's book was more exciting for what it represented than what it said, especially along these lines; academic validation of and openness to Braxton's work would save him and it from the disinterest of the marketplace, would give him and it a home to live and grow in, and would itself benefit from that engagement. Maybe this would be the place to regroup and regenerate the kind of music he gave to Arista, and to have a more lasting and profound impact with it anyway, in the end.

This, then, brings us to the climax and conclusion of this story, which is the unfolding of both intellectual and cultural utopia in my own work on and with Braxton throughout the '90s. It was a time that waded fully into both the new promises and problems mentioned above, which I will try to sum up for you in our remaining moments. It was also one that led past itself into a new phase of his work itself--his Ghost Trance series of compositions--with yet more implications concerning both intellectual and cultural utopia building. Considerations of these will comprise my story's denouement, and leave us in the present moments.

The Ghost of Utopia Future

Well fed by both Lock and Radano, I conceived my own book as an incorporation of what interested me most in them both, plus the addition of what I felt was unique to me and my experience. I started by spending the first 200 pages on the terrain they had covered more sketchily, that of the mythological and historical deep background of ancient sources, and of Braxton's own writings. For the background sources, I used what was on Braxton's own reading shelves, not always the most *au courant* or academically pedigreed kind of books. I tried as much as possible to find all such influences in specific musical traits of his recorded and scored work. All of this was intellectually utopic in the sense that it laid the foundation of context for the close musical study that took up the remaining 300 pages of the book.

When I moved into those, the story of the utopia unfolding--the occult knowledge behind the music--shifted from the main body of the text to italicized citations leading and punctuating each chapter. I wanted to suggest that we had been studying Braxton's influences in such a way as to show his apprentice and journeyman processes, how he handled his influences, and that now we were embarking into the realm of his own master-level responses to all those influences, with his own influence and authority.

I ordered his music into solo, duo, trio, quartet, and large ensemble chapters; I talked about the psychological, esoteric, social, and political implications of each configuration, as well as how the music reflected them both in composed and improvised forms. Let me run down the specifics of that, very cursorily, just to give you a sense of their utopian aspects.

- the solo music suggests the artist's, the anarchist's, the rugged individualist's utopian ideals: the virtues and values of self-determination, self-reliance, self-improvement of one's talents and genius for the greater good;
- the duo music suggests the lover's, the family man's, the parent's, the child's utopia: anti-sexist, pro-erotic, protective of the child and its innocence, inter-generationally harmonious;
- the trio music suggests tribal/clan/ethnic utopia of community bonded to but beyond nuclear family: the "us" distinct from all the "thems" in the world; and the noble savage, rural as opposed to urban culture;
- the quartet music bespeaks the step from the subjective and unstable to the objective and stable, from the informal and unchartered to the formal and chartered: the place where all the "usses" gather to meet with all the "thems" and focus publicly on their common ground for their collective interests rather than shun that possibility in the safety of their own private and/or provincial lives;
- and finally, the large-ensemble music resonates with civilization in its best senses, with

the universalism and cosmopolitanism cultivated by humans throughout time and space, where the best of their individual and collective potentials bears its richest fruits.

Of course, merely ticking these off as utopias calls to mind their many dystopic expressions in the real world...but the real power of such dystopias always lies in the zeal of those who buy into the utopia only to betray it, whether deliberately, cynically, or, tragically, by following the best intentions that pave the way to hell. Thus we get "all men are created equal" as a governing principle declared by slaveholders, genocidal racist maniacs, colonialists, patriarchs who own their women and children, capitalists who capitalize on and systematize unequal opportunity, and the communist and theocratic versions of that dystopia in party bosses and mullahs and jihadists and cultists of various stripe. Thus we also get the most effective counters to that situation, people like Gandhi and King and Mandela and their counterparts in the other societies who, through their writings and other artistic and political activities, manage to invoke the power of the oppressor's own professed good, the utopic principle being betrayed, to disarm him, even save him from himself.

My large-ensemble Chapter Nine's time period, the one it conveyed and the one in which it was written, was close to the one that was more or less blossoming in my life with Braxton when my book came out, in '96. By that time, he had won the MacArthur Award, in '94, and I had helped him produce and had played in several large-ensemble projects in New York, including his opera, *Shala Fears for the Poor*, a.k.a. *Trillium R*.

Another strategy I used was to write what I called the biography of Braxton's muse, as distinct from him or from his music. In this, I treated that thing we've been calling utopia here--an ideal, a mythos, a vision--as a living, thinking, sentient being with its own designs and agendas, sort of a spirit that possesses the artist and rides him, in fine voodoo tradition, like a horse. I claimed access to such a strategy by virtue of my insider status as a musician in the works discussed, and tried to establish my voice and persona there in the way Lock and Radano had established theirs as inquisitive and sympathetic-to-critical outsiders looking in. I ended with a tenth chapter looking back over the previous nine in the light of the ethnomusicological and cultural studies discourse I was becoming professionalized into at the time. That chapter is the one I would refer you to as the correlate to Lock's Postscripts and Radano's version of them, if you want the quickest, most summary fix along the lines we're discussing here.

In short, I tried to cover Lock's ground--that of the romanticized outcast, struggling against the powers that be, fighting the good fight without a prayer of getting through--and Radano's ground--the intellectual and cultural hero who did get through, but more as object than subject, a curious figure whom the powers that be finally deign to take seriously as part of their most serious--and utterly powerless-- amusements and diversions, from their seat in power...while adding my own ground as musical and intellectual and cultural compadre still hoping and trying

to really change those two cruel situations.

The picture of what the world would be like if I succeeded beyond my wildest dreams, and Braxton beyond his, very much goes to the theme of utopia investigated here. He and I would both be rich and famous, deluged with offers of commissions, positions, awards and honors, homages and accolades in our respective fields. He could quit teaching and work fulltime as a composer and player, to universal acclaim throughout the world; I could start teaching in a decent position and writing one book after another, making the occasional recording of interest to my small but select audience on the side, living the life of a professional don and passionate musical amateur. That we both have had occasional real tastes of such fates, as well as many more mouthfuls of much less palatable rations, speaks to me of the nature of the real promise and problems of academic culture and its place in the larger American one.

The promise, for us, has been fulfilled in the ways the new situation has worked out for us in spite of, more than because of, itself. In Braxton's case, he's been able to train the cream of the crop of music students already drawn to his work to become the new, fresh blood and energy of his most ambitious compositions. The problem of forming large ensembles has been significantly mitigated; these students remain associated with him after they leave, and become as skilled and substantial as the seasoned professionals they were not when they started out. Also, new sources of funds and opportunities have opened up. When you are well-positioned in academia, you look more fundable to many of the sources of such grants, and they were indeed what funded our large-ensemble projects at the Kitchen, Knitting Factory, and the opera at John Jay College in Manhattan.

In my case, it has led similarly to some writing contracts, and an array of guest-scholar appearances such as this one, and some music projects of my own, for which I am always happy and grateful. But having seen such limited rewards for a good decade-plus, now, in both our cases, it also seems clear that the real spoils and future lie with those artists and thinkers whose interests and concerns conform, again, to those of the powers that be, and no amount of sincerity, humility, diligence, perseverance, dedication, confidence, brilliance, reliability, competence, genius or collegiality, or any fertile mix thereof, will get around that. Until, of course, somehow they do.

The situation reminds me of a Bill Moyers piece I saw the other night about the current phenomenon of right-wing talk radio. The gist of the piece was that at first glance it looks like a healthy grassroots reaction to a corrupt liberalist-party culture, thriving on the sheer talent and rightness of Rush Limbaugh and his minions. By this view, the left has no purchase in popular culture because it really is morally bankrupt and void of good common sense. But when you look into liberal talk show hosts who are successful in this or that local market, you find that they don't get the national syndication their proven success deserves, because the media

conglomerates that control that would not be served by it politically or financially.

I see Braxton's marginalization by both academic and culture industries, and by association my own, to the extent of that association, as similar. I know beyond all doubt that it isn't due to his failings as an artist, or a functional human being in society, or a simple difference in taste; I'm certain it's a cultural-political-historiographical battle we are talking about here, which makes it both all the more daunting and all the more hopeful, because even though you are up against more than you imagined at first, battles have a way of turning around unpredictably for a lot of reasons beyond your control or perception. So you keep going, and trying to hang on...

If you want to get more of a sense of this academic terrain in terms of Braxton's work and mine about it, I put on your handout the URLs of two papers I wrote after the book, [one on his opera](#), and [one on his music for computers](#). These are rigorous and meaty treatises, well-researched, with a healthy range of connections to scholarship I deemed a fruitful match for Braxton's work. The opera paper is an argument for the importance of the trickster, hermetic figure--call it Utopia as it would be run if the Greek god Hermes, or Sun Ra, were the mayor--to an understanding of Braxton's work. The computer paper goes through issues in the discourse on Artificial Intelligence to get at two utopias at the root of the founding of America: that of the Deists and that of the Calvinists. Its method is to show how Braxton's approach to computer music veers away from each of those and into something both new and ancient to balance their post-Enlightenment flawed logics.

Now I would end this talk with two more shots of the intellectual and the cultural expressions of the Braxtopia, both of which you can look into in depth on your own. The first, the intellectual, is the [last big interview](#) I did with him, right around the real turn of the millennium, from 2000 to 2001. The musically intellectual one is his Ghost Trance series of compositions. The cultural one, one example of many, is a performance I saw just last year of one of his musical choreographs-cum-orchestrations, which I'll describe in closing.

The interview was really fun for us both, because it took place in the mythological context of the new millennium, which seemed like an entry into a time period that we both had been anticipating in its mythological terms throughout our prior years and reading habits. It was fun for me because I had taken in enough of Braxton's work to talk with him from the informed position of an equal rather than an aspirant to his esoterica, so I felt I could give him as much and as well as I got from him in the conversation, and I think it was fun for him for the same reason. It ends with a full look at the musical utopia that is Braxton's version of the city I've alluded to here.

The Ghost Trance series of compositions is very important to me both personally and intellectually. Intellectually, because it represents a shift from Braxton's ongoing synthesis of

American jazz and European composer's tradition--that project being completed, along with all its promises and problems, somewhere in the middle of his journey in academia and the breakup of his family in divorce, around the time of his children growing up. The Ghost Trance was inspired by his interest in a class on Native American music at Wesleyan, and in the history of the Ghost Dance phenomenon at the end of the Indian wars, when the decimated tribes rallied around a pan-tribal movement to resurrect the old ways that were dying out. Musically, it's a gesture from the artist who had processed the black-white drama in America and was moving into a similar syncretism with a tribal culture that still lived, but much more marginally to the culture than African and European descendants in America. It signaled that the crux of cultural meaning had shifted from black and white dialectic between civilization and its African others in America to one between the integrated society and a culture that had held out from any kind of assimilation or appeasement, following their own ways in the cracks, so to speak. More specifically, it foregrounded the quarter-note rhythm of Indian powwows as a trance-inducing device, milking it as a platform for the more complex elements of harmony and melody and composition and improvisation from the European and African traditions.

Personally it meant a lot to me, as Cecil Taylor has said it meant to him because of his own Indian genealogy, because my first wife and the daughter I raised are Nez Perce tribal members, the direct descendants of Chief Joseph in the Pacific Northwest. The cultural expression of this that I mentioned was a performance of many of Braxton's compositions, both his Ghost Trance and earlier works, in which a large ensemble took the center of an ice-skating rink at Wesleyan's Freeman Athletic Center, and was ringed with smaller groups, all playing from a set list of written pieces liberally peppered with improvisational sections. Players wandered in and out of each configuration, spontaneity and script were woven together thickly--and the whole effect was very much like that of the powwows I had attended with my daughter as she grew up, in which we would wander from this group to that in a large space where everyone did different things, and the whole scenario was like some nomadic village gathered on the plains in the middle of the country.

This reversion to the archaic that had weathered the millennia of Western civilization is one that my subsequent research for my second book, on Eurasian improvised music, yielded rich returns of its own, especially with the Mongolian peoples of Tuva who were descendants of the same ancestors as the people who crossed the Bering Strait 24,000 years ago. A propo of which, I would refer you to Leo Feigin's *Russian Jazz, New Identity*, which includes an essay on Siberian musicians who were greatly taken with Braxton's work. And, if you can read French, check out Cotro's book on the French free-jazz scene, which overtly used the utopic rubric throughout its development, also drawing much from Braxton's example.

Now you'll notice I've gone through an hour or so of talk and reading without playing a peep of

music. In some situations, of course, that would be negligent and only half the task at hand. But I've been through enough of these one-shot talks, both as speaker and listener, to know that I usually find the practice of playing little snippets and making little points about them both jarring and unsatisfying, at least for me. It doesn't do the artist justice, nor give the uninitiated listener enough to work with, nor the initiated one anything new to use. I'd rather you get the drift of my conclusions as a scholar after the fact of my own years of research and practice as a musician and listener, then go listen to all of Braxton's recordings, or at least a few key ones in their totality, with the material I've given you in hand to give the music context. Then I'd rather have you figure out how that context translates to your own life, both inner and outer, and what your best response to it should be. Also, focusing on the art for its own sonic and organizational traits and mechanics is too often a way people use to hide from its deeper implications, which I have focused on exclusively here.

However, that's just me, and I've designed two different optional endings for our session. One is cued by the list of recordings at the end of your handout, with a brief description of each in terms of our concern here. We can play parts of those and kick them around, as Braxton would say; I'm sure I'll have enough memories and ideas about the music to spontaneously comment on it in an edifying and entertaining way. But we'll fall back on that option only after we've determined that the one I would prefer is either played out or dead on arrival.

The one I would prefer is to assume that you all are already at least somewhat familiar with Braxton's music, and that you were just waiting for me to come along and point out to you its meaning and how it applies to your life. Then I would have you besiege me with information about your own different generation's versions of what we might call a clash of Utopias, to paraphrase from Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" line, and we would take it from there. Because for me what's most interesting, after all the sound and fury of the music itself over the last three decades, is the way everything has changed while remaining the same.

In my and Braxton's coming of age, the social drama between black and white in America, between youth and elders, and between women and men, between hypocritical moralists and less repressed realists, between hypocritical religionists and real saints, seemed to draw all the cultural and political battle lines, and seemed to be very clear. At this point in time, I think, for us and any our age, those lines have become much more gray and blurred than as black and white as they once were--but new lines of fire are, I find, just as compelling and fascinating as those once were.

Towit, the burning issues of terrorism and the fights against it have taken the place of the old threats of nuclear war with Russia, or of black or white militant revolutionaries attacking American imperialism; globalism, corporatism, and American hegemony have taken the place of that old imperialistic adventurism based on Cold War political ideology; debates about gay

marriage and sexual mores in the media and youth culture have supplanted the old ethos of free love doing battle with conventional moralism. I think I would be cynical and bored with it all by now, and would also underestimate its various dangers, if it weren't for the reality of utopianism in my consciousness being so well developed from my youth to now.

Which brings us back to Stockhausen's remarks. Because both the hope and the threat of nothing less than full life and death lie in the fact that some people are willing to kill and die for ideals, and there are a lot of utopias out there clashing and vying for volunteers to do so, and they have a power for good and ill that far surpasses that of those who don't engage them.

I think the best thing I can leave you with is to report to you that my own long engagement with Braxton's utopia-building has taught me that the most powerful one is the one that encompasses and governs all the others, not coercively but by harmonizing even the most antagonistic among them; and that maybe the real utopia in life happens while you're busy dreaming up the next utopia that is nowhere but in your imagination, rather than trying to make that dream come so true that you never wake up.

[Mike Heffley](#) || || || || || || || || [Almatour](#) || || || || || || || || [Almatexts](#)

Notes

1. This was from Grolier/Mindscape CD-ROM encyclopedia, under "Utopia." (1996 Grolier Electronic Publishing.)

2. Tomlinson, Gary. 1993. *Music in Renaissance Magic: Toward a Historiography of Others*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

3. Readings relating to music as cosmic science informing my work on Braxton and his peers. See bibliography of my book *The Music of Anthony Braxton* (Greenwood, 1996) for others:

Berendt, Joachim-Ernst. 1983/1987. *The World is Sound, Nada Brahma: Music and the Landscape of Consciousness*. Foreword by Fritjof Capra. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books.

Fox, Matthew, ed. 1987. *Hildegard of Bingen's Book of Divine Works*. Santa Fe NM: Bear & Company.

Fox, Matthew. 1980. *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation*. New York: Doubleday.

Godwin, Joscelyn. 1989. *Cosmic Music*. Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions.

James, Jamie. 1993. *The Music of the Spheres: Music, Science and the Natural Order of the Universe*. New York: Grove Press.

Johnston, Ian. 1989. *Measured Tones: The Interplay of Physics and Music*. New York: Adam

Hilger.

Le Mée, Katharine. 1994. *Chant: The Origin, Form, Practice and Healing Power of Gregorian Chant*. New York: Bell Tower.

Mâche, François-Bernard. 1992. *Music, Myth, and Nature or The Dolphins of Arion*. University of Edinburgh: Harwood Academic Publishers.

McClain, Ernest G. 1978. *The Myth of Invariance: The Origin of the Gods, Mathematics and Music from the Rg Veda to Plato*. Boulder & London: Shambhala.

McKinnon, James, ed. 1990. *Music and Society: Antiquity and the Middle Ages from Ancient Greece to the 15th Century*. Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Rouget, Gilbert. 1985. *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations Between Music and Possession*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.

Sansonese, J. Nigro. 1994. *The Body of Myth: Mythology, Shamanic Trance, and the Sacred Geography of the Body*. Rochester VT: Inner Traditions International.

Schafer, Murray. 1980. *The Tuning of the World: Toward a Theory of Soundscape Design*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Walker, Barbara. 1983. *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

4. Heffley, Mike. ["Tri-Axing the Rite Quest \(Yen for a ChANGe\)."](#) In Lock, Graham (ed.) *Myxtery: A Festschrift for Anthony Braxton*. London: Stride Publications.

5. Re: the sixties...

Berman, Paul. 1996. *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968*. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company.

Kurlansky, Mark. 2004. *1968: The Year that Rocked the World*. Ballantine Books: New York.

Saul, Scott. 2003. *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties*. Harvard University Press.

6. Re: politics...

Kraus, Chris and Sylvère Lotringer. 2001. *Hatred of Capitalism: A Semiotext(e) Reader*. Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press.

Glassgold, Peter, ed. 2001. *Anarchy! An Anthology of Emma Goldman's Mother Earth*. Washington D.C.: Counterpoint/Perseus Books.

7. See Graham Lock's *Blutopia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000; Chapter Six) on the image of the

city-state and other aspects of Braxton's mature musical utopia.