

September 22 - October 28

# Another time, this time, one time

Steffani Jemison &  
Justin Hicks

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An annotated selection of the playlist I listened to while working on this exhibition.

### **“We Almost Lost Detroit” Gil Scott-Heron & Brian Jackson**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4hDOVNbiVA>

The ongoing project by Steffani Jemison and Justin Hicks, *Mikrokosmos*, takes songs from the popular Black music tradition and thinks through them with a processes of listening and pedagogical re-working.

For their exhibition at Western Front, Steffani and Justin selected Gil Scott-Heron & Brian Jackson’s “We Almost Lost Detroit” for the source of their work. The song, from the 1977 album *Bridges*, borrows its title from a book by John G. Fuller, published a couple of years earlier, about a partial meltdown that occurred at the Enrico Fermi Nuclear Generating Station on the shores of Lake Erie, just outside of Detroit. Though Scott-Heron was born in Chicago and raised in the Bronx, he outlines in the liner notes for the album how his father and three siblings live in Detroit. When Scott-Heron sings about the nuclear incident, “That when it comes to people’s safety, money wins out every

time, and we almost lost Detroit this time” he is almost literally saying “Black lives matter.”

In this exhibition, Hicks and Jemison dissect the song into its 61 distinct melismatic gestures. Melisma, dating back to Ancient Greece, describes when a single syllable of a word is sung across multiple notes in the scale. This sits in contrast to the more common syllabic singing style, where each syllable of a word is sung in one note. Though its presence in contemporary music is widespread, the technique is most often associated with R&B music. Melisma is probably something we’re all familiar with, whether we are musically trained or not—we hear it, in a fairly accentuated way, in Whitney Houston, Beyoncé or Marvin Gaye.

Scott-Heron doesn’t play up melisma in the recorded version. For much of the song, his singing is bordering on just talking, in the hybrid spoken poetry/jazz singing style for which he is recognized. But at regular intervals, usually on the last word of a line, he cuts in with this smooth, quiet melismatic treatment: “But no one stopped to think about the people-a-a, or how they would survive,” the vocal runs following the lines of the keyboards and guitars. In these lines, the spoken voice delivers words with meanings, and in the melismatic gesture those words are infused with another language

running in between the notes that make up these syllables.

### **“Peace in the Valley” Sister Rosetta Tharpe**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8BdASWmeIw>

I was raised Catholic: went to a Catholic school, attended mass every Friday during school and again on Sunday with my family. Our church was a pretty straight and narrow one, not conservative to the point of the service being held in Latin, but where the extent of its post Vatican II reforms had only really opened the way for there to sometimes be a younger person with an acoustic guitar accompanying some of the hymns we sang in church. What I remember most about singing in church was the days when I ended up in the pew in close proximity to Mrs. Shepp, my math teacher from 6th through 8th grade, sang so painfully out of tune, it often drove kids to laughter, which invariably led to detention.

Perhaps because of this, I didn't grow up singing. And though I grew up with an appreciation for popular music, that certainly didn't include music that was connected to the church. My exposure to religious music outside of our Catholic church

was probably Nell Carter singing gospel tunes occasionally on the TV series *Gimme a Break*.

So it was a revelation when, in my 20s, a friend made me a tape of Sister Rosetta Tharpe songs. At the time, Tharpe was having a resurgence, largely for recognition of her unique guitar style which prefigured the birth of rock and roll. Just as Scott-Heron is considered by some to be the first rapper, Tharpe is thought of by some as the first rock and roll guitarist. And it's in that guitar work that I was first drawn to Tharpe: her signature solos, where she shreds and wails on an electric guitar resonated with me in a way I never would have expected for someone singing about Jesus.

Tharpe has a lot of full sounding, big band gospel hits, and though my entry point to her work was through her guitar playing, I've always been drawn to these recordings from solo tours she did in Europe in the 1960s. In them, the sound mix favours the voice, while the guitar, what people always seemed to focus on in her songs, sounds as if it's plugged into an amp in a different room. Tharpe isn't a singer with a huge range, though her voice slips up and down the scales she sings with the same dexterity as her guitar work. And though some of her recordings and

performances with a full band can be quite extravagant in the way that mid-late 20th century gospel music often is, these recordings show some of the same subtle restraint that is in “We Almost Lost Detroit.” Tharpe’s voice is quiet, yet direct, gentle, but overflowing with power.

**“Early in the Mornin” Band 4 (22, Little Red, Tangle Eye, Hard Hair) Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsiYfk5RV\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsiYfk5RV_Q)

In “Early in the Mornin”, we listen to four men sing, two at a time taking turns swinging their axes on alternating beats chopping at a live oak tree. The voices of the men weave in and out of each other, working in syncopation with the strikes. Something in between a call and response and a round, their voices are both singing, and acting as percussive polyrhythms, with words broken up mid syllable.

Alan Lomax’s recordings of prison songs are usually field recordings, with the songs, often sung on a chain gang by groups of men, captured as rough and raw documentations

of the men as they worked. This particular song is a variant on a Mississippi prison standard “Rosie” (a version of which appears on this same album of recordings by Alan Lomax in 1947), and in addition to narrative similarities, the songs share similar structure, phrasing and vocal gestures. Stanzas often are made up of three repeating lines that are then followed by another couple of differing lines. Sometimes short words are extended—“till-a” or “well-a”—with these “-a” sounds marking a breath, which comes often and heavy in these songs on account of the physical work the prisoners are engaged in.

Despite its direct, documentary recording, nothing about this song is transparent. Despite the deep and frequent breaths, the strikes of an axe, the voices here belt out incredible melodies. The voice is longing, yearning, and imagining a place that it is not presently in, or to be with the voice of another, a woman, from whom it has been separated. And at the same time, the voice is also filled with rage, with sorrow, for the systems in society that are keeping it from the place and people it wishes to be with. The voices here aren’t performing, or at least not in the way that Tharpe or Scott-Heron and Jackson may be. They are everyday voices, singing songs of the everyday. Extracted

from their communities, these songs always seemed to me to facilitate re-inscribing a community, or proclaiming some kind of sovereignty or solidarity in spite of a prison sentence.

### **“Golden Girls Gospel Remix (Full Song)” Finally Aaron**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWD\\_VPiMlso](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWD_VPiMlso)

Admittedly, Steffani and Justin played this for me only a few days before the opening. But I’ve watched this video dozens of times in a couple days, probably surpassing Ton Do-Nguyen’s Snuggie version of Beyonce’s *Countdown* video for number of times I’ve watched a video in a such a short span of time. As Justin proclaimed when they shared it with me, there is a whole lot of melisma going on here. In the video, YouTube user Finally Aaron does a rendition of the theme song to the 1980s TV series *Golden Girls* remixed as a gospel song (you know the one, “Thank you for being a friend...”). With a selfie stick and the original song playing in the background, he adds on a layer of lavish, over the top gospel flourishes as he dances in the frame. For all the subtle gestures Scott-Heron delivers in “We Almost Lost Detroit”, Aaron is fully embracing the melismatic gesture as show here, so much so, he even points out at the 14 second

mark, “this is my part right here.” From there, he belts out a sequence of perfect little vocal gestures: an “ooooooooowoooooooh” just before “And if you threw a party” and then punctuates the next line, “invited everyone you knew” with an octet of “knews” and tops it off with a grandiose “the biggest gift , the bigggeeeeeaaaasssst yeaaaaaaaaahhhh” as he wig snatches himself for the grand finale. It’s the purest expression of living I’ve seen in ages.

– Pablo de Ocampo, Exhibitions Curator

## Artist Biographies

**Steffani Jemison** was born in Berkeley, California, and is currently based in Brooklyn, New York. She holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (2009) and a BA in Comparative Literature from Columbia University (2003). She has served as a visiting artist at many institutions, including the University of Pennsylvania, Brown University, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Hampshire College, the Evergreen State College, and Georgia State University. She has taught fine art at Columbia University, Parsons The New School for Design, Wellesley College, Trinity College, Rice University, the Cooper Union, and other institutions. She was the 2016-2017 Arthur J. Levitt '52 Artist-in-Residence at Williams College.

Jemison uses time-based, photographic, and discursive platforms to examine “progress” and its alternatives. Jemison’s work has been exhibited nationally and internationally. Her work has been presented at the Museum of Modern Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, The Drawing Center, LAXART, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Art, Bridget Donahue, Laurel Gitlen, Team Gallery, and others.

Her work is in the public collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Kadist Foundation, and the Whitney Museum.

**Justin Hicks** is a composer and performer who explores various themes such as identity, economics, marriage, labor, and religion in compositions and performances that range from singer/songwriter-style presentations, recordings, and sound installations, to collaborative works involving movement and set design. His work has been featured at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Baryshnikov Arts Center, PS122, The Japan Society, The Knitting Factory, Jack, Bowery Arts and Science, MoMA, Dixon Place, and La Mama. He was a member of Kara Walker’s 6-8 Months Space and was a performer and sound designer for Kaneza Schaal’s Go Forth, as well as the Obie Award-winning (Abigail Deville, design) production of Prophetika: An Oratorio by Charlotte Brathwaite. His vocal tribute The Odetta Project: Waterboy and the Mighty World was featured during Jack’s Freedom Songs Festival: Which Side Are You On, Friend? (Jack 1015). Most recently Justin was a contributing songwriter and performer in Meshell Ndegeocello’s “Can I Get a Witness?” (Harlem Stage 2016).

## List of Works

**1. *Sometime, that time, every time***

gold-plated brass, brass, hardware,  
installation dimensions variable, 2017

**2. *Another time, this time, one time***  
*(Aaliyah, Barbara, Brandy, Chaka,  
David, Erykah, Gil, Lionel, Loleatta,  
Mariah, Marvin, Stevie)*

looped two-channel installation, 16min  
8sec, 2017

**3. *Power listening (Power power power  
power)***

Dye-sublimation print and acrylic on  
synthetic velvet, 48in x 177.5in, 2017.

**4. *Power listening (Every Black Person  
In The World)***

dye-sublimation print and acrylic on  
synthetic velvet, 21in x 18in, 2017

**5. *The “New York Is Killing Me” Vignette***  
vinyl wall text, paint, 11.5ft x 12.5ft, 2017

**6. *Power listening (How would we ever  
get over / over)***

dye-sublimation print and acrylic on  
synthetic velvet, 54in x 106in, 2017

**7. *Another time, this time, one time***  
*(in the vicinity of Fulton Avenue and  
Saratoga Avenue)*

HD video, colour, sound, 2017

Steffani Jemison and Justin Hicks will  
perform together on Friday, September 22  
and Saturday, September 23 in the Luxe  
Hall.

