

Following Geri's Lead

Farah Jasmine Griffin

Abstract: Drawn from a keynote delivered for Timeless Portraits and Dreams: A Festival in Honor of Geri Allen (Harvard University, February 16–17, 2018), this personal essay shares observations about Allen's intellectual and artistic leadership in diverse roles including bandleader, teacher, curator, and artistic visionary. In addition to discussions of Allen's music and recordings, this essay also focuses on her collaboration with the author and actor/director S. Epatha Merkerson, which resulted in two musical theater projects, Great Jazz Women of the Apollo (2013) and A Conversation with Mary Lou (2014).

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I followed Geri Allen's career for almost twenty years before I met her, going to hear her in clubs, festivals, and concert halls; purchasing records and then CDs; and reading any interview I could find. Surprisingly, our first meeting as friends, colleagues, and collaborators happened on the campuses of some of our nation's greatest institutions of higher learning. Geri was both an artistic and intellectual leader whose life-long project was to ensure the ongoing relevance of the music to which she'd devoted herself. She especially wanted it to be relevant to African American audiences. This informed her reading, her performance, and her pedagogical practices.

Geri's relationship to institutions of higher learning was not only as a performer, but also as a teacher, administrator, and someone deeply engaged with ideas. She was a voracious reader who kept up with new developments in the field of jazz studies and served on the faculties of the University of Michigan and the University of Pittsburgh. Our mutual friend the historian Robin Kelley and I were immediately struck by her brilliance and depth of knowledge when she visited the jazz study group at Columbia University. She would go on to collaborate

with that group for the next decade. However, it was an encounter with her at Emory University in March 2005 that would profoundly influence the direction of my own work. Musician, composer, and minister Dwight Andrews had organized a three-day series of panels and concerts celebrating the life and music of composer and music educator William Dawson. The conference “explored the role of race and ethnicity in the creation of music and other art forms, the intersection between concert and vernacular traditions; the cross-fertilization of artistic genres; and the impact of new modes of music creation and dissemination.”¹ In many ways, this description fits the multidimensional nature of Geri's work. Always interested in the role of race and ethnicity, she became even more interested in gender. She worked closely with artists across form and genre, continued to create new music, and sought new modes of dissemination. On the second day of the Dawson conference, before my presentation, I walked into the hall and saw Geri sitting there by herself. I had a brief fan girl moment: I didn't want to disturb her, but I did want to say hello. As I walked tentatively to her, she looked up, smiled, and said, “Oh my goodness, you're the lady who wrote that book,” and reached into her bag and pulled out my book on Billie Holiday. We hugged each other; I sat down, and there began one of the most important friendships and collaborations of my life. It was a transformative moment. I had been a bit of an interloper into the field of music with that book. I had not been trained as a musicologist or ethnomusicologist; I was not a musician, though I read and listened widely. Encouraged by my beloved community in the jazz study group at Columbia University, I took a chance and started writing. Although I hoped my colleagues in the academy would read the book, my ideal readers were lovers of the music

both within and outside the profession. I dedicated *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery* to my parents and to “black artists everywhere.”² And here was one of the most important artists, an ideal reader, affirming it and me. Recently, musicologist Guthrie Ramsey reminded me of the complicated reception of the book and I told him quite honestly that I don't recall being aware of that. I explained that once Geri responded in the way she did and because of the long conversations with her that followed, I felt that the work had been received in the way that I wanted it to, and that I wanted it to be part of a larger body of writing, some but not all of which would be academic. Geri helped make that possible, not only through literal opportunities, but also because she, along with Robin, Guthrie, and musician Salim Washington became my major interlocutors. I realize now that in many ways, I was following Geri's lead. For an all-too-brief moment in time, we accompanied each other as we attempted to experience a deeper intellectual, political, aesthetic, and spiritual relationship to and through the music we loved. In the pages that follow, I will not argue that Geri Allen was a genius. I take that for granted. She was. Instead, I hope to share the multitude of ways that genius manifested itself, especially in her quiet, steady leadership.

“Following Geri's Lead” takes on multiple meanings:

First, if we follow the shape and arc of her career, what does it tell us about the history and cultures of jazz? How will it reshape the histories we write? Here I mean not only what we write about women and jazz, but also about the broad and deep narratives we write about the music itself and her place in it.

Second, she is both collaborator and leader in many capacities. As a bandleader, she was an innovator and a visionary who created opportunities for others

through her inclusive and broad outlook. As a leader in the field of jazz education, she had distinct ideas about jazz pedagogy, and with the assistance of her brother Mount, she pioneered the use of technology in presenting the music and making possible performance collaborations not bound by shared location. For instance, as part of our tribute to Mary Lou Williams in March 2013, Geri helped to organize a cyber symposium with Internet2 technology to engage musicians and scholars in five venues simultaneously.

Finally, we might think about what it means to follow her lead as ancestor guide, inspiration, and example.

What follows is a set of deeply personal, preliminary thoughts on Geri as leader and on the implications of her life's work for our study, playing, and understanding of the music.

Geri's 2006 Telarc release *Timeless Portraits & Dreams* opens with the spiritual "Oh Freedom," melding almost seamlessly into the Antoine Roney original "Melchizedek," which includes ample quotation of Geri's own "Angels." This purposeful opening with "Oh Freedom" serves as an invocation: "the act or process of petitioning for help or support"; specifically, "a prayer of entreaty." A lesser-known definition of invocation is "a formula for conjuring," an incantation.³ Geri's choice to open with "Oh Freedom" is a gesture toward all of these meanings. It is indeed an invocation, a recognition, and an invitation to the ancestors and the Holy Spirit to guide and bless the endeavor, but also a way of honoring and walking in the black freedom struggle:

Oh freedom, Oh freedom, Oh freedom
over me,

And before I'd be a slave I'd be buried in my
grave,

And go on home to my Lord and be free.⁴

Geri includes the lyrics in the liner notes. This is no "by and by in the after life" song. It is a song of resistance sung by generations of freedom fighters. With this opening, she is making an offering to the tradition and a promise to the future. The spiritual flows into "Melchizedek," which Geri says is written for the King of Peace. But the name means the "king of righteousness" and it appears in the fourteenth chapter of the Book of Genesis.⁵ He is both king and priest. In bringing the two songs together, she reveals her understanding that there is no separation between the spirituals and jazz. For Geri, they are produced of the same culture, they are both sacred music, they both bear witness to a people's ongoing struggle to be free. This album includes a wide variety of black music: jazz standards, spirituals, and jazz originals. It features Carmen Lundy, Jimmy Cobb, Ron Carter, George Shirley, Wallace Roney, Donald Walden, and the Atlanta Jazz Chorus under the direction of Dwight Andrews. There are standards like Gershwin's "Embraceable You," Charlie Parker's "Ah-Leu-Cha," and lesser known jazz works such as "Just for a Thrill" by Lil Hardin Armstrong. On this recording, Geri once again uplifts the work of black women composers and includes works by Hardin, Mary Lou Williams, and her own beautiful blues "Our Lady" written not for Mary, Mother of Christ, but for our Lady Day.

This recording gives a strong sense of Geri's own sense of history. Jazz situated in, in conversation with, stretching, and at times led by other forms of black music culture. For Geri, jazz as a form was open to a vast array of influences but deeply grounded in African American history and culture. Here we have a celebration of the music in that context.

If the invocation is "Oh Freedom," the benediction is "Lift Every Voice and Sing," otherwise known as the Negro

national anthem, with which Geri closes the recording. In her most recent book, *May We Forever Stand: A History of the Black National Anthem*, the brilliant Imani Perry writes of the song:

It tells the singer to see herself or himself as emerging magnificently through struggle. It nurtures an identity rooted in community. It is a song that moves regionally and internationally, yet holds fast to a sense of particular belonging. It has had a remarkable longevity due to both its beauty and its vision.⁶

Certainly the same might be said of *Timeless Portraits and Dreams*, but most important, of Geri's own sense of the history of black music and especially the history of jazz, which also moves regionally and internationally yet holds fast to a particular "belonging."

I think of this album as a guide through Geri's own understanding and conception of the music she played and the way she believed it should be taught and passed on. First, jazz is not separate from other forms of black music. It is born of those forms that precede it and helps to shape those that follow. It is always in conversation with these other forms as well as music born of different cultures. This understanding informed her pedagogy. She believed the student of jazz needs to know the history and context of its birth and its development. She was a voracious reader and one of the most intellectually curious people I knew. She kept up with the latest jazz studies scholarship, not only to be informed by it but also to judge the degree to which it respected the context, the history, and the political and cultural import of the music.

In one of the best interviews I've read, conducted by Angelika Beener, Geri asserts:

It's OK for people to have opinions, that's fine . . . and it's OK to publish opinions, and that's fine. I feel strongly that there is

a renaissance of amazing scholars in this area of African American music and culture. I'm looking at the writers, people like Farah Jasmine Griffin, people like Robin D. G. Kelley, and George Lewis . . . people of that ilk, who really are establishing a level of responsibility for how we will write about the music and how we talk about the music. And I just feel that these are the ways to look, [instead of] getting so upset about some of these other things that are not really dealing with the real core of what is happening in the culture. Like the book that Kelley did on Monk . . . that sets the bar of what the expectation of jazz scholarship should be . . . real, substantive research on the music, based on a respect for the cultural criteria accepted by the field . . . [and] the folk. The music truly deserves this level of care. Ten years, you know, Kelley did that research. That kind of time and that kind of love and appreciation for the subject matter, is where I want to go personally to find out, what the facts were, on a much deeper level. These discussions about our innovators' contributions are thrilling. And I think we're going to see more of this.⁷

"A level of responsibility" – it resonates. Her sense of responsibility to the music, to its past and its future, to her peers and her students, a sense of responsibility that required a profound discipline, was daunting. In emphasizing the importance jazz history and tradition held for Geri, I by no means want to suggest an aesthetic conservatism on her part. This was not the case. For Geri, jazz was innovation. Among her earlier recordings were Afrofuturistic ventures. She is one of the few pianists to play with Ornette Coleman. She worked with Betty Carter, and Cecil Taylor was a major inspiration to her. So Geri was no traditionalist in the vein of Wynton Marsalis. She saw the music on a continuum. I think her emphasis on history and tradition stemmed from two things: 1) what

she feared was an effort to de-emphasize jazz as an African American form, a living tradition whose practitioners need to know, acknowledge, and honor it as a product of black culture; and 2) her desire to influence and inform the way that history was represented so that women and avant-garde artists were not marginalized or ignored.

A Conversation with Mary Lou was a theatrical piece born of the collaboration between Geri, actress S. Epatha Merckerson, and me. And although I will gesture toward the making of our shared projects, I want to talk about them in the broader sense of the kinds of *conversations* and collaborations Geri initiated and sustained with the other artists and with the tradition itself.

Conversation and dialogue are the words that most often come to mind when I think of Geri as leader. On the bandstand, even when she is the leader, she is in conversation. She may set the tone, suggest a direction, but always she seems to say “What do you think?” “Let me hear what you have to say.” She is creating space for your response, your questioning, and your questing. Sometimes she is goading you: “Go on . . . Go on . . . Keep Going . . . Jump! . . . OK, now come back . . . I got you.” Even Geri the soloist is in conversation, with those who inspire her, with the various emotions within her, with God, with herself, and with the future. Collaboration is a form of conversation as well. The source of my greatest joy, and not a little bit of frustration, were the collaborations I embarked upon with Geri and Epatha.

It all started with a conversation. A phone call and a series of discussions about her idea to do a show at the Apollo that would honor the great jazz women who performed there. She asked me to be the historian on the project and I agreed. And later, she set up a meeting between

herself, me, and Epatha, who had also agreed to work on the project.

Farah
Jasmine
Griffin

It’s an afternoon, possibly January, during the week, a Tuesday or a Wednesday because I run from a seminar I conduct at the Schomburg to Epatha’s Harlem abode. She greets me with a warm smile and down-to-earth spirit. She, Geri, and I sit at a large round table . . . eating, drinking . . . was it tea? Wine? I don’t remember. I just know we are immediately comfortable. Three sisters who love this music and love black people, and we are laughing and singing, and Epatha is pulling up the music, and I am recalling obscure tracks and anecdotes, and before you know it, we are mapping this thing out. Geri is happy, quietly encouraging, laughing. Soon it becomes clear, when we start talking about our Queens, that we are also talking about folk not conventionally recognized as jazz artists. Our discussions reach the blues, gospel, and soul royalty, and pretty soon we get to Bessie, Mahalia, and Clara Ward, and I’m coming up with anecdotes about when this one performed and when that one performed, and at some point, someone asks “How can we organize this?” And one of us comes up with a conceit and a narrative about the Apollo as a sacred space, as hallowed ground. And at some point, I don’t remember when, Geri says, “I’m going to need somebody to write the script. Farah, you can do that.” “No, I cannot.” “Yes, you can, you just did. Epatha, you direct.”

And before either of us can object, Epatha is directing and I am writing the script and our debut show will be at the Apollo with Dianne Reeves, Lizz Wright, Tia Fuller, Terri Lyne Carrington, and Geri’s trio with Kenny Davis and Kassa Overall. Eventually what feels like a million more people join, including the Howard University a cappella choir, Afro Blue, the DJ Val Jeanty, two hoofers, and Maurice

Chesnut. Because I add a bit about Pearl Bailey and Mom's Mabley, the oh-so-talented comedic actress Karen Malina White is on board. At the last minute, perhaps two days before our first performance, Geri would add an organ. But that was all to come. On that Tuesday or Wednesday in Harlem, I left Epatha's apartment elated and scared to death. "What have I gotten myself into? She needs a playwright not a historian."

Together, the three of us embarked on a roller coaster ride that started with a conversation and that included many more between us, the tradition we honored, Geri's vision and genius, and all the other artists on that stage and the brilliant, sophisticated, all-knowing Apollo audience who spoke to us during the show, during intermission, and afterward. "I love it, but how could you have Sarah Vaughan singing 'I'm Glad There is You?' when that was Gloria Lynn's song first and she sang it here at the Apollo and she was from Harlem. I know, 'cause I was here." I look at Epatha with a look that says "I told you so." And she breaks out laughing and we hug each other because we got through it and were the better for it. Now she was a director and I was a scriptwriter, something we both aspired to be, but had not articulated to Geri. She just knew and she presented the opportunity and said, "Do it." And we had to rise to the occasion because you have to bring your best when you are writing for and directing Dianne Reeves, Lizz Wright, and Terri Lyne Carrington. That demands a certain level of responsibility and discipline.

I don't know about others, but for Epatha and I, collaborating with Geri went something like this:

Geri: "Hello ladies, would you like to take a ride on a carousel with me."

Farah: "Why yes, I love carousels. They are pretty."

Epatha: "They are boring, but I like the company so let's go."

And then as we approach it, I ask "Where are the horses?" And Geri says, "Oh, there are no horses." So we get on and we strap ourselves in, and before long, we realize there are no horses because it's not a carousel, it's a roller coaster. And we realize it's not just any roller coaster, but a super duper, triple loop cyclone or something. And Epatha and I are holding each other screaming. But not Geri; she's just smiling because she can see the whole thing and while we are freaking out about being upside down, she already sees the end and knows we will survive. We get off, exasperated, and declare: "That's it. Can't do it. My nerves can't take it." Geri is gracious and thankful, and bearing gifts. The evening ends and we are giddy; days later, we have the postperformance meeting to evaluate what worked and what didn't. Geri sweetly says, "Would you ladies like to go on another ride with me?" And we both say, "Yes, can't wait."

Collaborating with Geri was exhilarating and exhausting and you are a better thinker and artist for it. You have grown creatively and spiritually, and you have been so steeped in love that you can't wait to return. Like the improvising artist, you bring all that you have to the moment, and then you step out on faith.

We learned to trust the process, to trust the vision, even as the nuts and bolts of making it happen seemed impossible. We went from the Apollo to three nights at Harlem Stage, where we debuted *A Conversation with Mary Lou* featuring the remarkable Carmen Lundy, thanks to the tireless Ora Harris and the Kennedy Center. And the process was a true collaboration. I wrote, they read, I rewrote. Epatha saw the stage and might tell us that what we thought we could do, we couldn't do,



Geri Allen, S. Epatha Merkerson, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (left to right). Sound check for *A Conversation with Mary Lou*, Harlem Stage, New York, March 14, 2014.

but we could do this instead. Epatha and I created ways to highlight Geri, we let her genius guide us, and the music guided all of us. We did it all in service to the music, and for Epatha and I, out of love for Geri. And in return, we got each other and these creative projects that were bigger than any one of us together.

From her reading of my book on Billie Holiday, Geri heard something in the sound of my writing, in the sound of my voice, spoken and written. “Your writing is very musical,” she would say. And she would try to get me to write a spoken word piece to be on one of her albums. “I’m a bad poet,” I’d say. But she would push back: “Would you write the liner notes?” “I’d be honored.” Geri had a sense of your capacity and your gift. She’d insist that you live up to it, that you step outside of your comfort zone. At first, she would feel out what felt safe and

lay the foundation for you to perform. “Read from the Billie Holiday book” while I play “Our Lady.” “Write the liner notes.” And then, certain that you could do something different, something more, certain of her vision and the broader picture, she would “encourage” you to take bigger risks by placing you in situations where you had to leap out on faith, and her belief in you.

An exploration of Geri’s collaborations reveals her insight as a thinker and a visionary. Her gift for seeing the whole picture, hearing its sound, was extraordinary. I think one course of study about Geri would be an exploration of her collaborations: with her own band, with Terri Lyne and Esperanza, and with Terri Lyne and David Murray. It might venture out to a consideration of her interest in technology and explore the collaboration with her brother in introducing

innovative technology into performance and the classroom.

As an aside, I want to say something brief about Geri's commitment to ensuring that the music reached audiences, especially black audiences that might not otherwise hear it. This was yet another way she sought to keep the music relevant. I helped her organize a series of residencies. She did them at Harvard, Princeton, and the University of Pennsylvania. Whenever possible, she held master classes for the students, performed with the jazz band, and gave a concert with her own band. But she also requested that we set up performance presentations at local high schools. In New York, we did it at the Thurgood Marshall High School and Geri knew that Kassa Overall and Maurice Chesnut could attract the students' attention with hip-hop rhythms. She wanted the young people to know that all jazz was their music, that they could bring themselves and the sounds of their generation to it. She seemed to say "Come on in. Join the conversation." As a professor of music and later as a director at the University of Pittsburgh, she sought out the best high school-aged musicians and built relationships with high school music teachers and church directors of music in search of musically talented young people. At the Apollo, our extravaganza was part of the Harlem Jazz Shrines Festival, a series that takes place every spring in different Harlem venues, theaters, churches, restaurants, and bars. A ticket to each performance cost \$10. Our *Great Jazz Women of the Apollo* was held on Mother's Day weekend, and one of the stagehands (someone needs to write a book about the Apollo's stagehands; I actually wrote them into the script and they were among the first to take a bow) thanked us for having the show during Harlem Jazz Shrines because he bought tickets for ladies from the senior center/nursing home and also

for a group of mothers from a nearby shelter for mothers and children. Beautiful things happen in Geri's wake. She set things in motion and there is a shimmering, ripple effect much like her shimmering playing on the piano. Where Geri led, love and beauty followed.

Geri found inspiration and influence far and wide. She was not bound by the tradition she held in such reverence. She was freed by it. As much as she was grounded in a sense of community, it was the basis from which she soared. When we think of her, we should also think of her as a cosmopolitan artist who traveled widely in her music, her ideas, and her person. That's one of the reasons I so love her recording *Flying Toward the Sound*; it encompasses her journey in this life and beyond.

The recording, though solo piano, provided yet another opportunity for collaboration. Carrie Mae Weems provided the photograph, cover concept, and art films. I wrote the liner notes. While I often visited Geri in the recording studio, it was a special treat to spend time on the set when Weems was making the films. In my liner notes for that recording I wrote:

She hails from a culture that celebrates flight as a metaphor for freedom. From the folk tales of the enslaved Africans who abandon the fields and fly back to Africa to the fugitive slave narratives of the 19th century; from Paul Laurence Dunbar's exquisite poem of 1899, "Sympathy," with its singing caged bird [the inspiration for Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" (1970)] to Abbey Lincoln's "Bird Alone" (1991), African American culture is dominated by images and sounds of movement, mobility, fugitivity, and flight. Geri Allen is nothing if not deeply rooted in the cultures of Africans in America. She is also a highly accomplished, cosmopolitan, world-class artist. As such, like the music she plays she is always open to new influences.⁸

Upon hearing Native American legends, especially “Legend of the Flute,” that resonated with her own people’s love of music and near mystical celebration of flight, she found inspiration as well. *Flying Toward the Sound* is a musician’s journey. She conceived of the project in relation to three modern jazz pianists in whom she found inspiration and in whose lineage she falls: Cecil Taylor, McCoy Tyner, and Herbie Hancock. She does not play their music, instead she plays toward it, around it, through it, to her own voicing. The suite is titled “Refractions.” Like light entering through a prism, Geri envisioned the project as the music of Taylor, Tyner, and Hancock, entering the prism that is herself, only to be bent, reshaped, and colored anew, resulting in a flight of light and sound.

Until the recording of *A Child Is Born* in 2011, I would say *Flying Toward the Sound* was her most introspective and spiritual work. Here, she is an artist looking deep within and making connections between what she finds through this practice of interiority and that of the larger world. In nine original compositions, composed during her Guggenheim Fellowship, she engages the music of her guides, to meditate on the meaning of family, particularly motherhood and creativity: “Faith Carriers of Life” and “Your Pure Self (Mother to Son).” But it is [“God’s Ancient Sky”](#) that is the project’s spiritual centerpiece. It flies to places of great spiritual power – the Western Wall of Jerusalem, St. Mary’s of Zion in Axum, Ethiopia – and then over the great natural cathedrals – the ocean, the desert, the forest, and the mountains. The repetition played with her left hand gives us drama and a sense of permanence, it moves us along, while the melody played by the right is broad, spacious, and panoramic – it flies. At times, we are given roots, complex and twisted, but roots nonetheless,

while the right hand takes ever more risks. It glides, sails, dips, and soars. In its entirety, the song is almost sixteen minutes long embodying both the groundedness of a daily spiritual and artistic practice that allows for flights of creativity and improvisation in life and in music; parental love that provides a safety net for children to soar; and the jazz tradition that does the same for innovators such as Taylor, Tyner, Hancock, and Allen.

All the pieces that precede “God’s Ancient Sky” lead to it as light going through a prism. The first three are devoted to Tyner, Taylor, and Hancock. She introduces themes associated with each artist and then integrates them throughout. [“Flying Toward the Sound”](#) is for Tyner. [“Dancing Mystic Poets at Twilight”](#) is a highly percussive, polyrhythmic piece not unlike Taylor, who inspired it. [“Red Velvet in Winter,”](#) for Herbie Hancock, is orchestral, making use of the full range of the piano, a kaleidoscopic world in itself. Here, Geri leads and we gladly follow to a sonic universe of her making.

Let us imagine a study of jazz and a construction of jazz history in which she is not an addendum – “a woman in jazz” – but where she is a central component in any narrative we write, where it is impossible to think about the trajectory of the music without thinking about her. Where we place her in a lineage of those who influenced her and those whom she influenced, perhaps especially pianists, but not only pianists. Vocalists, percussionists, bassists, horn players, and those of us who are not musicians, but actors, dancers, writers, photographers, painters as well.

She hailed from a culture that celebrates flight as a metaphor for freedom, and through her music and her grace, she touched that longing, that struggle, and that capacity for freedom in all of us.

- ¹ "In Celebration of William Levi Dawson: An Exploration of American Music and Identity at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century," conference at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, March 3–5, 2005.
- ² Farah Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: One World Books, 2001).
- ³ Merriam-Webster, "Invocation," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/invocation>.
- ⁴ Geri Allen, "Oh Freedom," *Timeless Portraits & Dreams*, liner notes, Telarc, 2006.
- ⁵ Melchizedik: Melch = King, Saddiq = Righteousness.
- ⁶ Imani Perry, *May We Forever Stand: A History of the Black National Anthem* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), xiv.
- ⁷ Angelika Beener, "Geri Allen on First Christmas Album & Embracing It All," *Alternate Takes: Broadening the Jazz Perspective*, November 22, 2011, <https://alternate-takes.org/2011/11/22/geri-allen-on-first-christmas-album-embracing-it-all/>.
- ⁸ Geri Allen, "Flying Toward the Sound," *Flying Toward the Sound*, Motéma Music, 2010.