

AVERY J. SAVAGE

KAYVON GORDON

THE BODY AS PALIMPSEST

BY ARIELLA STOK

At Red Hook, Brooklyn's Record Shop, home to live music as well as vinyl, Kayvon Gordon pulls an album of traditional Japanese music from the bins. The 31-year-old Detroit-born drummer is preparing for a project with shamisen player Emi Makabe and bassist Thomas Morgan. His listening habits, he explains, follow his musical activities, requiring their own course of study. Gordon produces a slim paper datebook, its pages crowded with gigs, lessons and flights. He plays in so many bands, sometimes several in a night, that the book is indispensable. "Everybody looks at me like I'm crazy," he says of his analog bookkeeping. "Cats don't do this anymore." It suits a musician deeply invested in tradition, though Gordon's relationship to the past is anything but antiquarian. His playing draws on bebop, Afro-Cuban percussion and free improvisation, finding continuities where other musicians might hear divisions.

At Bar Bayeux, in Brooklyn's Prospect Lefferts Gardens, with a quartet including saxophonist Adam Kolker, pianist Dabin Ryu and bassist Jeremy Stratton, the amount of influence exerted by Gordon's understated playing without his appearing to insist upon anything was almost a sleight of hand. Playing Wayne Shorter's "Juju", he quietly propelled the music, sometimes sidestepping an anticipated climax or redirecting its movement toward a less-predictable conclusion. Afterward, the musicians gathered in the backyard. Having recently returned from a visit to Seoul as a member of pianist Sullivan Fortner's trio, Gordon produced multiple packs of Ryu's preferred Korean cigarette brand. "You are my savior!" she exclaimed. The conversation drifted toward a coveted Koreatown gig that paid $100 each and included unlimited barbecue, until somebody ruined the arrangement by bringing Tupperware.

Pianist Jon Elbaz, a collaborator of eight years, hears Roy Haynes in Gordon's subversion of musical expectations. More unusual is his command of sustain: dragging a stick across a cymbal, Gordon can make a drum kit produce long, orchestral sounds. Elbaz describes a musician who studies difficult rhythmic structures mathematically until he can approach them intuitively. That musical curiosity appeared early. In Detroit, preschool teachers discovered that the child they'd reprimanded for playing around garbage cans had arranged them into a drum kit. In eighth grade he met trumpeter Marcus Belgrave, entering a musical community that became, as Gordon says, "a second family." He moved to NYC in September 2018. At a Mezzrow jam session, a reluctant sit-in almost immediately led to a gig with Fortner. They later discovered they had both been mentored by Belgrave.

Pianist Micah Thomas began calling Gordon around then for his trio with bassist Dean Torrey. He describes Gordon approaching music "from under it," uncovering hidden meaning rather than imposing ideas upon it. "He has this endless way of manipulating rhythm within barlines…so that multiple types of infinity seem possible." Saxophonist Nicole Glover first heard Gordon in Elbaz' group, negotiating asymmetrical compositions with the rhythmic fluency of bebop. To Glover, bebop is a language, not a period style; Gordon has absorbed its grammar deeply enough to express himself rather than imitate his predecessors. When she formed a trio with Gordon and bassist Tyrone Allen II, she discovered that she had to become more flexible—and more confident in her own hearing—to follow him. That lesson became unexpectedly concrete during a recording session for Glover's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (Savant, 2025), her sophomore recording with this trio and as a leader. Gordon's bass drum pedal broke minutes into "Number Two", a composition by Detroit drummer Lawrence Williams. He kept playing, redistributing the missing drum's rhythmic functions across the rest of the kit. Neither Glover nor Allen noticed anything wrong. They recorded another take after fixing the pedal, but the first was better and made the album.

Gordon distrusts the opposition between traditional and free music. "I feel like I'm always playing free," he says, because choices remain available even within a written form. Conversely, improvisation still draws on inherited habits. "Free doesn't mean freedom." A composition establishes a musical world; its constraints can stimulate rather than inhibit imagination. What matters is hearing the music as it happens, rather than clinging to what one intended to play. "I'm recently interested in realizing myself as an artist," he says. "Not just a drummer. Just trying to think on that level." His own ambitions have begun to extend beyond the act of performance, embracing the conceptual decisions involved in making a work. His first two recordings under his name, each released this year, *type shit* and *blood memory*, suggest what that broader conception might entail.

The 19-minute solo album *type shit* originated in an attempt to adapt the oru seco (Afro-Cuban batá music played by three drummers) to one kit. Unable to reproduce the interplay of three minds, Gordon issued the improvisations recorded between attempts. On "joy rd", a drum stroke sprouts a rattling afterlife; "beechwood" suggests breakbeats. The music is solitary yet strangely populous. *blood memory* takes the opposite route. The drummer recorded four sets of collective improvisation at the Lower East Side venue Close Up with vibraphonist Joel Ross, woodwinds player David Leon, keyboardist Elias Stemeseder and bassist Torrey, then cut and rearranged them, occasionally triggering samples. On "marked, then marking", repetitions accumulate with almost mechanical regularity while Gordon's cymbals simmer beneath them; on "becomes, not is", Ross' vibraphone emerges from a dense collective texture. Listening back, Gordon sought passages in which an idea acquired a beginning, middle and end. The resulting music loops, coheres and dissolves with dreamlike logic.

For him, the body is a palimpsest, repeatedly inscribed with new experiences over prior experience, whose traces remain. Music, too, carries what its players have absorbed. He wonders about "something that's been conditioned to then go on and have agency in producing its own conditions." The record's editing becomes part of that inquiry: another way of arranging the material left by lived experience. For another quintet project, Gordon is investigating Markov chains and cellular automata as frameworks that might guide improvisation without prescribing outcomes. He points to precedents in Anthony Braxton, Roscoe Mitchell, Henry Threadgill and Wadada Leo Smith.

At Close Up, artistic director and co-founder Solomon Gottfried has given Gordon room to develop the quintet, recognizing its particular collective color. In mid-October, the drummer returned with Thomas and Torrey for a set of Thelonious Monk music. His brushes dissolved into the trio's interplay; the music shifted almost imperceptibly under his hands. Gordon puts his ambition plainly: "I'm just trying to make art on the same level as the people who inspired me to play this music."

For more info visit kayvongordon.bandcamp.com. Gordon is at Jazzcultural Dec. 1 (with Micah Thomas); Close Up Dec. 2 (with David Truil), Dec. 4-5 (with Peter Evans), Dec. 16-20 (with Micah Thomas) and Dec. 26-27 (with Ben Sherman); SEEDS Brooklyn Dec. 12-13 (with Joel Ross); Louis Armstrong House Museum Dec. 19 (with Sullivan Fortner); Mezzrow Dec. 22 (with Zak Shubert). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Micah Thomas—*Reveal* (Artwork, 2022)
- Nicole Glover—*Plays* (Savant, 2023)
- Sullivan Fortner—*Leave That In There* (Artwork, 2023)
- Simón Willson—*Feel Love* (Endectomorph Music, 2024)
- Kayvon Gordon—*type shit* (Tribe, 2025)
- Kayvon Gordon—*blood memory* (Close Up, 2026)

