

VERTICAL REALITIES: THE BEAN, THE ZIP & THE HEROIC IMPULSE



You see it in Barney Newman too, that he knows what a painting should be. He paints as he thinks painting should be, which is pretty heroic. – Franz Kline

They hit this chord and all the time they got this other thing goin' down there...What can you play between these two things? ...That's what music's all about anyway. Finding those things; the adventure. – Coleman Hawkins

IN 1947, THE “PRETTIEST EXISTENTIALIST,” as Janet Flanner dubbed Simone de Beauvoir, landed at La Guardia airport and preceded (like a modernist, Left Bank-Tocqueville) to take in the scene:

What pleases Americans in jazz is that it expresses the passing moment, but as this moment is something abstract, they also demand abstract expression. . . Transition into abstraction is not limited to the field of jazz. Again, in picture galleries and while reading certain books by young writers, I was struck by the general character of this phenomenon. ...In this country, so eagerly preoccupied with concrete civilization, the word Abstraction is always on my lips. I must now why, more precisely.

Precisely. The immediate and the particular.

Within the next year that word went from de Beauvoir's lips to god's ear—if you can say that to an existentialist—and out to the world, as two brazen, yet dignified artists of invincible will discovered the secrecy of matter.

I don't know that it didn't happen. I'm just guessing it didn't. Could be that abstract expressionist painter Barnett Newman (1905–1970) and tenor saxophone titan Coleman Hawkins (1904–1969) were the best of friends or the most perfect of strangers. Linked by contemporaneity, neck and neck in life and death, seismic highs, lows and breakthrough epiphanies, connected through an abiding authority of craft and authentic deployment of the heroic impulse. With careers marked by periods of receding, exodus; discovery, ignition and combustion and flight; interiority, suspension, and beauty; at times quixotic in their singularity, Barnett Newman and Coleman Hawkins were patron saints of the vertical, masters of the sublime, breathtakingly bold and obstinate in their adherence to momentum and gesture.

Whether or not they ever crossed paths, in Newman's words, "if a meeting of people is meaningful, it affects both their lives... [it is] immediate and particular." Let's toss caution to the breeze and try on a little wisdom of Jack Spicer: "Things do not connect; they correspond" and let's play a little pretend.

In 1948 on the tails of de Beauvoir's visit, both artists were discovering new territory. Like Lorca they had developed an appetite for "sharp profiles and visible mystery." But it wasn't such an abrupt passage from "mediocrity to master with the invention of a new style," as Arthur Danto suggested of Newman. It was arduous. Both men weathered the '30s in probing, soul-searching ways—Hawkins packed it in and split for Europe

in 1934 where he set the continent on its ear and raised the bar for serious jazz playing; that same year Newman burned all of paintings up until then, following a failed run for mayor of New York on a platform that advocated for a civic art program with the manifesto "On the Need for Political Action by Men of Culture." Both men found themselves making breaks with the Past and engaging the Now, just as Ezra Pound was manifesting to *Make it New* (although it's worth noting that Pound too needed a second take—he'd originally translated it back in 1928 as "Renovate, dod gast you, Renovate!") By the time Hawkins returned from Europe in 1939, blowing minds and foiling gaggles of tenor-sax contenders with his landmark recording of "Body & Soul," Newman had decided to take a detour, immersing himself in the study of botany.

THE SUBLIME IS NOW: 1948

Bebop (punctuating rhythmic displacement and reconfiguring harmony with all the frontier justice of an atom bomb) shook up a post-war American jazzscape, but Hawkins was unfazed, he hired the kiddies (Thelonious Monk, Max Roach, Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis and Max Roach, J.J. Johnson and Fats Navarro) and, as William Matthews wrote:

*blew ballads/you knew one use of force:
holding it.
This was a river of muscles.
Old dimes oily from handling. . .*

Hawkins was consistently at the forefront of his instrument, an improviser with a deep knowledge of chords and harmonies who maintained an Olympian 40-year prime from the mid-1920s to the tumultuous mid-1960s. Whether swinging into the public's view with Fletcher Henderson in 1926, throwing down a solo at 260 beats-per-minute on "The Stampede" that was as modern as chrome or mixing it up 35 years hence with Eric Dolphy, Sonny Rollins and Paul Bley—Hawkins, aka the Hawk, aka Bean was a domineering force, "a full body & soul sorcerer whose spirit dwells eternally in every saxophone," as Ted Joans poetized.

In his *Pisan Cantos* in 1948, Ezra Pound offered, "do nothing with revolutionaries/until they are at the end of their tether." But I venture that in the case of Barnett and Bean, revolutionaries of an imposing and sartorial mien, things were just getting going.

That year Newman penned an essay entitled, "The Sublime Is Now," where he called for an art that "reassert[ed] man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions." He also daringly asserted that American artists could only gain access to the sublime when they stopped making pictures and started making paintings, in essence making paintings about paint. A delicious, immediate and particular notion.

Newman, one of the major figures in abstract expressionism, was born in New York City, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, studied philosophy at the City

College and worked in his father's business manufacturing clothing. He painted from the 1930s onward, allegedly in an expressionist style (before destroying all his works), prior to transforming, as Thomas Hess wrote, "from an outcast or a crank into the father figure of two generations."

In that same year Newman reached a major breakthrough in his painting, a new beginning of sorts, which led to *Onement I* (1948)—the first of the artist's "Zip" paintings. The "zip" was a vertical stripe of color running the length of the canvas, a device that was a constant in the artist's canvases from this point forward. As Rachel Gershman writes, the Zip, "suspended a painting's traditional opposition of figure and ground, and created an enveloping experience of color in which the viewer herself, physically and emotionally, is invoked by the zip—gestured to as a being filled with the original spark of life, just like Newman's mythical 'first man.'" Suffice to say a little florid—but the elemental power of *Onement I* is just that. In that moment, Newman discovered in that simple abstraction a clarity and commitment of vision; it lured him out on the edge and then a little further and that was that.

Arthur Danto resolutely sums it up: "*Onement I* is planted like a flag at the threshold, and when one crosses over it, one is in a very different world from that marked by the uncertain pictures that preceded it."

In this year of innovative, quixotic daring, Coleman Hawkins released the solo, unaccompanied saxophone

work, “Picasso.” One part second-cousin to the 1931 hit “Prisoner of Love” (a tune not dissimilar to “Body & Soul”) and two-thirds, in Gunther Schuller’s words, “a free-form, free-association continuity,” the tune was notable says Hawkins’ biographer John Chilton for being “positively avant-garde. . .unconnected by harmonic progression or tempo.” With the post-war dither, glee and inanity of #1 hits like “Buttons and Bows” by Dinah Shore & Her Happy Valley Boys, I’d say this was indeed a very heroic impulse, given the circumstances.

Very few things are as demanding for an improvising musician as solo performance. There are no hesitant Prometheans—stealing fire takes bold steps. It’s an intimidating double-dare-you to one’s artistic identity. It’s High noon (oh do not forsake me...) the musical equivalent of the vision quest or walkabout. And in this case it separated Bean from the boys.

There’s now an amazing legacy of jazz performers who work in this vain (think Sonny Rollins’ “Last Time I Saw Paris” or Jimmy Giuffrè’s “So Low,” Braxton’s “For Alto,” Julius Hemphill’s “Blue Boye” or Frank Gratkowski’s “Artikulation,” for instance), but it doesn’t mean it’s any easier than it was when Coleman Hawkins wrapped his full-throated sound around the landmark “Picasso”—churning, refracting, dicing quiet with cubist bursts of saxophone luster. You’re still alone with alternating currents into and out of silence.

Consciously naming the piece after the reigning marquee-named abstractionist of the day was pause

enough, but as with Newman making the painting about the paint, the sound and angularity of Hawkins improvisation became the raw material—the line of continuity, as it were. At that moment, he player and the process became the vehicle, not the song.

Onement and “Picasso” share values. For Hawkins, the saxophone, like Newman’s paint becomes the enduring reality, the raw material, neither sideman nor frontman, just a man standing. Immediate and particular—like the light cadmium red zip striding across a warm field of Indian Red. Sound, like paint becomes, in the words of Newman, “a living thing, a vehicle for an abstract thought-complex, a carrier of the awesome feelings he felt before the terror of the unknowable.”

And then there’s the line. Always the vertical line. As though he were riding one of Newman’s zips, Coleman Hawkins played “vertically,” burrowing into a tune’s chord structure (or in this case a free improvisation with knotty clusters of tone) — deploying a prosody as sweet on chord as it was on melody (an approach that can be heard in everyone from Don Byas to Coltrane, Warne Marsh, Sonny Rollins and David S. Ware).

The Guardian’s Adrian Searle nailed it when he wrote of Newman’s canvases that they were, “filled with resonances and silences, passages of stillness and sudden, surprising yet somehow inevitable events.. . that balanced calculation and reserve with intuitive leaps.” He could easily have had said these same things of the mature work of Bean—capturing perfectly the visual

analogue of Hawkins' rhapsodic swagger and abstraction, his aching, masculine lyricism meted out patiently, legato, until the simmer is overcome by a splintered, surging shower of arpeggiated lines and immediate and particular shards of verticality.

Newman like many modernists thought "he had resolved the problems that concerned the great guys who preceded him," as Danto writes. Hawkins planted firmly in place, like Newman's description of Rembrandt, "all that brown, with a streak of light coming down the middle," cleared the room of all comers—resolving any problems that concerned him on his own unequivocal terms. To answer Simone-the-prettiest-existentialist's question, Abstraction, whether in improvisation or painting, was as American as skyscrapers, the frontier and Clara Bow, it allowed for "the presentation of content without pictorial limits"—it was transcendental, imbued with a spiritual reality and providence. Paintings that were not pictures sidestep commandments against graven images; the sounds of the "bent metal serpent/ holy horn" do a Kantian riff and excite, "ideas of the sublime in its chaos or in its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation." And as Monk said, at last we feel "more like we do now than when we came in."

What I'd like to imagine is they spent a hot summer evening in the back seat of a borrowed 1947 Oldsmobile with Hydra-Matic Drive, sharing a flask and talking about which way the wind blows. But from your mouth to god's ear on the secrecy of that matter.

POSTSCRIPT: 1950 — ALWAYS THE LINE

. . .contemporary workers go lazy RIGHT HERE
WHERE THE LINE IS BORN.

Let me put it baldly. The two halves are:

*the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE*

*And the joker? that it is in the 1st half of the proposition
that, in composing, on lets-it-rip; and that it is in the the
2nd half, surprise, it is the LINE that's the baby that gets,
as the poem is getting made, the attention, the control that
it is right here, in the line, that the shaping takes place,
each moment of the going.*

*....And the threshing floor for the dance? Is it anything but
the LINE? —Charles Olson, "Projective Verse"*

