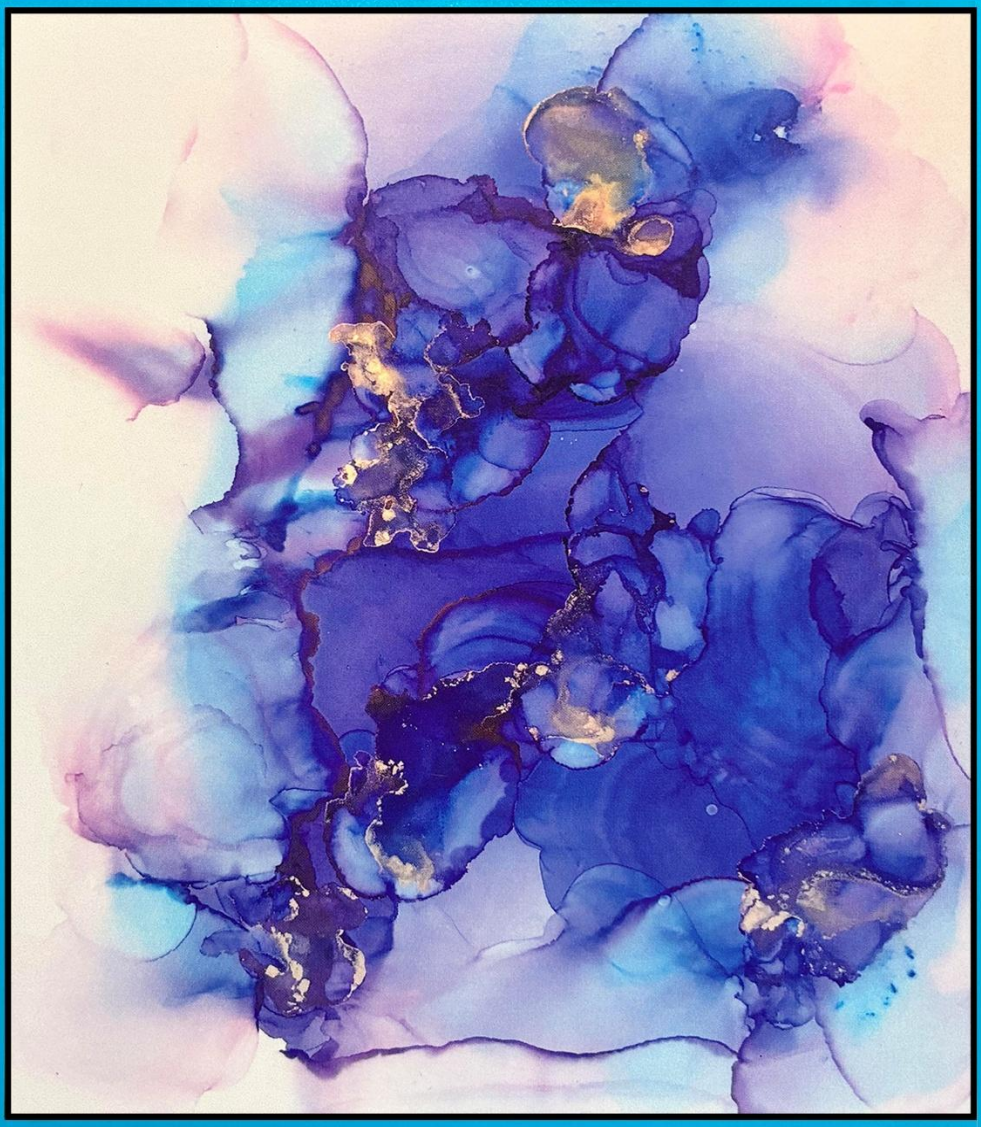
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Awakening the Root Chakra

An Interview with Angela Carole Brown

Conducted by Sascha Feinstein

Angela Carole Brown is an artist working in a variety of media. Her books include the jazz-saturated novel *Trading Fours* (recipient of the North Street Book Prize for literary fiction) and *The Assassination of Gabriel Champion*; the novelette *The Night, the City, and Miss Thing*; two poetry collections, *Bones* and *Viscera*; the memoir *The Kidney Journals: Memoirs of a Desperate Lifesaver*; and the 100-word story collection *Aleatory on the Radio*. Currently in Kansas City, she was on the L.A. music scene for over three decades as a singer, songwriter, and recording artist; she has also released a number of jazz and folk CDs. As a visual artist, she has most recently been focusing on Alcohol Ink on Yupo. She was one of the featured women interviewed in the documentary *The Goddess Project* and, in 2013, created the blog *Bindi Girl Chronicles*. <www.AngelaCaroleBrown.com>

The following excerpts have been reprinted with permission. The interview itself took place via the internet on March 7, 2021.

Trading Fours [excerpt]

Angela Carole Brown

The crowd goes nuts, and Lazarus socks the audience's chest with a tune of Chloe's that Julian arranged and turned from a tepid little bossa nova into a poly-rhythmic, time-signature-change-every-other-measure, Brecker-esque opus that Chloe has to count furiously in her head just to sing the freaking thing correctly, even though it's her tune . . .

Chloe holds on tight, sings her ass off, hitting every mark and wows the crowd, even if she isn't wowing herself. But it isn't only counting that's burdening Chloe's head. It's also how the announcer introduced them. She didn't even merit her name being in the introduction, and she's the one Seth called for this, not Julian. Like everything else, Julian takes over and makes it his. This is *her* up here singing, *her* song, which is about to come out on *her* album, but the crowd has been introduced to Julian Troupe and Lazarus.

She also thinks about Hayes. See, this is what happens when she can't disappear into a song. A whole other grocery list of concerns floods her thoughts, instead. Why didn't she remember to buy a bouquet of flowers so that she could make a grand gesture of handing them to Hayes when she was done with her set? Something for the whole world to see her do, a gesture always thought of by women, a tradition that does lift them up from the pragmatic natures of men. Yet she didn't think to do it.

Trading Fours [excerpt]

Angela Carole Brown

"Where are we going?" Hayes asks, more passive than he's been all day. He floats in and out of the twilight sleep, and in between he attempts pages from *Beneath the Underdog*, Charles Mingus's near-biblical autobiography, which Hayes has read and re-read probably thirty times.

"*Oh damn it all blues . . .*" he reads out loud to Seth, savoring every bit of cracked poetry, "*. . . Screwed to the melting frozen walk of dared-to-embrace stone, concrete hard, imagined soft . . .*"

He puts the book down.

"You know what that means?"

"Uh . . . I suppose it could mean a lot o' things."

"Coward! Be bold! Seize the day! Have an opinion, goddamn it! It means that everything is a disillusion. We think this artistic pursuit of ours is somehow going to register in the history books as profound, as culture-shifting, and that we'll be viewed as these enlightened, sentient beings. These special people on earth. These deliverers. But not only is the reality NOT that romantic, it is, most essentially, a dogged trek down a dead-end, fly-ridden road. And there is where the real heartbreak lies. The true blues."

"How do you know that's what Mingus meant?"

"I don't give a good goddamn if that's what he meant. It's what I got."

"After the Thousandth Time Singing Lush Life" from *Aleatory on the Radio*

Angela Carole Brown

This couple isn't married. He has a wife at home. That guy's getting dumped. Check out her pity face. Even I know she's about to lower the boom. This couple in the corner? You can practically see the pheromones leaping off the red leather booth, skank dust. Strayhorn's "Lush Life" is heartbreak and anesthesia. I tend to open a vein when singing her, but tonight I just want the wound to stay sealed, so I let the audience distract me. Look at that girl too young to be in here, trying to nurse her own wounds. All these come-what-may faces.

"Jazz" from *Aleatory on the Radio*

Angela Carole Brown

Once upon a time there was a girl. Otherly in all things. A musician by the compulsion in her gut to assert a unique improvisational voice, and in doing so, unflinchingly state who she was: A woman who was never quite feminine enough. An African-American who was never quite Black enough. An artist who was never quite crafty enough. As inclined as she was to march to her own be-bopping drummer, she also spent an unseemly amount of her life deflecting the throng of pundits that threatened her right to improvise. When all she needed to do, truly… was blow.



Sascha Feinstein: You grew up in Compton in the '60s and '70s, and you are an artist through and through. What kind of artistic environment did you have in your household growing up?

Angela Carole Brown: My dad was an artist. My mother was not remotely that; she worked in local politics and civic affairs. At one point, she was the City Manager of the city of Compton. She was the grants director for the city of Santa Monica; she also was the CEO of the Skid Row Development Corporation, whose purpose was to revitalize the downtown Los Angeles area. So I had an artist in one parent, and a social-outreach person in the other parent, but we always had art in the home. I have a brother and sister that I grew up with, and we all took piano lessons. We all were made to be in the church choir. My mother took us to museums and had art books in the house. She made us read, very, very early on, and my sister and I developed a great love of books. It was an artful home.

Then, when I was about thirteen or fourteen, we moved from Compton to the Los Angeles area so my mother could take the job in Santa Monica. So my early education was in Compton, and then I graduated from Santa Monica High School with future movie stars! [Laughs.] I did. I graduated with Sean Penn, among others.

Feinstein: At the time of your move, if I'm remembering correctly, the music you enjoyed ranged from the Jackson 5 to Jethro Tull. [Brown laughs.] When did jazz take over?

Brown: I would say it started when I was a teenager. My sister, who's nine years older, was very into jazz (and is not a musician). She was listening to Coltrane, and Herbie Hancock, and many others. I was in the high-school dance group, and one day, when I was trying to choreograph a solo piece, I asked my sister what [music] she would recommend, and she said, "I'm gonna hip you to some Pharoah Sanders."

Feinstein: Whoa!

Brown: Yeah. [Both laugh.] She said, "I think that you might respond to him because I know your penchant for something abstract." She made me listen to the album *Thembi*, and I was pretty mind-blown. I was around sixteen, and it took me a while to learn that the stuff that seemed 100% abstract really *wasn't* 100% abstract. There is a whole modal language that I later learned when I became a musician: "Oh, *this* is what was really happening." That's when my ear became more understanding. But even before I understood that, I thought, "I don't know what this is, but it's hitting me in a really deep way." I was hooked after that.

Feinstein: And yet your first deep immersion into the arts wasn't directly singing or dancing, it was acting.

Brown: Yes. I graduated from the American Academy of Dramatic Arts [Pasadena campus], and theater was all I wanted to do. Right out of school, I did two or three years of regional theater, but I never got an agent for television, never did the routine things one does when one's trying to break out. I cannot explain to you why. I gave it a half-assed effort. [Laughs.] I wanted to be on television but, honestly, I think it was just the youthful desire for fame. (I'm also not a natural-born hustler, so there was that.) I would see my friends moving up, getting commercials and parts on television, and I'd be jealous—but then I'd say to myself, "You didn't hustle it the way they did."

And then I became a core member of a children's theater company called Synthaxis, out of North Hollywood. We were all around the same age and became very good friends, and most of the members from that time are still dearly in my life today. And there were some singers and musicians in the company, so my friend Greg Stanton said, "Let's start a band!" It literally started with that cliché. We started a band. We did a lot of the gay clubs in West Hollywood. We got tons of bookings, a lot of cabarets. We just had a blast, and it budded from there.

I call the club The Rose Tattoo my "birth home" as a musician. At the time, it was a very famous gay cabaret. I played there once or twice with the band I'd been in, but then I started to meet other musicians there, and they

were jazzers. That began my slow transition from the pop we were doing to learning standards and being hipped to the great American songbook.

Feinstein: You spent your whole life in the L.A. area, and then, just this past June, you moved to Kansas City (probably the roughest time to do that). Did you move to K.C. for the music scene?

Brown: I did. But here's how it began:

I have lived in L.A. my entire life, and I always dreamed of living someplace else. I can't say I have this particularly all-enduring love for L.A., and I always thought I would live in Europe. But a very good friend of mine—who's the conductor of the Orchestre Surreal, an outfit I've been a part of for the last twenty-five years—started buying property, including this beautiful Victorian mansion in the historic district of Kansas City with the idea of turning it into an Airbnb. He wanted to use it as well for artistic events: writer salons, or musician salons. And about six months before we had any idea COVID was coming, he came to me and said, "Hey, I know you've been really frustrated the last few years with L.A., from a music standpoint." (My gigs were just dwindling down to nothing.) "So I have a proposition for you. K.C. is a *great* music town. It does not have the same ageist prejudices that L.A. has. I need someone to manage my house, and the whole third floor has been renovated into its own apartment. You can live there if you want and manage the Airbnb."

I wanted to say "YES!" instantly, but I did "the responsible thing" of thinking it through [laughs]. I asked for two weeks—this was a *big* decision—but I don't think it took that long at all because, other than my family and friends, L.A. wasn't offering me anything at all. So I said, "Yes!" And then, of course, COVID came and I wondered if I would even be able to make the move, but ultimately the answer was, "You can't stop living because this thing has arrived. You'll just have to find a way to live *with* it."

I've now been here nine months, and the city hasn't opened up for gigs yet. I *have* met musicians, and we've done socially distanced jam sessions, and that's been lovely: getting to know people and having people get to know me. It's just a matter of time for the rest. And, in the meantime, I live

in a *fabulous* house!



Feinstein: For over twenty years, you were a singer with a jazz trio performing at a swanky hotel in Beverly Hills. How much of that experience fed into the making of your novel *Trading Fours*?

Brown: A little bit. *Trading Fours* is really about casual musicians, and my Four Seasons gig wouldn't be qualified as a casual, but it was definitely a significant part of the musical scene of Los Angeles and the musicians who do casuals, and also was easily the longest-running steady lounge gig in town. I have my dear friend Dana Bronson to thank for that nearly twenty-five-year experience.

Feinstein: And, for those who don't know, could you briefly explain what "casual" means in this context?

Brown: A private party—usually contracted by an events company, and there are *several* of those in Los Angeles. As a musician, you can hook up with one or more. They call you up and say, "Here's this gig." Sometimes you know the musicians you're playing with; sometimes you don't. But because there is a system of how casuals work, there's a roster of, say, 200 songs that are traditionally done. So you're usually walking into a gig, whether you know the musicians or not, where everyone knows the same tunes. You call your key, and you go. There's a fun spontaneity in that, but, you know, there have also been plenty of train wrecks on the stage! [Laughs.]

Feinstein: And you must have done plenty of casuals in your time.

Brown: I did mostly casuals. The gig at the Four Seasons in Beverly Hills, which I had with pretty much the same trio for between twenty and twenty-five years, was an extraordinary experience and definitely a major part of my growth as a musician. As I said, it played a more peripheral role of the casuals

that I was portraying in *Trading Fours*, but every one of those musicians who I worked with at the Four Seasons did casuals—and we also sometimes did them together.

Feinstein: I ask because, in terms of this kind of jazz musician, and casuals in general, no novel portrays them better than *Trading Fours*.

Brown: Oh, thank you!

Feinstein: You're just so *inside* the music—no matter which character you're portraying (because, of course, they're connected, but they come to each scene in *very* different ways).

Brown: Right.

Feinstein: Can you talk about the brilliant structure of this novel?

Brown: I wanted to write a book about musicians for the longest time because it was my world. I'd written novels before then, but this was the first one I actually published. And I wanted to write this particular book because what's out there that the layman knows are stories about very famous musicians—rock stars, jazz stars—or they know about the busker on the street. And there is a *world* of music experience between those two which has never really been portrayed in any art form that I can find. Maybe the closest in movies would be *The Fabulous Baker Boys* (and, in a sillier, comic sense, *The Wedding Singer*). [Feinstein chuckles.] But, really, there was no comprehensive story of what that world really is. Of course, I only know the L.A. version of it.

The title, *Trading Fours*, immediately popped into my head. I thought, "That's what I want to do: I want to tell four stories, not one at a time but in-and-out and in-and-out, and they will connect in the end." That's as much as I knew before I started writing it. How they connected at the end only came as I started to flesh out characters.

The one thing that I really *didn't* want to do was the clichéd thing of having these four musicians all come together at the end, and they're all

gonna play music together! It's the obvious choice, and I didn't want to do that; I wanted something that was more complex and that spoke more to how life really does unfold. And so, at the end of the book, some of these characters won, and some lost, let's just say.

Feinstein: So, did you free write in the voice of each character and see what emerged?

Brown: Yes. All of the characters, of course, were amalgams of the many, many musicians I knew, but I really wanted to come from distinct perspectives. In the casual world, you've got the hard-core jazzers who you know should only be put on jazz gigs and not pop or R & B gigs. (Oops! That happens.) You've got the rock guitar player who's got a great voice but who should *never* be put on a "jazzual"! I wanted to create four very distinct personalities, musically as well, that do exist in the casual world but who can still work together. There's a magic to that, as well.

When I first decided to write the book, I started talking about it a lot on gigs: "I'm writin' a book about *us*, you guys!" But I would always add, "It's *fiction*." And, to this day, I laugh at how, no matter how many times I'd say, "It's fiction," musicians would say, "Well, if I tell you stories, you've gotta change my name, man! I can't be known!" [Both laugh.] I couldn't, for the life of me, get some to understand I wasn't writing an exposé!"

Feinstein: That's so great—and not at all surprising, right?

Brown: Absolutely.

Feinstein: You have two epigraphs in *Trading Fours*. One is from Charles Mingus' whacky, surreal, ingenious autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog* [1971], and it comes up again in a really important way about three-quarters into the novel. Why that book? What did you think of that autobiography?

Brown: Well, it changed me. I read it many, many years ago, and I remember the first thought out of my head was, "He's as great a writer as he is a

musician. Holy shit." Because a lot of times you can tell when an "autobiography" has been written by a ghost writer. You can tell. But this, after knowing his music, seemed to scream to me, "This is him." There's a half-cockedness to it that I love; he is at once absolutely self-deprecating *and* very self-important. I thought, "Well, that's just a beautiful blend. That's fascinating." And he's a poet. The turns of phrase. I go, "Wow . . . That's not your standard, hearing-the-info biography." It blew my mind.

And may I also just give a little shout-out to my friend trumpet player Roy Wiegand, who provided the other epigraph: "In a world of casuals, no one can hear you scream." Some of the most surreal and ridiculous things can and have happened on casuals, some of which appear in the novel. And right in the middle of writing the book, I was on a casual one evening with Roy, and some craziness ensued between a bridezilla and somebody, I can't even remember the incident. But what I never forgot was Roy's reaction. It was that line, the epigraph. Everyone in the band fell out in laughter, and I begged him to let me use that in the book. Because it just says so much about the absurd life casual musicians can often live.

Feinstein: Have there been other jazz-related books—any genre—that have moved you? Maybe something by Ntozake Shange?

Brown: Oh, she's an *amazing* poet. The work's *very* musical. The fact that she invents her own language, her own spelling . . . There's something so primal about it and at the same time very pointed and studied. "Here's what I'm tryin' to do—and I'm not tryin' to do it like you." That, to me, is the soul of jazz.

◥

Feinstein: In *Trading Fours*, you write, "Chloe connects to a song the way an actor connects to a character he is hired to play." How much of *you* is in her character?

Brown: Me. Yeah. [Laughs.] That's me. I don't have the greatest chops in the

world, from a technical standpoint. I couldn't do most of the repertoires from the Broadway genre. I don't have a particularly wide range. I have my limitations, and I recognized that very early on. But I thought, "Well, I have a degree in theater. I have an understanding about telling a story and telling it from a very intimate standpoint, stepping into the character of a song. Why not cultivate that as your strength?" That became a conscious decision: Make sure you know what the hell you're singing about and are feeling it on some visceral level.

A really dear friend of mine, Karla Ross, loves to tell this story, and I think it's a great one: When she was a young woman, she was taking voice lessons from a teacher, and she brought to him—it's a Nancy Wilson song . . .

Feinstein: "Guess Who I Saw Today"?

Brown: Thank you. She brought that to him, and he said something to the effect of, "Well, get about twenty years on yourself, have your heart broken and stomped on, and then come back, bring me that song, and you'll be ready to sing it." [Both laugh.] Pick songs that you can feel viscerally connected to. That's where you can find your strength in delivery, whether you have this awesome instrument or not. This is why some of my favorite singers wouldn't make it on *American Idol*. Forget it. But they're some of the most powerful singers I've ever heard.

Feinstein: I want to ask you about the song that Chloe writes [in *Trading Fours*], especially the line, "One of these days I'll learn the difference between a widow and a bride."

Brown: I didn't have an actual song in my head that was her song, but I wanted to give it a title that would elicit real curiosity. At the time, I had just seen the movie (and had previously read the book) *Cold Mountain*. There's a song in there that Allison Krause sings, "The Scarlet Tide," by Elvis Costello. Soft, beautiful, very folky, prairie kind of song with the line, "And separates the widow from the bride," and for whatever reason, that stuck in my gut. I thought, "I'll do a twist on that," because I wanted the reaction, "What

the heck is that about?!"

Feinstein: Different character in the novel: Tristan. He says, emphatically, "The reward for a thing well done is to have done it."Why do you think that's so difficult for so many to accept?

Brown: I think a lot of us define success in a certain way, and that gets in the way. We all have dreamed of large stages and crazy-sized audiences. We're also artists for art's sake—but that [desire for recognition] gets in the way. And a lot of times we don't let it get out of our way, so we start to define our own success by that barometer.

Cognitively, I realize this trap. But I'm this human animal, you know? Validation. A bit of, "Hey, I'm over here, tryin' to make something!" I think that's part of us as artists.

Feinstein: I wanted to ask because it seems to me that this is at the center of *Trading Fours*: How does one keep going when [as happens to the character Nick Brandt, a superb pianist] an audience member may interrupt your profound performance to ask for more bread.

Brown: Right.

Feinstein: Tristan's son, Graham, is a secondary but interesting character: a seventeen-year-old white rapper who appropriates black dialect (and, one could easily argue, black culture). I know he's there partly to contrast rap with jazz, but were you also interested in his character because of cross-cultural reasons?

Brown: Well, I probably don't share a lot of the views about cultural appropriation with a lot of people. I tend to want to say, "As an artist, you have the right to tap whatever culture moves you, and to *enter* it." You should be a welcomed guest at the table. But I know a lot of people would disagree with me. I don't think I have the most popular position on that but it's what I believe.

Graham exists in the book to challenge his dad, Tristan. I know a lot of musicians who have young kids coming up and getting into the business. There's the [parental] dynamic of, "I really want them to know *music*, and what they're learning, and what they're wanting, is fame." I wanted to depict that.

Feinstein: And you do—more than anything else.

Another issue that comes through boldly has to do with how many fathers mess up their sons. Do you think one can talk about mother/daughter relationships in the same way?

Brown: Yes. I absolutely do. I don't [discuss the issue] in this book, but—it's interesting you should bring this up—I've written a memoir that has yet to be published about my mother and me. It examines the relationship of mothers and daughters as a similar dynamic. They're different, of course, but the similarities are what I have wanted to explore and express.

Feinstein: It's fairly mythic: You want your parents' approval, and I suppose it's particularly wonderful if the parent of the same gender approves of what you're doing with your life.

Let's move to a more recent book, *Aleatory on the Radio*. You call these series of paragraphs "100-word stories." I don't know if I'll ever be able to distinguish between flash fiction and prose poetry.

Brown: I discovered this genre of flash fiction almost by accident. Amazing stories! And I wanted to try it. And as I got into this collection, I realized that many of them were straight-out fiction narratives, and many of them were much more poetic. I felt I had the freedom to do it either way.

I have tried unsuccessfully for years to write traditional short stories—ten pages long, say. I could do long form, but I couldn't seem to do the short form. (I always thought, "I can't seem to wrap this up fast enough. It's becoming a novel!") And it wasn't until I found the *ridiculously* short form that a whole world opened up. I thought, "There's a key right there." A nugget can tell a whole story.

Also, subject matter: You want a really kind of weighty subject matter when you commit to a novel, but in flash fiction, I wasn't as burdened by that. I found, suddenly, everywhere I looked: "Ah! That's a 100-word story. *That*'s a 100-word story." It opened up a whole world. And as a result, there are little lightweight trifles in the collection, and there also *are* some weightier expressions. It really runs the whole spectrum.

Feinstein: The collection begins with a piece from the point of view of a singer who's thinking about everything except the song. It's a move you've made elsewhere in your writing. Was this an effort to point out the dangers of not committing to a performance, or are you simply trying to portray the reality of a singer in this particular situation?

Brown: Just that: Sometimes you feel very connected and the world can be flying right by you and you're in your song. And there are other nights when—[laughs]—you're just not, but you're still performing. You're still doing the job, but your mind might be a thousand miles away. Those are just realities. You always *want* to be connected, of course, but sometimes I find the more interesting stories are with the singer who's struggling that night with staying focused.

Feinstein: How does a singer, ideally, fully fall into a song?

Brown: Don't know that I know the answer to that. All I can say is, first, make sure you understand what you're singing about and try to make some personal connection to it. Ultimately, be more concerned about the expression than the chops. I find when I am feeling most unconfident about my voice as an instrument, I try too hard, and that's when I sing the worst. That's where my mind is. The lyrics are going by, and I'm not remotely plugged into them. But when I'm not terribly concerned about what my voice is sounding like, and I'm just inside the expression, and my heart or veins are open, that's often when I think, "Wow—I did a *job* on that song." It's an interesting paradox because the more we want to give a powerful performance, the more we can over-think it. That's when things can get in the way.

Feinstein: A lot of this goes back to the anecdote you shared by your friend Karla Ross about living a life so you can believe what you're delivering. In that respect, who are some of the singers who really do it for you?

Brown: Cassandra Wilson. Joni Mitchell—who is my heart. Billie Holiday. Johnny Hartman. Nina Simone. Tom Waits. No one calls him a "great voice" but he's a *great* vocalist because he's telling a story he knows about. Leonard Cohen. And of the more traditional jazz artists, I love Betty Carter. Oh yes! Those kinds of singers do it for me.

Feinstein: Your piece ["Frames" from *Aleatory on the Radio*], where the character's digging Coltrane on a blackened highway, made me wonder if the majority of people these days listen most closely to music while in their cars.

Brown: I think that's absolutely so. I think that's where people will listen to music when they can *really* listen to their music. If they're playing it at home, they're usually multitasking: having a dinner party, cooking their meal, whatever. There's nothing wrong with that, but when you're listening in your car, you're giving it your 100%—and therefore you're getting that back.

Feinstein: You've written that jazz "is the assertion of an identity." Regarding the piece "Jazz" in *Aleatory on the Radio*: How much of that is *your* identity?

Brown: It's exactly me. It's me. I've always felt a little bit outside of any club, living on the fringes, not really doing things in the way that would be expected of me as a woman, as a black person, as an artist. In all three of those areas, I've always felt that I've been on the fringes. It's just how I naturally operate, and I've often been challenged about it—in all three of those areas. So that story is about me trying to encourage and celebrate marching to my own drummer.

Feinstein: Speaking of drummers, although more literally: You and I have always been floored by Max Roach improvising a drum solo behind Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. [Brown sighs.] King's speech is

perfect, of course, and yet Max Roach adds something *else* to the incredible moment.

Brown: I don't know if I can put it into words, but the first word that comes to mind is *primal*. His drumming seems to awaken the root chakra of the "I Have a Dream" speech. Primal, instinctive, survival instinct: That's what the root chakra is about, and that's how I feel when I hear that piece.

Feinstein: One last thing: More than once, you've referred to that moment in childhood when you found a dead blue jay and brought it home so it could be preserved in the freezer. [Brown laughs.] You always mention this as a way of saying that you were different, even an oddity. But you know what, Angela? I'm wondering if this wasn't really an early embodiment of being an artist, of wanting to preserve beauty.

Brown: Oh . . . I've never had it framed that way. I *love* that. I've always told that story because I cherish my nerdiness and my oddballness. I do. But I love that. Thank you.

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A Note on the Cover Art

Angela Carole Brown

As a visual artist, where I am only on the fringes of dabbling, I have played around in a range of media—paint, glass mosaics, handcrafted dolls, video and digital art—but for the last two years, my focus has been Alcohol Ink on Yupo.

When I was living in Los Angeles, I went to an exhibit by Alcohol Ink artist Bonny Butler that turned my world upside down. Bonny is extraordinary. I started following her on social media, and went to see her do a demonstration because I really wanted to try this process myself. I took copious notes, then took several months to amass the needed materials, and eventually started painting.

I love every style of painting, but what really calls out to me is abstract expressionism. Some of my favorite artists are Basquiat and De Kooning and Paul Klee. Bonny's works are largely landscapes and florals, but with Alcohol Ink there's a certain amount of non-control, so even her figurative works have a semi-abstract quality to them. For me, I wanted to be fully abstract.

Alcohol Inks are highly pigmented alcohol-based inks that are further awakened with more isopropyl—literally, just rubbing alcohol—and the craft is considered a brushless art form. You blow it around. You can use a straw or compressed air; you can use a hair dryer or an airbrush machine. Bottom line, the ink goes where it goes. The tiny measure of control I have to take the inks in a certain direction, coupled with them largely exercising their own agency, makes for a complicated relationship, to say the least. Ultimately, it's about surrender. And I find a freedom in that. I like accidents.

Literally just a few months after beginning to dip my toe in this form, I was hired to participate in a chalk art festival, where ground murals were being created right in front of the public. I was the only Alcohol Ink artist there. All I was hired to do was sit at a table and paint,

as people would walk past, stop, look, ask questions. I was so new at this that I felt a bit the fraud, but I was having a blast. And I probably made three or four of them in something like five hours. *Northern Lights* was one of those. There was a little girl with her mom who stayed glued to my table, asking a hundred questions about it, and we simply chatted the entire time I created this piece, which is, so far, my favorite one that I've yet created . . . possibly because of the beautiful energy of this curious young girl that infused the process and the moment?