

being found guilty of sexual abuse—a very different case. As Joan Morgan writes, hip-hop feminism makes space for these contradictions inherent in hip-hop, the ways it can both speak to oppression and be itself oppressive, especially along gender lines.⁴ A critical, feminist approach to its history would celebrate these artists' contributions while also honestly acknowledging the harm they may have caused. To downplay these complexities is yet another way to marginalize women and LGBTQ+ practitioners in the genre.

If an instructor were to use episodes of this series to introduce students to topics related to the history and development of the genre, I would strongly recommend supplementing them with additional materials. Readings that I incorporate in my own hip-hop courses to decenter the otherwise male- (and hetero-) centric narratives include Kyra Gaunt's repositioning of Black girl culture within hip-hop, Tricia Rose's foundational anthropological study of rap, Shanté Smalls's historiography of queer hip-hop, and Cheryl L. Keyes's work on archetypes of women rappers.⁵ *Hip-Hop Evolution* might be a useful tool for introducing students to the genre, but when curating materials for teaching this subject, we must be mindful of not only content but also framing. We should avoid a process of canonization that tokenizes a few women, or worse, writes them out of the story altogether.

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Caroline Shaw and Sō Percussion. *Let the Soil Play its Simple Part* Released June 25, 2021. Nonesuch Records, SKU#075597915891, 2021. CD

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“People are more important than music.” In a 2021 interview with Rebecca Lentjes, Caroline Shaw offhandedly explained how the phrase, a piece of advice she often gives to young musicians, circumscribes her artistic philosophy: Music's coordination of social relationships—especially between performers and composers—should be of primary, rather than peripheral, concern.¹ In the context of Shaw's 2021 album *Let the Soil Play its Simple Part*, such a worldview offers its creative team the basis on which to challenge the presuppositions of a traditional composer-performer relationship, translating collaborators Sō Percussion (Eric Cha-Beach, Josh Quillen, Adam Sliwinski, and Jason Treuting) and engineer/producer Jonathan Low into co-composers. Historically, the substance of composer-performer collaborations has not always matched the rhetoric; musicologist Arnold Whittall has expressed skepticism about the veracity of shared authorship, writing that “collaboration in the sense of a kind of co-working, which begins to take on some aspects of sharing, influencing and even determining the outcome of the ‘real’ composer's creative process ... has been, unsurprisingly,

⁴Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

⁵Kyra Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes From Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Shanté Smalls, “Queer Hip Hop: A Brief Historiography,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Queerness*, eds. Fred Everett Maus and Sheila Whiteley, published online September 2018, doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199793525.013.103; and Cheryl L. Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

¹Rebecca Lentjes, “Meaning in the Parentheticals: An Interview with Caroline Shaw,” *Van Magazine*, July 1, 2021.

rare.”² Nevertheless, *Soil* demonstrates the creative potency of such a philosophy in action. Recorded in a whirlwind session over 3 days in late 2018, the album comprises a series of collaborative duets with each member of Sō Percussion, interspersed with tracks “very specifically composed by Caroline.”³ Given the circumstances of its production, it may be easy to imagine that *Soil* leans into the unstructured aspects of free collaboration; but Shaw, Sō Percussion, and Low have constructed the album such that the ideas that emerged during the recording process are presented with clarity and brevity. The product is both careful and intentional, using recording depth and spacing, textural density, resonance, and articulation to guide the listener.

Soil's opening track, “To the Sky,” is characteristic of the album’s soundworld: Timbral variation in perpetual motion and textures at the brink of overwhelming density. “To the Sky” originated as a piece by Treuting, workshopped into a propulsive track for full ensemble. It begins with keyboard mallets gently rolled and delicately bowed, knit together with Shaw’s wordless hums. These vocalizations are quickly replaced with text adapted from a passage from *The Sacred Harp*, an 1844 book of melodies notated in then-popular shape note format.⁴ Shaw carves gaps into the original text by Anne Steele. Each fragment of the phrase “So soon our transient comforts fly/and pleasure blooms to die” is spaced haltingly, further from the last. As Shaw’s declamations become more distant from one another, acoustic and digitally manipulated knocks and thuds interject between them, at first competing. What is initially a jarring incongruity between bowed metal and *secco* wood becomes recontextualized as the ensemble builds into a composite of short, interlocking fragments. A spectrum of resonance emerges between xylophone, vibraphone, and washy cymbals, which Shaw cleverly mirrors: Sharp rimshots and a subtle, subdued tail of un-pedaled vibraphone are mediated by Shaw’s stressed vowels trailing quickly but gracefully to *niente*. “To the Sky,” along with plentifully multi-tracked percussion in “The Flood is Following Me” and a cover of ABBA’s “Lay All Your Love on Me,” shifts a listener’s focus on timbre into a meditation on resonance.

Where Shaw’s recorded voice in “To the Sky” and “Other Song” maintains a sense of fidelity to her live sound, the tracks “Cast the Bells in the Sand” and “Long Ago We Counted” use a Helicon VoiceLive vocoder to put Shaw’s “real” voice into dialogue with imagined, altered doubles.⁵ The vocoder projects Shaw’s voice into a noticeably manipulated choir of copies; such cyber-doppelgangers are used to great effect in precisely shading the size and shape of the mix. “Cast the Bells in the Sand” closes by stacking several layers of independently choired vocal lines. Each line meanders, quasi-contrapuntally, through the others, losing energy until they diffuse into breathy wisps. “Long Ago We Counted,” on the other hand, uses Shaw’s voice in ever-expanding choirs to make the mix sound dramatically vertical, so spacious that even Treuting’s loud, frenetic drum set climax has room to grow. Low’s production experience alongside artists from Bryce and Aaron Dessner to The National and Taylor Swift offers him a wide swath of pop and new music sound ideals upon which Shaw and Sō Percussion can build. Low’s canny ability to balance foreground and background and his careful preservation of unique timbres gives the performers the luxury of choice. Whether they decide to draw connections to, or differentiate from, one another, the final mix crafts continuity out of a parade of innumerable instruments, texts, and voices.

Each of *Soil*'s personnel demonstrates sensitivity and virtuosity, and not only in the context of performance. For example, Treuting and Quillen wrote lyrics, while all six collaborators contributed themes, instruments, and strategies for organization. Although the album is sold without liner notes, Nonesuch’s “journal” page for the album, along with notes written for Apple Music and an

²Arnold Whittall, “Composer-Performer Collaborations in the Long Twentieth Century,” in *Distributed Creativity: Collaboration and Improvisation in Contemporary Music*, eds. Eric F. Clarke and Mark Doffman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 24.

³Caroline Shaw and Sō Percussion’s ‘Let the Soil Play Its Simple Part,’ Out Now on Nonesuch,” *Nonesuch* (accessed May 26, 2022), <https://www.nonesuch.com/journal/caroline-shaw-so-percussion-let-soil-play-its-simple-part-out-now-nonesuch-2021-06-25>.

⁴For more on the sacred harp and shape note singing, see Kiri Miller, *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

⁵“Shaw: Let the Soil Play its Simple Part,” Liner Notes for *Let the Soil Play its Simple Part*, by Caroline Shaw, Sō Percussion, and Jonathan Low (Nonesuch, 2021).

interview with NPR, offers a substantive paper trail explaining the ideas underpinning their work.⁶ *Soil's* source materials are vast: Quotations (and streams of consciousness) from James Joyce, the poetry of Anne Carson, babies babbling, and medieval organum are all cited as texts and influences. The absence of a definitive written source designed to help the listener identify and categorize the album's sounds seems an intentional, perhaps even instructive, omission. Without notes, information must be gleaned from listening, perhaps repeatedly, over time. *Soil's* listeners will find it nearly impossible to pull words or phrases that accurately categorize the sounds without direct reference to the musical content.

Although Shaw prefers to describe herself as a “musician,” post-Pulitzer press has often made the mistake of conflating the prize credential with an identity. Shaw's subsequent choice *not* to define herself in *Soil* demonstrates a shift in how she receives the “composer” label. Although the term's legibility has facilitated some visibility for Shaw's “composer” craft—she has produced remixes with Ye and has been chosen as “composer-in-residence” for several ensembles—Shaw's strategy of self-representation in *Soil* affirms her claim to musical skills and perspectives beyond the composerly concern for notation or form. Nevertheless this strategy of self-representation affirms Shaw's claim to musical skills and perspectives beyond the composerly concern for notation or form. *Soil*, here, proves a case in point. Shaw still composes, but her long-standing, close relationship with her Sō Percussion collaborators implies that *Soil* is not necessarily amenable to replication by any ensemble, with any interpretation. Shaw also still performs, but the painstaking detail of *Soil's* production required many takes to conceptualize, execute, and reorganize. As new music organizations such as the American Composers Forum rebrand commissioning initiatives in order to downplay or even avoid the use of the word “composer,” perhaps *Soil* can be a lesson that some musicians' apprehension about terms like “composers” and “compositions” should be reflected in musicological commentary.⁷ Not only do the terms invoke a personal identity that is gendered and racialized, they also suggest a methodology that privileges fixity and reproducibility. Instead, observes Sō Percussion's Cha-Beach, *Soil* “captures lightning in a bottle,” capitalizing on the ensemble's collective ingenuity with a role-agnostic blueprint for collaborative creation.

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⁶Elena Saavedra Buckley, “Caroline Shaw is Not Here to Save Classical Music,” *NPR*, July 6, 2021.

⁷The American Composers Forum renamed one of its annual call for scores programs “Minnesota Music Creator Awards,” referring to applicants and winners as music creators rather than composers in order to reflect their genre- and practice-agnostic preferences. The program was formerly titled “Minnesota Emerging Composer Awards.” See “Minnesota Music Creator Awards,” *American Composers Forum* (accessed May 26, 2022) <https://composersforum.org/programs/minnesotamusiccreatorawards/>.