

Eric: Second song is by Jen Shyu. Um, who is a composer, vocalist and multi-instrumentalist from Illinois. She is of Taiwanese and East Timorese descent. Um, I put that, because that's really important for her recent music, and is also important for the song I'm going to talk about. The song that I'm going to talk about is 10 years old. Um, she's best known in the experimental, free jazz scene. Um, and what is really important about the free jazz scene is this book, called "Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music". So, this is a movement that really got underway in the 1970s. Ah, '60s and '70s, but primarily in the 1970s with the Art Ensemble in Chicago, and ensembles like that. And, it started, you know, with someone like Ornette Coleman that says, what does freedom really mean if jazz is supposed to be about freedom? Why are improvisations based on this European product called a harmonic progression? Right? This is the question that Ornette Coleman asked in the early 1960s. And he began to play without a chord progression. Right? And, um, so that really developed into Black politics, and really, say, free jazz, is what freedom is. Free jazz is wild. If you don't know free jazz, I mean, it's really, really wild music. And Asian American jazz players in the 1980s were really, um, really very much influenced by free jazz. Because they really see the way forward for the Asian American movement is coalition with Black radicals and Chicano radicals. And, um, we'll talk more about Jon Jang. And Jen Shyu was a student of Jon Jang. Um, so she was very much influenced by this movement as well. So the song that I want to talk about is called "The Chinese-Cuban Question". It's a 22 minute suite, in three parts. It's from her second album, "Jade Tongue", that came in 2009. And it's in three parts and I think the three parts each do different things. So the first part is really to inform, and to really sort of provoke anger. The second part is to memorialize. And the third part is really to ask a question, and maybe to heal. So the first two parts are based on text, on this particular report. You can see "The Cuba Commission of China, Chinese Emigration, the Cuba Commission Report of the Commission Sent By China to Ascertain the Condition of

Chinese Coolies in Cuba." Right? This report came out in 1876 and it was the Chinese Government was hearing so many bad things about how people, Chinese people in Cuba were treated, so the Chinese government, actually the Ching government actually sent a delegation to Cuba to take testimony from Chinese workers. And that is the report. So the text for the first two parts are directly from the report.

Part one is to talk about how people were essentially kidnapped in Macao, or on boats, right? They might want to work on the boats but then they were kidnapped by the sailors and then put into Cuba and sold into slavery. Ah, this is around the same time as the emancipation of African slaves in Cuba, so they were looking for other types of labor. They were treated in fairly similar ways. So, um, yeah, so, uh, the first movement is really to give you an idea of what the story is because not many people, including Jen herself, she, ah, wrote this very shortly after she studied in Cuba, ah, she wanted to study percussion in Cuba, and Cuban rhythms, so she discovered a lot of Chinese people in Cuba, which of course there are, ah, but she didn't know about this particular story until she studied in Cuba. So she wrote this shortly after she came back. So this is the beginning, ah, I'm going to play two excerpts, from the first movement. The very beginning and then the climax about six minutes in.

(music begins with speaking and sparse percussion)

Eric: 5:30 (over music) She builds up this anger, she always speaks in short phrases, because she's so angry, right? She gets more and more angry and then she breaks into song.

(music continues)

Eric: And then it keeps building for about five or six minutes until you get to this point.

(music continues with singing, trumpet and piano)

(music ends)

Eric: Thoughts?

Too angry? (laughter)

Okay. Let's keep going.

So in the second movement, she memorializes specific people who were in the testimonies.

This is a picture of the Chinese cemetery in Havana.

Ah, so the movement is called "What Were the Causes?" and it tells the story of specific workers, particularly

people who reportedly got sick, or who committed suicide. Ah, so this is a memorial, but I want to bring up the question of what are the ethics of this memorial? Okay? Um, how do people want to be memorialized on the worst days of their lives?

(music begins, recounting a beating and torture)

Eric: And there's about seven of these stories.

Thoughts? Yeah?

Audience: I actually read that exact excerpt of the testimony in school and I think it's, like, a lot more powerful hearing it this way. Yeah.

Eric: Yeah. Okay. Other thoughts?

Let's, let's hear how this piece ends.

So, the third movement is a ballad, so the text is no longer from the report. It's her own text. Um, it's asking, is there a possibility of a more humane world? And here are some of the texts, right?

"Will it always be a tragic demise of the innocent and wise or is there some kind of hope we foresee will it be the ones that come to be?" And then here is, "Skin rubs off and what remains?/the human color of our veins." Right? Because there's no color difference in the color of veins. So, my question for you is, do you think this end is hopeful? This is the last minute and a half of this song.

(music begins with piano, trumpet, percussion and singing)

Eric: Thoughts?

Yeah?

Audience: Her music reminds me of the African-American music that I've listened to for protest songs. It's very dark, and also has dark endings and (inaudible) storytelling of what happened to African Americans (inaudible). This very much, it mimics that music and ends in a dark way like that music. (inaudible). It gives you a negative feeling.

(inaudible)

And it leaves me feeling very sad. It leaves me feeling miserable. I'm generally a positive person so I tend to not want to hear that type of music.

Eric: Yeah, I mean this is, ah, her closest partner, her musical partner is Steve Coleman, who is a Black jazz saxophonist. Very, very important saxophone player. They play together all the time, and I think Steve is in this recording. Um, so yeah, I mean, she's definitely very much involved in playing with people who were involved with that movement. Yeah.

Audience: Yeah, it's interesting that she's Chinese from Taiwan and I wonder how they welcomed her, how they interacted, given idea that someone who looked (inaudible) Chocolate City,

I'm wondering of her experiences trying to get to know the jazz musicians and how they interacted. I imagine that they would be very wary of her, not being American, number one, and being Chinese. Many African Americans during that time had no concept of what the Chinese were doing as part of our history, so she must have been, ah, (inaudible) and someone who could articulate and empathize and be persuasive for them to welcome her into their world. Because it was not an easy world to break into.

Eric: Right. She, she has, I mean, I know her quite well, but, she has the right introductions and, I mean, she is an American, I mean, she grew up in the US, um, and she does a lot of work in Taiwan these days, but, yeah. She knows the right people to break into this world and yeah, I mean, it's...she's been in the New York free jazz scene since probably 2003, 2004, something like that. We were college friends, actually. Um, she was an undergrad at Stanford, I was a grad student there. Yeah, so, but after she graduated, she really just went directly to that scene and you know, with Jon Jang's recommendations and things like that, so, it smoothed things out.

Yeah?

Audience: Is her heritage part Taiwanese, and East Timor Indonesian?

Eric: Yeah.

Audience: So her father or mother was, that's part of what I'm trying to figure out here.

Eric: Her father is Taiwanese, her mother is East Timor.

Audience: Ahhhhh. Chinese and Indonesian have a (laughs), they go like this (hits fists together).

Eric: They met in the US.

Audience: Met in the US, okay.

(laughter)

Eric: Okay, so...