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Preface

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P R E F A C E

A S I BEGAN WRITING this book—not just talking about it, or researching in preparation for it, but actually beginning to make sentences across the simulated page of the computer screen—I was told over and over again that it was urgent that I get the word out. Urgent. There was a pressing need, to chart this territory, to tell these stories. My self, my identity, was wrapped up in this telling. In the Yoruba-based practices I explore throughout this book, *Legba*, the Divine force who gives us an opportunity to be in sync with our life path or in opposition to it, let me know that I must do this writing work daily. Because of *Legba's* particular relationship to words, to *àṣẹ* or the life force, and to communication, I knew it was a message designed to pierce my stubborn *Orí* (head as destiny) and compel me to work *now*.

What exigency could there be about a book that looks at the intersections of jazz aesthetics, theatrical performance, and Yoruba-based theology? While I may never know precisely what the *Òrìṣà* or Deities/Divinities and the ancestors deemed imperative about this work, I believe the urgency is about transformation using the tools I have been trained to employ—words and interaction, networks and communities, art and intellect that is intimately guided by the heart and spirit. This urgency is about not being distracted by an illusory reality in order to immerse myself in the *awo*, or mystery, that is the nature of art and writing. In so doing I may provide others with the desire and courage to transform personally and communally as well.

A fundamental principle of the jazz aesthetics discussed in this book is the act of opening one's intuitive powers. One learns to soar in performance when one's instincts are primed, and this priming means responding to the forces of nature, to instincts. The times demand that we envision and implement new strategies for living our lives, and this is precisely what the artists in this book are doing with their seriate, polyphonic, transtemporal work.

The urgency of the times also requires that we not fear including spirituality in our intellectual and scholarly work. Artists generally have no problem acknowledg-

ing spirit, but some writings *about* performing artists fail to include the spiritual impulses that fuel so much of the work. In this way, using the term jazz in the title of this book is very helpful in that jazz giants such as John and Alice Coltrane made it clear that they were in pursuit of spiritual transcendence. I am troubling jazz, interrogating it as a concept and asking jazz not only to reference sound, improvisation, and immediacy but also to evoke spirit. This work is more about the spiritual than it is about the material, though material life-changing events may come to pass by “working the work,” the phrase that some of us use to identify the process of doggedly, enthusiastically rehearsing. Living the work helps us to touch that place of genuine freedom and bring back to earth the knowledge we have gleaned, allowing us to more fully understand and transform the material world we inhabit. We return to the earth with paths to freedom—our responsibility is to share it.

I have journeyed in Austin, Minneapolis, and New York with Laurie Carlos, Daniel Alexander Jones, and Sharon Bridgforth, serving variously as performer, dramaturg, producer, director, and witness. My multiple ongoing roles with them give me a unique vantage point for charting their work. Although my understandings and sensibilities are the principle force governing the explorations in this book, this is clearly a collaborative ethnography in which the ongoing relationships between Carlos, Jones, Bridgforth, and me have generated a host of shared codes, jointly told stories, communal revelations, and fluidly intertwined memories. Given this long-standing, intricately woven union, it is sometimes difficult to know exactly who said what and when. I have discussed the ideas of this book with each of them for many years. Their thoughts have stimulated me and folded into my own knowledge of theatrical jazz. While I am the author of this book, I do not lay claim to inventing, discovering, or solely explicating what is presented here. *Theatrical Jazz* is my composition, but we—and many others—have all made this tune together.