

ALAN NAHIGIAN

THURMAN BARKER

MAKING SENSE WITH NEW MUSIC

BY JEFF CEBULSKI

Since its founding, the history of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) has featured several prominent drummers and percussionists—Steve McCall, Kahil El'Zabar, "Turk" Burton, Alvin Fielder, Famoudou Don Moye, Reggie Nicholson, Avreeayl Ra, Mike Reed and Isaiah Spencer among them—and one at the association's 1965 genesis, the soon-to-be 79-year-old, Chicago-born Thurman Barker. Barker's inclusion in Muhal Richard Abrams' Experimental Band began a stellar career, in which he participated on a number of key early albums by Abrams (AACM's co-founder along with McCall, Jodie Christian and Kelan Phil Cohran), as well as, to name a few, woodwind players Joseph Jarman and Kalaparusha Maurice McIntyre, all of whom helped define the idea of "creative music."

Barker's journey to that foundational role was unconventional. Inspired by witnessing a drum performance while he was in elementary school, at 12 years of age he entered the Chicago's American Conservatory of Music and once a week studied music theory. "I was introduced to musical forms and songs before I even started drum lessons," Barker recalls. "Keep in mind, doing those two years of studying musical theory, I had to listen to Leonard Bernstein, Stravinsky, Bartók, all of these folks." Two years of theory study led to his first real drum lessons, with Count Basie drummer Harold Jones, who introduced Barker to the music of Oscar Peterson, Miles Davis and Eddie Harris, as well as the styles of many influential drummers. "When I started listening to jazz, my appreciation for music had accelerated to the point that I understood 12-bar blues, that 32-bar form of bebop, and it was only a matter of time to apply my learning to the drum set, which Tony Williams taught me has all these different parts. I looked at it as a melodic instrument by listening to him and Max Roach…you got a percussion ensemble right here with the drum kit."

Invited to jam sessions by Jones, student Barker began to flourish. Then a friend of a friend who was connected to Abrams' Experimental Band invited the young drummer to come check it out. Barker was inspired by the unique gathering and decided in the late '60s to join the AACM in its infancy. "All these musicians were writing new music, which expanded my knowledge," he says. "I was able to apply my studies in theory to the music." Abrams noticed and encouraged the precocious drummer. "Those two years of theory taught me how to learn and listen, and I think that played a role in my acceleration. Keep in mind, the music was new to the composers as well; they had me there to understand and play the percussion parts the way they were hearing it."

For the next 14 years, Barker balanced a conventional career as a gigging drummer-percussionist with heavy involvement in AACM-associated activities, including seminal recordings. One of his first album credits was as an 18-year-old on Jarman's groundbreaking debut, *Song For* (Delmark, 1966). The next year, he appeared on Abrams' futuristic *Levels and Degrees of Light* (Delmark, 1967), on which Barker got his first extended solo ("My Thoughts Are My Future—Now and Forever"), bridging Anthony Braxton's squawking statement and McIntyre's husky rejoinder. In 1968, hired as house percussionist at Chicago's Shubert Theatre, one of Barker's first roles was for the musical *Hair*, which led to other theater gigs when Black musical productions began to show up in the Windy City. His inner discipline was tested when he was contacted by Lester Bowie of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, which had traveled to France for artistic purposes. The problem was they had no gigs lined up, but wanted Barker to come over anyway. "I said, wait a minute. It's kind of difficult for me to quit a job to go and be unemployed. So, I had to decline. I was honored, but my declining allowed me to grow as a professional musician on my own terms."

Having established himself as a go-to percussionist in the progressive jazz scene, Barker was tapped by Braxton in the late '70s for his quartet, the drummer's first touring band. "I found his music to be a challenge for mallets because of the large intervals used," Barker notes. His work is represented on *Seven Compositions 1978* (Moers Music) and *Performance (Quartet) 1979* (hatART). "Braxton's music made me laugh at times, because you have this jazz band playing classical music on jazz instruments." He also appeared on three records led by Sam Rivers, notably *Contrasts* (ECM, 1979), a quartet session with trombonist George Lewis and bassist Dave Holland. Lewis singles out the contemplative track "Images" as a personal favorite. "A lot happens in under four minutes," he says. "Thurman plays very minimally, but each color is so carefully introduced, like the AACM idea of 'little instruments'."

And then, after a recommendation from fellow AACM drummer McCall, Cecil Taylor contacted Barker. "I was hired to play percussion [specifically marimba] and mallets, not drum set. The music beat me up because I tried to keep up with Cecil. And you can't do that, because then it's going to turn into a battle." Taylor began to accept Barker's role as a counterpoint. "It's about texture. I looked at myself as countering what Cecil was doing, to settle in, pick up a tambourine, a triangle, a woodblock, a cymbal here, a cymbal there. Then the space begins to evolve and the music begins."

Barker moved to NYC in 1979 in an effort to establish his own sound, joining Dr. Abrams and other AACM members who had moved to NYC to eventually establish (in 1983) the AACM New York City Chapter, Inc. The '80s involved work with artists including bassist John Lindberg, pianist-organist-vocalist Amina Claudine Myers (on a more conventional trio album, *The Circle of Time*, Black Saint, 1983), violinist Billy Bang and trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith. Myers says that Barker "paints pictures as he plays (and) tells stories. He's very friendly, very warm, and tries to do exactly what the music requires." Barker then decided to up his game and compose for small ensembles; his first album as a leader, *Voyage* (Uptee), was recorded in 1986, featuring guitarist James Emery. "There I made a statement. It had a taste of fusion, but it wasn't fusion at all, it just had that sound. [With this album] I went to the next step. Not only did I write some music, but I created my own record company, Uptee Productions." The follow-up, *The Way I Hear It* (Uptee), with a more diversified lineup, was released in 1998. *Time Factor* (Uptee, 2001) again included Emery and skirted the fusion genre, but with a greater emphasis on drums and percussion. *Strike Force* (Uptee, 2003) is even more dominated by percussion, in a nod to Max Roach's M'Boom ensemble.

By 1993, Barker joined the faculty at Bard College, where he was fundamentally instrumental in the development of its jazz program. "[The college President] said, very simply, 'create a jazz program.' And I did. My four class responsibilities were percussion ensemble, directing the jazz ensemble, a class I called 'Jazz and Literature,' where we studied jazz journalism, and a course called 'Freedom Principle,' which was jazz history." Barker has since retired as Professor Emeritus after serving 30 years at the helm. "The college gave me a Chair. I haven't 'sat' in it yet because I'm still working and writing and playing." Staying active, Barker has served as drummer for tenor saxophonist Ricky Ford (who lives in France and occasionally tours through New York). Having delved deeper into serious composition, Barker says, "You have to reinvent yourself as you develop as an artist. You have to leave room because this music is art." With encouragement from Abrams, Barker began to write for larger ensembles. "I started studying composition in 2015, and in 2017 I wrote my first chamber orchestra score, *South Side Suite*." His works have subsequently been performed by Petr Kotik's S.E.M. Ensemble and International Contemporary Ensemble.

This month Barker will be presented by the AACM New York City Chapter, Inc. with a night of music that has special personal meaning, in tandem with his son Noah, a pianist and composer. "The audience is going to hear a premiere of two movements of my string quartet," he says. "They're also going to hear three segments of dual pieces with piano and percussion and multiple percussion. It's all new music, part of my establishing myself as a composer. I was once told years ago that you're not considered a composer until you have written a string quartet!"

Yet, his heart forever remains with the music the AACM cultivated back in the day. "I see myself making some sense and organization of this new music and, you know, a lot of folks don't really like it. But I'm a believer that avant garde music is going to be considered traditional music in about 20 years. We're just catching up to bebop, the music that was considered avant garde in the Swing Era."

For more info visit upteeproductions.com. Barker is at Roulette Dec. 18 (presented by AACM New York City Chapter, Inc.). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Art Ensemble of Chicago—*Early Combinations* (Nessa, 1967)
- Joseph Jarman—*As If It Were The Seasons* (Delmark, 1968)
- Sam Rivers—*Contrasts* (ECM, 1979)
- Thurman Barker—*Voyage* (Uptee, 1984)
- Cecil Taylor—*Olu Iwa* (Black Saint, 1986)
- Thurman Barker—*Strike Force* (Uptee, 2003)