



JAZZ

The Peace Warriors

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leroy jenkins

by robert hicks

As a founding member of Chicago's AACM in the 1960s, and with a solid track record in the Anthony Braxton Trio, his own Revolutionary Ensemble, and the innovative Creative Construction Company, violinist Leroy Jenkins had, by 1980, established himself as a brilliant composer and musician, known to combine jazz and blues tonalities with the classical leanings of Bartok, Xenakis, and Schoenberg. During the Reagan years, however, Jenkins found himself sidelined as an improviser. The gigs just weren't there.

Fortunately, through his experience as a critical panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts, a board member on New York's Composers Forum, and advisor to John Duffy's Meet The Composer series, Jenkins had learned the ins and outs of grants and commissions. When performance work became scarce, he turned to writing string pieces for chamber groups and quartets. He combined jazz and classical idioms in his mixed quintet with varying results and scored big in his collaboration with librettist Ann T. Greene and choreographer Bill T. Jones on their opera, *The Mother of Three Sons*, which was premiered by the Aachen Opera at the Munich Biennale and had its American premiere at the New York City Opera.

Performances of Jenkins' concert music for strings, though, were sporadic at best — and unrecorded until last year's CRI release of a live retrospective of Jenkins' works presented at New York's Merkin Concert Hall on April 9, 1992. The program ranged from the early 1983 piece, "Panorama I" (for Jenkins, Henry Threadgill, Don Byron, Marty Ehrlich, and Vincent Chancey) to the 1990 composition "Off Duty Dryad" (for the Soldier String Quartet, featuring guest bassist Lindsey Horner). The title piece from the CD, "Themes and Improvisations on the Blues," shows the episodic quality of Jenkins' blues-inflected themes. The remaining piece, "Monkey on the Dragon," started out as a dance score, written for dancer Felicia Norton with choreography by Mark Dendy. Much of Jenkins' writing for dance exhibits his penchant for lyricism while exuding dramatic

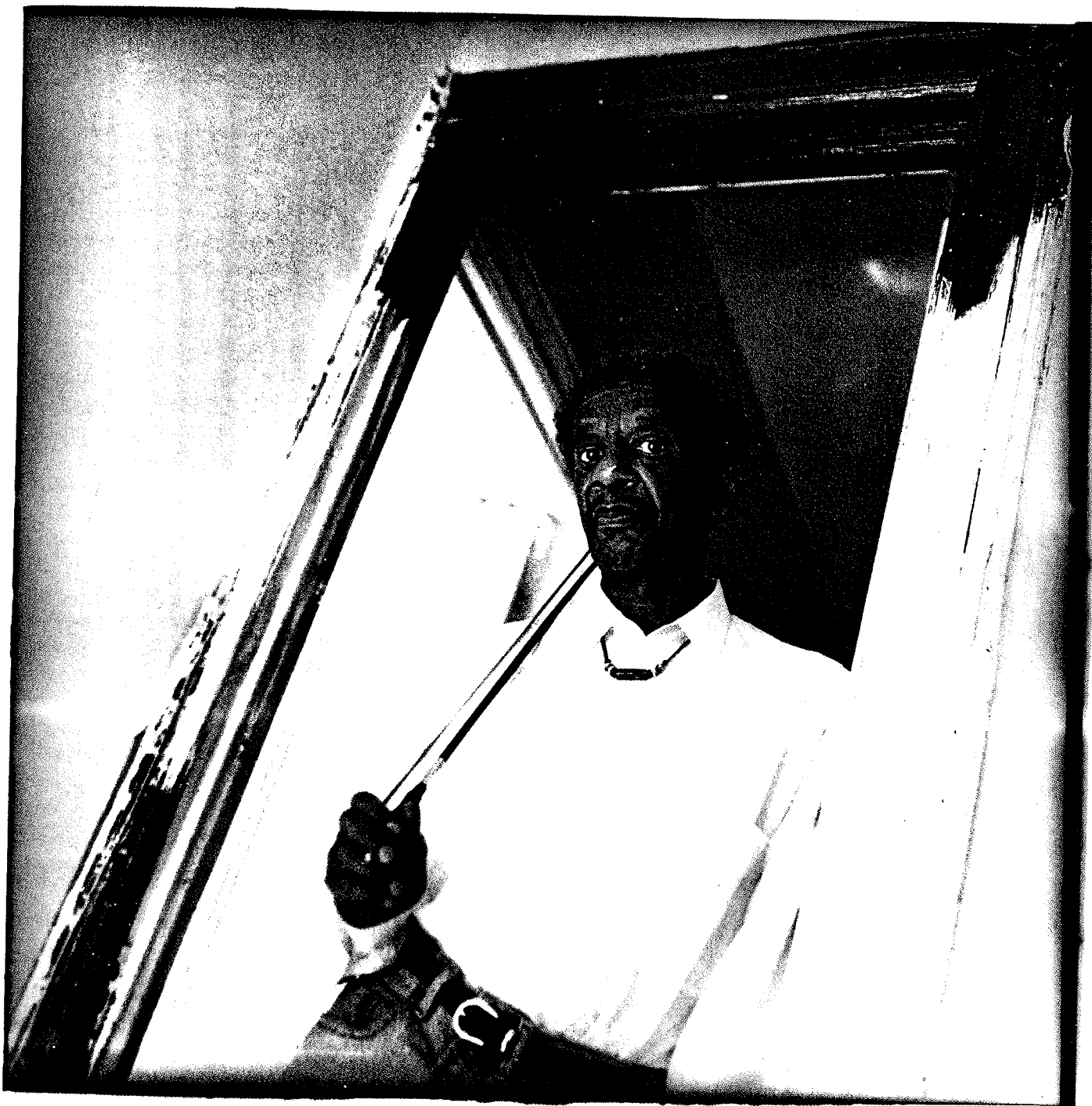
tension and richly varied rhythms.

At present, Jenkins is writing a score for his forthcoming jazz rap opera, *Fresh Faust*, which is under wraps at the moment while Jenkins looks for a librettist who can fulfill the mixed demands of telling a narrative story with the subtlety of good poetry, the high sophistication of an operatic aria, and the invigorating street smarts of rap. "It will combine recitative, arias, and rap," says Jenkins. "I'm just putting in the rap to make it more contemporary. It'll have everything that a usual opera has in it." Jenkins' work will be based on Goethe's *Faust* and on Robert Anson's *Best Intentions*, a story about Edmund Perry, the black youth

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who escaped from a drug-infested and crime-ridden neighborhood in Harlem to attend Philipps-Exeter, the prestigious preparatory school, only to be mistakenly shot while back home on vacation by a police officer who claimed Perry had attempted to rob him.

Scheduled for a fall 1995 premiere at New York's The Kitchen is *The Negro Burial Ground*, commissioned by the Rockefeller Foundation. Several years ago, on New York's



Downtown, near the Wall Street district, an ancient burial ground in which Negro slaves and Native Americans, Hispanics, and other indentured servants were laid to rest was uncovered accidentally during an excavation project. Based on Negro life in the 17th and 18th Centuries, with a story conceived and libretto by Ann T. Greene (who did much of the research for the piece), *The Negro Burial Ground* will tell the story of the first Africans imported to New Amsterdam, who arrived as farmers, artisans, and skilled laborers brought by the Dutch to the New World.

"We bring the world of the living in contact with the world of the dead," says Jenkins. "We have the insurrectionists, conspirators, and dividers who can maintain contact with the world of the living. We have the Native Americans who are participating in the insurrection of 1712. We

have the African soldiers who fought for the British during the Revolutionary War. We have the women who died in childbirth, the babies who died due to malnutrition. The white indentured servants who died poor and who were dependent on the government and just a step above the slaves. We have all those people who were found in the graveyard," says Jenkins.

To bring the story up to present times, Jenkins incorporates the story of Eleanor Bumpers, a 67-year-old Bronx resident who was fatally shot while being evicted from her apartment. Police contended she violently resisted arrest. The story of Edmund Perry also arises, as does the story of Michael Stewart, a 25-year-old Brooklyn graffiti artist who died a week after being beaten by New York Transit Police. "There's not much difference going on

now," says Jenkins. "They're dead too. They're the new dead, and the old dead are the elders — insurrectionists way back in the 1600s."

Jenkins plans to tell their stories with limited music, only a pianist, two percussionists, and a conductor, with the majority of the tale told by a large chorus, each telling the stories of different displaced peoples in a variety of languages from Bantu and Akan to Portuguese, Iroquois, Swahili, and Greek. Jenkins wants to evoke a sound that will show these people at their lowest ebb, full of anger and bitterness in their hearts, all of which he will transform into a rhythmical field. The stage will be divided into two worlds, one the ancient burial ground of the dead and the other the modern city landscape of New York.

"There will be a polyphony of languages," says Jenkins. "I want to reproduce in musical language the sounds of a slave auction, animals, carriages drawn on muddy cobblestone streets, blacksmiths, water being drawn, men drinking at taverns, a flogging — that type of stuff."

A main fictional character, Solomon Boatwright, is hung and descends into the burial ground, with his rope-burned neck, his eyes protruding, to speak to the people in the world of the dead. From the excavation of the dead, the elders have to figure out a way to suppress the world of the living and its imposition on their previous lives. In the end, The Loving One ascends to the world of the living, where he appears, giving audience to the mayor of New York. There his spirit must reign forever; he may never die again.

Jenkins and his operatic fervor are also fascinated by the figure of Willie Horton, the subject of Bush campaign

ads during the '88 election. Willie Horton epitomized the black scapegoat. *Willie Horton*, scheduled to premiere in 1996 in Philadelphia, as commissioned by Meet The Composer/Readers Digest, will mark Jenkins' entrance into what he terms an "editorial" opera, one more overtly political and critical of our modern-day uses of technology and the media to tell a story, sometimes without regard to fact but with a bent on distortion for political gain. ♦

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