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Anne Lise Jensen
Plaque series in commemoration of Clarence Williams and Eva Taylor
JAMAICA FLUX 2016: WORKSPACES & WINDOWS

Jazz now enjoys, after almost a century's worth of debate and struggle, prestige as an indigenous American art music with a global presence. The dominant narrative of jazz history in the United States is thus populated with women and men who, through their creative vision and artistic gifts, produced musical works of lasting achievement. As a result, jazz musicians are, through the work of artists, archivists, critics, historians, and commercial media, commemorated as cultural heroes. This is particularly true for African American jazz musicians: Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, John Birks "Dizzy" Gillespie, John Coltrane, and many others represent the twentieth-century vanguard of black American sonic arts. Theirs is a music constituting what is venerated and studied across the globe as the jazz tradition.

What significance then is it that many jazz luminaries originated or established their permanent residence in Queens, New York? Louis Armstrong's house in Corona was declared a landmark in 1988 and converted into a museum in 2003, and each of the other luminaries named in the previously were themselves Queens residents, many until their passing. While Manhattan's nightclubs prevail as sites that incubated and launched the careers of many musicians in the historical narrative, and the stylistic transformations of jazz attached to venues extending from Harlem, the midtown Theater and Tenderloin District, the East and West Village, and the Lower East Side. But precious little attention has been paid to spaces outside of Manhattan that were just as important in the development of the music; localities like Jamaica, Queens where musicians established permanent homes and raised their families, contributing to a community that extended beyond their professional network.

Anna Lise Jensen, a Danish-born transdisciplinary artist and New York City resident, seeks to bring the public's attention to the house and eight adjacent plots of land once owned by Clarence Williams and Eva Taylor, the spousal team that, in 1922, moved into 171-37 108th Street in Jamaica. Williams, a noted pianist and composer, was also a radio producer and music publisher and blues singer Bessie Smith's first manager; in occupying these multiple roles, Williams did much to disseminate and further popularize black music, the soundtrack to the country's Jazz Age, after World War I. Eva Taylor, a singer and vaudeville performer, was a cast member in Noble Sissie and Eubie Blake's groundbreaking musical *Shuffle Along*—an unprecedented showcase of black talent in the city's racially-segregated theater circuit—and maintained a presence on the radio into the 1930s, broadcasting jazz across the airwaves locally and nationally.

Given the historical significance of Williams and Taylor in creating, producing, and promoting the nascent art form, their omission from jazz's standard historical narrative deserves to be rectified. But Jensen's project strives equally to keep their legacy tethered to their Jamaica community and, in doing so, invites a more interesting and largely unasked set of questions about the influence musical figures have on their home communities. That Williams and Taylor are a part of the pantheon of greats who established roots in Queens is one thing, but that they were two of many African American and Caribbean migrants aspiring to and finding a more prosperous life in an emergent black middle- and upper-middle class neighborhood in the early twentieth century expands the focus

from singular historical figures (the narrow and suitably problematized “Great Man Theory”) and towards a jazz historical landscape based on communality and collectivity.

Jensen’s work invites considerations into how community members in Queens—other musicians, fans, dancers, family, children—played significant if previously undetectable roles in mediating the development and proliferation of jazz from the 1920s onwards. These invisible relationships are the target of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), a theoretical intervention promulgated by sociologists Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law that describes the multifarious web of associations between people (actors), some more visible and powerful than others, existing in overlapping and sometimes conflicting sets of networks which form the basis of any phenomenon in the social world, including musical production. This focus on locality offers a vision of jazz’s evolution that is relational and contextual, where specific landmark historical events (i.e. studio recordings and live performances) with national and international resonance are also seen as the products of the musicians’ everyday interpersonal relationship with friends, neighbors, and colleagues. Put another way, the significance of Williams, Taylor, as well as that of Fitzgerald or Gillespie, is no less measured by their impact on the children in their community who knew that a great musician lived in the neighborhood.

Drawing attention to the legacy of Williams and Taylor and firmly embedding it in their Jamaica, Queens community works against the tendency to excise historical jazz musicians from their formative environs. Just as important is the ways in which Jensen’s initiative—along with similar efforts by the Weeksville Heritage Center’s “Lost Jazz Shrines of Brooklyn” project—expand the geographic boundaries of jazz in New York City beyond Manhattan, reminding us that a music so fundamentally based on interactivity depends on more than just the musicians present on stage and in the studio. The jazz tradition was always and will continue to be, first and foremost, a community-based endeavor, and Jensen’s network of plaques memorializes precisely that.