

Cecil Taylor – Letters to Bob Ceely, 1951-54

Four letters transcribed, selected from seven handwritten letters held in the New England Conservatory Archives.

Courtesy of the New England Conservatory Archives

[?] = uncertain words or parts of words, either the preceding word or one or more missing words.

[...] = personal material not of musical interest omitted; available in the archival originals.

Most of the spelling, punctuation, and indentation is preserved from the handwriting.

About Robert Ceely: <http://www.ceelymusic.com/Biography.htm>

Sept 28, '51
33-16-100 St.
Corona, L.I.

To a Steelhead:

I wish I could relate to you my gigantic feats since arriving here but I'm afraid in truth these stories would be pure invention. Unless I'm careful disintegration will be mine the scene will have disappeared into yesterday. Of course there are reasons; but some situations cannot be coped with, even after the most sensible course has been shown to you. — emotion vs. intellect: perhaps — I'm not sure.

Your schedule seemed fine; and I agree I think M.K. will be a challenge — at least thought so when I was in a similar position. [?] you are in a position — in relation to the Dr. — that I could never attain. Do make the best of it. For people who know and are equipped will be needed on this scene. I'm tired; tired of the slow talking sleepy eyed characters who dominate this scene; if these faces held behind or I should of say cover deep minds of not especially great depth (gee! we know few of us have this stuff) but at least [?]able facile minds that will grow or attempt to.

Yes I'm disgruntled; these moosicians have made mat[?] technically — but I think most of them are pretty poor — (play some of the pyrotechnical sounds as recorded on records but at a much slower pace — thank you 20th century! —) listen to the poor execution etc. etc.

However wail while you're in school, get all the air from the cup, suffocate your very living with learning; but see your contemporaries [?] outside of N.E C. There is a boy around the corner who has shed light on a very tough topic for me, teaching me — [?] not knowing it too! — to that thing called swing and yes! He does know how; fine things he plays, not a pretentious bone in his tenor, just the "Boston 1, 2."

Oct. 1

It is now 2:20 AM. And I can't find my pen so don't if you will mind the pencil scrib. New York is all a [?] over the baseball thing, and for a baseball enthusiast it has been a [?][?] thing. I'm certain there are many who could give great cogent [?] reasons why baseball is the lowest, but my only defense is that I like this game. I was never any good at it but I did like to play. A [?] competitor at times, I attained modest success in basketball but enjoyed long distance track more. — even won a one mile race in '40 in Boston.

I saw Streetcar and thought the performances were the finest. Leigh was fine, Kim was [?] wholesome no [?] this is better; Karl something or other was at [?] life (remember the dance hall party?) and Brando was rough and puerile but once and again tender. If this picture has a

weakness it is its failure to mention the reason the real crux of Leigh's trouble, her homosexual husband. In omitting this in reflecting upon this, her whole plight seems less valid...but this again is a result of America failing to treat its audience as adults perhaps?

What month was the L. Belleson article in N. Yorker?

A friend of mine went to the Ellington, Vaughn Cole concert at Carnegie Friday and they said Gillespie sat a few seats away from them accompanied by his vocalist J. Carrol. When the M. Bryant dancers appeared on the stage Ellington's band supposedly swung into Manteca. This brought very odd [?] embarrassing [?] from D.G. who went [?] of yelling with hands in air My Music, 'My Music' etc. etc.

The Wednesday is American composers [?] at the Ballet Theater and we will see the Fall River Legend, Billy the Kid (Copland), Fancy Free (Bernstein) and [...] (Gould)

I can't say anything even half bright about the Miraculous Mandarin, with music presented by the 2 b's. We saw it and thats all. I suspect I didn't like it, [?] didn't like the Cage the 1st time either so there was at least something that I wanted and did like... There is one scene in A Place in the Sun which is one of the most tension [?], dramatic filled things I have ever seen on screen. However I just sat there and as yet am not certain what if anything I feel. I'm afraid I've missed something along the way. [...]

Enough at least I can't continue—sleep is the deciding s[?]gh. Bob if you ever come to New York and feel you want to, an invitation won't be necessary just fall by and stay as long as you feel you can take my eccen...[...].God! Now I'm hungry. Good night

[?]

Cecil D[?]

P.S. Say was Shearing as bad as I heard him to be?

3/7/52

This to you:

As we all must realize I'm the world's worst correspondent, the thought have been of you but the pen just hasn't been able to jot down these no-things. Of course the rarefied air and activity of N.Y.'s New Yorkers doesn't help this situation.

My trio, quartettes, etc. fold just about as quickly as they are conceived of, partly because I live away – away from the city – am not in close contact, partly because what I play no one really likes, and lastly because I have not exhibited leadership qualities. My organization [?] have been periodic rather than continual.

However I haven't given up.

We don't make sessions because we are extremely sensitive and afraid of what will or won't be said of our playing. This reaction has been an interesting thing to observe for when beginners [?] or less prof [?] cats have heard me their reaction has been something like a complete collapse. When playing for the Boppers coolness has reigned: expressions that say, better than their inarticulate mouthings could ever hope to say "nothing is shakin'."

The reasons are simple. When I'm playing with the young heads, I'm completely confident or really more relaxed, more adventurous, in short more inspired — odd luck? When the boppers are really blowin some things too I have withdrawn, become shaky, and a very poor imitation of no one in particular. Of course with the B.P's you've got to play like Bud or you aren't making it — In Tristano's Puritan school house I imagine similar regulations and criterions are placed upon creativity — of course the initials are L.T. — Recently had a score

played downtown and as usual the results were disre-t[?] [?] of like N.E.C.'s pop band without [??] R[?]. They played it loudly with all the lack of musical insight imaginable; also I first realized that what I'm writing these musicians don't feel — don't have the (for lack of a superior term) "classical" background necessary. But they do swing; I am wrong perhaps —

Had several nice talks with Brubeck and he confirmed your statement that the group wasn't very good in Boston. I think Dave has talent and I have heard him do some superb harmonic [?] upon things — but this is not enough (or is it?) to be considered top or great jazz. If he could swing more when submerging himself with those wonderful sounds — course as you pointed out when we heard your Fugue on a Bop Theme, only in about 5 measures did it swing — I love Bud and the swing of the future just must [?] on his — I think! — L.T. on Ju-Ju as I recall the side is at his best because he is swinging in the bud thing. But saying or rather using his own harmonic devices — [?] tell you about L.T and his school, my one visit, him at all — We can't Ju Ju and Pasttime in N.Y — is this not the lamest? — I have finally found your M[?]etta's — and your friend? Did he return to Paris? You said that he was ill and implied he might be paying for the balls had there. I wonder if depriving oneself of the real swinging things doesn't hurt one just as much! — Don't think much of the Village although must admit don't know too much about it as yet. Ran into al Tepper about five weeks ago and spent some time talking music and stuff "Stravinsky the dehumanized composer" blah blah blah! But he probably swings — my eyes [?] so many people !! — by far the most important afternoon was spent with Howard Swanson winner of N.Y.'s — blah! blah! award. I listened he talked — we talked I played — a friend played — then he played — ended by playing his favorites — (Chopin nocturnes) etc. One picture could be seen in his very small living room — my god of [?]. He was either very kind or very snide with me — I haven't made up my mind which as yet — Do bring your stuff with you I should like to hear everything — Yes I would like a program very much: Where will you be staying? You could, and I should like to put you up, stay here but I must warn you we live at least an hour's ride from Juilliard — and my landlords are stinking people — and we are moving — but I want you if you want to stay here — On all Jerome Robins [?] nite at the ballet Sunday (pronounced ball-it! And the music will be Straw's Violin Concerto and (The Cage) Bernsteins 2nd Symphony (The Age of Anxiety! Ballade of Debussy's) and something else can't remember it though — Birdland stinks most of the time or they have mostly "spit on ze floor acts" The New Downbeat is probably one of the swingiest clubs in the city. But I can't risk listening to any more Billy (the Pills) Taylor —

Talked to Bird one afternoon and he wanted to leave the country and "learn music" in Europe of course. So Boston's scene is shaking, huh? Jean Marion has a band and it is working on B'way — The most, "most" people I've met are Dixielanders! But then again you also [?] maintained (secretly if not openly) that I didn't know many people.

This should give you some idea of what's happening although some things I haven't mentioned 'cause I'll have to see you — When? —

Cecil

I'm flattered that they begin the symposium around my birthday — could it be that my genius has been recognized at last? B. De Franco's quartetto playing about 2 miles from my house — Kenny Drew playing piano — as always your letter was a gas!

April, 1952

? The scene is “bare”: I attended Miles’s opening “gig” in the city at the Downbeat where he and Lee Konitz held out for three days playing all of six numbers each night. Lee was quite dragged by it all as he was in the very difficult position of being tabbed as “one of the most creative people on the scene,” and he had to depend upon a rhythm section that just didn’t move at all on that Friday night. — also he said it depended upon Miles’s mood, which as you know has many levels etc — [?] Miles did some fabulous things that first night — especially on You Go To My Head.

Sunday nite went back to hear them and Lee was beginning to “wail” but Miles was still carrying the ball until about 1 A.M. when Lee started playing some “long long Ulanov lines”. Some nice things. After that set Lee and I went over to see Mingus as they have business to talk over. As we marched back to the beat, we heard this huge alto sound vibrating through the thin walls of that club and of course “bird” was on the stand surrounded by characters like Sims [?] Harris [?] — (Elliot walked off the stand! Simms [?] nothing Harris little better and [?] not much either.

Konitz and I have had some pretty wild arguments. The guy is pretty bright. Thinks things through and is I think a pretty nice guy, still doesn’t dig “St[?]” — asked me what all those sounds were I continually hum while walking in the street — sort of lifted eyebrows when we started talking ballet. “You make all the scenes don’t you” — of course I bowed out as self effacing as possible — me [?] me

Had a pretty wild time at this party Saturday didn’t get back home until 8:30 next day — ballet theater is at the Warner Theater for a couple of weeks doing 4 + 5 shows a day what a gas!

Konitz claims Yardbird Suite is the greatest Bird on record — what do you think — he wears some swinging togs. Who needs a piano player up there? What’s Parkin’s doing this summer — and dunking Duckham? And more important what are you doing — Yes I should like to make it up there especially in your [??] finance is my eternal romance. But we’ll — What are you writing? Have completed that “game” thing for some band downtown, and I believe they are going to attempt it at a concert. [?] started a couple other things. One of which I shall try to finish. — and M[?]? — [?] moves this week — Miles and Lester Young at Bird Land this week. If [?] write to me in the future the address is

River Crest Sanitarium
Astoria, N.Y.

c/o Mr. Percy Taylor [Note: Taylor’s father Percy was head chef at this mental hospital]

‘I hope T[?] goes down — been practicing like [?] since you left.

? Aug 7 1954 [at top in another hand]

1.

Don’t really know how to begin this letter [?] in the old days “Hi ya Steel head” would have sufficed — but this hardly seems appropriate or flattering to a graduate of N.E.C. — a holder of one of McKinley’s secret letters too. Dear Robert seems proper and New Englishish and also completely meaningless — so I’ll say hi!

Passed thru Boston in latter part of June, having just completed a 3 wk thing in Ca. My trio did everything but dance and the audiences did everything but clap and a horrid time was had by all — until I decided to play what I wanted — Visited the much talked of Jazz Workshop and found all the stars (?) missing. Pomeroy was there and played alright. Those others have a great deal of work to do. Then went over to the other side of town and had a ball with some swinging

drummers and bass players. Saw only David who killed me with his swinging records and his impressive looking scores!

The only thing I have done since I left Boston has been to start building a style of piano playing that when fully [?] developed will at least satisfy me.

II.

Slowly it seems to be taking shape, the harmonic and rhythmic potentials have hardly been scratched; [??] in about 3 to 5 more years something should happen. In any case I feel I'm ready for the Birdland Scene although still way short on the experience side.

Haven't heard Brubeck [?] in person since '52 and therefore can only comment on the few records that I have heard, the most recent being LuLu's back in Town which was horrible. Most of Dave's other records don't swing, particularly his lugubrious solos which invariably contain heavy chordal passages which fail to conceal the fact that Dave is really a corny young boy at heart; his single finger has to me no sense of direction, indeed it seems lost as if searching for the thing — which is swing. Desmond too has brought — to a lesser degree a certain style. But really that's all (!) He has no jazz technique within (in) that phrased legit type approach of his; and at best his soul is rather pale — frustration the only expression accurate enough to describe his goings on.

III.

I think you will miss all that is good and great in jazz if you don't start realizing certain things such as, its anti-legit attitude or character. This means that that segment of the [?] population from which the jazz giants have come have been denied the social economic and educational facilities that would possibly have influenced or introduced them to the European or legit approach! Since [?] means nothing to Bud Powell and Berg nothing to Lunceford how can you compare. Honestly the 2 musics (?) for you — you use one standard the European one and by this standard nothing is happening or at least very little is happening with any jazz person. However to really attempt to get an insight into what is happening in Jazz one must surrender or rather subordinate his own standards in favor of the search of the Jazz persons standards (i.e. one must try to find out what each cat is attempting to say; and must make [?] one's self in his standards) Why? The reason is one of comprehension — and when this is reached then one can judge as to the desirability of said expression.

The above hold true particularly for Jazz improvisers. However in the case of its composers it is perhaps even harder to appraise their work for they are faced with some terrific problems. They must not only write good music in a contemporary sense (yes today's Jazz composers might [?] be compared with the other people only if they have had a background of musical education similar to those other people — this isn't as fine a line of distinction as one might think. All one has to do is listen —) but they must swing also. And to really be great and important the jazz composers will have to intensify and change the swing that we know for already I feel cramped — so for me at least the direction can be found. The one piece that I'm most happy with [?] of dabbles in what we believe is a valid form and swing conception though time of course will decide.

5.

The Village scene is only a fair one music wise — although Straw's Septet [??] there last year. There are some jazz goings on. Milt Jackson probably the most forceful Jazz person in the world makes the scene occasionally.

I still dig the theater more than ever — the theater and the "Charlie Parker" of all actors Ralph Richardson —

So if you get a chance make it to the city and we'll talk —

Cecil

As you can see my handwriting hasn't improved — so hope you can make out most of it if not I'll translate it for you when you arrive!

The three other letters from Taylor to Ceely in the NEC archive are dated July 1952; October 22, 1952; and February 5, 1953.
