

The background of the entire page is an abstract, textured composition. It features a dark blue base with a prominent, horizontal band of deep red and maroon in the center. The texture is grainy and layered, resembling a watercolor or a heavily used piece of paper. The colors are not uniform, with various shades and tones creating a sense of depth and movement.

JASON MORAN

Black Stars: Writing in the Dark

MASS MoCA



Up Close: Proximity and Residues in Jason Moran's *Black Stars: Writing in the Dark*

By Alexandra Foradas

"Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did."
— James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues"

While the contours of experiences of live music vary from venue to venue, the embodied exchange between performers, instruments, and audience members—in the form of sounds, movement, and even touch—is central to experiences of live music across spaces throughout history. Bringing together Jason Moran's works on paper and two sculptures from his *STAGED* series, *Black Stars: Writing in the Dark* delves into his interest in the embodied experience of live music, and in the residues and memories that music-making leaves behind.

The *STAGED* series examines venues that showcased contemporary jazz as a revolutionary form of music. Moran begins with intensive research within the archives of jazz musicians. Drawing on the photographs and documentation preserved through these archives, as well as oral history interviews, he creates installations modeled on spaces in New York that shaped jazz in the 20th century.

During The Great Migration (1910–1970) millions of African-Americans left the terror-ridden southern United States for places in the North, West, and Northeast. Thousands of Black folks made their way to New York City, seeking economic opportunity and community. Throughout this period, New York was central to both the jazz scene and to the growing civil rights movement.¹ The *STAGED* series traces the movement of jazz from Harlem in the 1920s (*STAGED: Savoy Ballroom 1*), to Midtown in the 1940s (*STAGED: Three Deuces*), to the Lower East Side in the 1960s (*STAGED: Slugs Saloon*). Luminaries including James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Ntozake Shange, and Amiri Baraka frequented performance venues including those that shaped Moran's *STAGED* series, and drew inspiration from the improvisation and freedom of artists' live performances.



Tom Marcello, *Studio Rivbea* - Sam Rivers and Joe Daley, New York City, July 4, 1976

STAGED: Studio Rivbea, commissioned for this exhibition, honors the storied loft of Beatrice and Sam Rivers at 24 Bond Street in New York. Sam Rivers was a pivotal figure in the free jazz movement from the 1960s onward, and his career as

a composer, musician, and musicologist spanned decades, from the 1940s until his death in 2011.² Starting in the 1970s, Sam and Beatrice Rivers shaped Studio Rivbea into a hub for artistic freedom and experimentation.³

Moran's connection to Sam Rivers' legacy is personal: the two collaborated on an album titled *Black Stars* in 2001, to which this exhibition's title is an homage.⁴ Moran, who at the time was 25 years old to Rivers' 78, explained, "I had the idea to bridge some of the generation gaps that have occurred in jazz. I wanted to record with someone who I had been a longtime fan of, and Sam immediately came to mind."⁵

Moran and Rivers are part of a long history of artists who embrace a variety of media in their practices, often through collaboration. Rivers' oeuvre encompassed composing, space-making at Studio Rivbea, and performance on tenor and soprano saxophone, flute, piano, and vocals; in addition to her work as a pianist and composer, Mary Lou Williams ran thrift stores in Harlem⁶ that benefitted musicians in need of support; pianist and poet Cecil Taylor was influenced by dance, and frequently created work with dancers and choreographers; Moran is a visual artist, pianist, composer, and frequent collaborator with other artists. As Moran put it succinctly, when describing his work across media: "this is not new."⁷

STAGED: Studio Rivbea pays homage to Studio Rivbea's canvas-covered walls, parachute-draped ceiling, and black



Jason Moran, **STAGED: Savoy Ballroom 1**, 2015. Mixed media, sound. 120 x 216 x 120 inches. ©Jason Moran; courtesy of the artist and Luhning Augustine, New York. Photo: Farzad Owrang

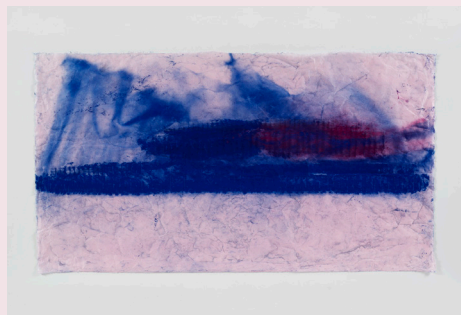
vinyl PA system, as well as to the artists and audiences who shared the space. The archive of ephemera and photographs on view alongside Moran's new *STAGED* points to the ways that their quest for emancipation—both musically and more broadly—reverberated far beyond Studio Rivbea's canvas-wrapped walls.

Also on view is *STAGED: Savoy Ballroom 1*, which visually references the arced wall built behind the stage at the famed ballroom in the 1920s. At the Savoy, integrated audiences were allowed to dance together (a rarity among venues at the time). The wall's curved shape bounced sounds from the musicians to the dance floor and vice versa, underscoring the interconnectivity of performers' and audiences' embodied experiences of live music.

Alongside these sculptures visitors will see a series of works on paper. While Moran's richly pigmented works initially appear to be abstract compositions, they in fact register the movements of the artist's fingers across piano keys—each work holds the keys' memory of a performance from

their perspective, temporally compressed into a visual gesture. This series records how Moran attacks and moves between the piano's keys when performing: gently, firmly, repeatedly. The migration of Moran's fingers across the keyboard leaves smears between where the keys would be, his touches blurring the edges of the keys-as-notes. We might recall that Thelonious Monk developed a piano technique to bend the pitches of notes played on the piano, depressing two adjacent keys and quickly releasing one while the other rang out.⁸ As Moran plays, his body moves with—and is moved by—the music, a dance in which the piano is his partner. The pigment registers this relationship onto the paper. Moran notes of his works on paper, “There is much more action than simply pressing down a note with a fingertip.”⁹

The two parts of Moran's exhibition at MASS MoCA—the *STAGED* series and his works on paper—juxtapose his reflections on the role of performance spaces in shaping jazz music with physical residues of Moran's own past



Jason Moran, *Magnet (Magma)*, 2022. Pigment on Gampi paper. 43 x 78 1/4 inches © Jason Moran; courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York. Photo: Farzad Owrang

performances. *Black Stars: Writing in the Dark* encourages visitors to explore their own proximity—both physically and historically—to the embodied acts of making and witnessing live music. As Moran has said, “Where do we sit to be moved? I sit up close.”

- 1 *Deep Water*, which runs concurrently with the first year of Moran's exhibition, celebrates Black jazz and blues musicians active in the 1950s and 1960s. More information can be found at massmoca.org/event/deep-water
- 2 For an in-depth history of Sam Rivers' practice, see Rick Lopez, *The Sam Rivers Sessionography: A Work in Progress* (Vortex: 2022).
- 3 Playwright and poet Ntozake Shange, for example, rehearsed and performed portions of her acclaimed choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* at Studio Rivbea. (See Hilton Als, “Color Vision: Ntozake Shange's outspoken art,” *The New Yorker*, November 1, 2010. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/11/08/ntozake-shange-for-colored-girls-play-profile-hilton-als>)
- 4 The exhibition's subtitle, *Writing in the Dark*, is a phrase sometimes used by writers and critics to refer to the practice of taking notes at venues during performances—another allusion to the importance of audiences' and performers' physical experience of live music.
- 5 Jason Moran, “Jason Moran & Sam Rivers - Black Stars Recording Session Blue Note Records 2001,” Vimeo Video, 9:17, April 27, 2010, <http://vimeo.com/11266926>
- 6 Michael Machosky, “Biographer of legendary jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams was moved to relocate to Pittsburgh,” *NEXT Pittsburgh*, September 14, 2021, <http://nextpittsburgh.com/features/biographer-of-legendary-jazz-pianist-mary-lou-williams-was-moved-to-relocate-to-pittsburgh>
- 7 Conversation with the author, October 10, 2022.
- 8 For more information about the influence of Thelonious Monk's life and work on Moran's practice, see Jazz Night in America, “Jason Moran Plays Thelonious Monk,” YouTube Video, October 8, 2015. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqhH-OUXyRY>
- 9 Jason Moran, unpublished internal communication, April 29, 2022.

Jazz pianist, composer, and artist Jason Moran was born in Houston, Texas, in 1975 and earned a degree from the Manhattan School of Music, where he studied with Jaki Byard. He was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2010 and is the Artistic Director for Jazz at The Kennedy Center. Moran currently teaches at the New England Conservatory. He performed at MASS MoCA as part of *LeWittx10* to mark the 10th anniversary of *Sol LeWitt: A Wall Drawing Retrospective* in 2018; his edition of the museum's Auditory After Hours series premiered in 2021.

Jason Moran:

Black Stars: Writing in the Dark

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Curated by Alexandra Foradas

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Cover: Jason Moran, detail of *Magnet (Magma)*, 2022. Pigment on Gampi paper. 43 x 78 1/4 inches. © Jason Moran; courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York. Photo: Farzad Owrang

Interior Flap: Jason Moran, *Black Mondo Grass*, 2022. Pigment on Gampi paper © Jason Moran; courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York. Photo: Farzad Owrang