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## Artist Profile: Maxine Gordon on Jazz Geography and the Allures of Archivism



Maxine Gordon surrounded by newspapers. By [Courtesy of Maxine B. Gordon](#)

By [Eliza S. Banbury](#), Contributing Writer

in 4 months



Maxine B. Gordon is building a new perspective on jazz history. In her upcoming book, “Quartette: Stories from the Lives of Four Women Jazz Musicians—Maxine Sullivan, Velma Middleton, Melba Liston, and Shirley Scott” Gordon weaves together Black feminist thought, studious archivism, and a lifetime on the jazz scene to create a window into the lives and careers of four remarkable musicians.

An oral historian and archivist with a Master’s degree in African Diaspora History from New York University, Gordon is currently a Carl and Lily Pforzheimer Foundation Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.

“The big gift is time to think ... and read,” Gordon said in an interview with The Harvard Crimson regarding her fellowship at Radcliffe. “It’s really valuable.”

Her love for both jazz and the musicians who perform it is obvious, and shines through in her discerning, convivial demeanor.

even befriended the owner. Her experience there was merely the beginning of a long love affair between Gordon and jazz.

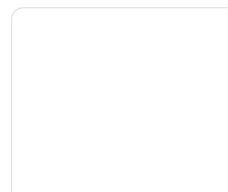
As a young woman, Gordon worked as a road manager, spending months on the road with bands. Later, she married famed Jazz saxophonist Dexter Gordon. After her husband passed away in 1990, Gordon began working on his biography, which led her down a fascinating, winding path of African American studies. On this journey, she met archivist mentors, organized three Library of Congress collections, and became the senior interviewer and jazz researcher for the Bronx African American Research Project.

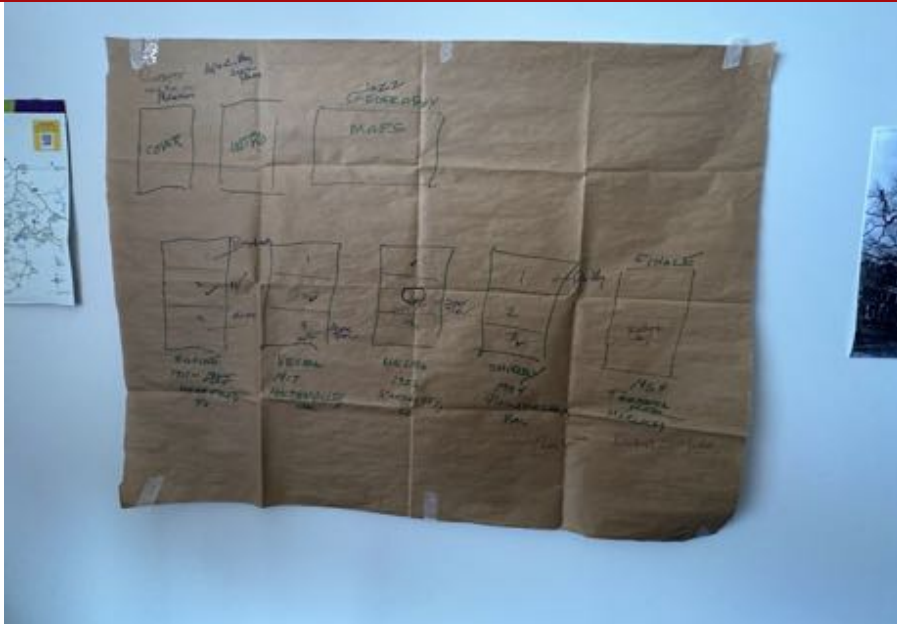
Finally, in 2018, “Sophisticated Giant: The Life and Legacy of Dexter Gordon” was published. The book weaves together many different facets including pieces in Gordon’s husband’s voice since Dexter began writing his autobiography before his death. The book also incorporates aspects of history, music, research, and anecdotes to create an astounding piece of work which raked in various awards, including the Book of the Year 2019 from the Jazz Journalists Association and the Timothy White Award for Outstanding Music Biography from the ASCAP Foundation.

Before the writing of “Sophisticated Giant: The Life and Legacy of Dexter Gordon” was even complete, Gordon was already looking ahead to “Quartette: Four Women in Jazz, Stories from the Lives of Four Women Jazz Musicians.” One of the four women she is researching, Shirley Scott, was not only a phenomenal musician, but a close friend of Gordon’s for many years.

Indeed, Shirley Scott, Maxine Sullivan, Velma Middleton, and Melba Liston are ever-present in her office. Stunning photos of the musicians fill a whiteboard, and their names dress the swath of brown paper that decorates the wall across from her desk.

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On the landscape of brown planning paper, each highlighted musician has a box that represents a section in Gordon's upcoming book. By [Courtesy of Maxine B. Gordon](#)

Gordon learned the practice of planning on sheets of brown paper from her archivist mentor Annie Keubler. Gordon met Keubler while she was working as the head archivist at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University in Newark. Gordon went to see a Mary Lou Williams archive that Keubler was working with and they became quick friends.

Gordon spoke fondly of her friend and mentor, who passed in 2012: "She inspired me, and she kept saying, 'Oh, you have a talent for this.'" Gordon took to archiving quickly, and adopted her friend's fondness for brown paper sheets, a roll of which sits in the corner of Gordon's office. She said that in Keubler's workroom, "she had these rolls of brown paper ... like, all around ... that's how she worked the archive, by sorting, but by using the paper and crossing out stuff and moving." This dynamic and engaged physical approach reflects the conceptual approach Gordon takes to her research, exemplified by her notion of jazz geography.

Inspired by the influences of Sylvia Wynter, Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods's book "Black Geographies and the Politics of Place," as well as by the work of her mentor Robert Farris Thompson, Gordon has put together the concept of jazz geography as an innovative lens through which she is able to analyze her research subjects. In addition to pulling from Black feminist thought and her intimate knowledge of the process of musical touring, jazz geography was galvanized when Gordon went on a book tour for "Sophisticated Giant: The Life and Legacy of Dexter Gordon."

"I did 65,000 miles for the tour. I tracked the mileage ... and that was when I started thinking about jazz geography," she said.

The influence of place became sharply relevant to her. Two of the subjects of her upcoming book had careers that revolved around touring: Velma Middleton toured for almost 20 years with Louis Armstrong and Melba Liston accompanied Dizzy Gillespie on a well known tour of the Middle East. Gordon is digging into the role location played in not just the careers and lives of the musicians she studies, but also all those they touched while on tour.

Gordon's connection to the jazz musicians in her books is not merely that of researcher and subject: She brings a profound sense of engaged biographical scholarship that grants a rich sense of vibrancy to her work. Gordon's unique perspective as a cultural archivist with a lifetime of experience in music and a deep-seated love for jazz imbues both her presence and her writing with a

mellifluous when Maxine B. Gordon is on the scene.

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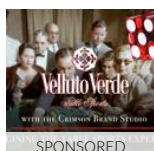
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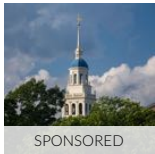
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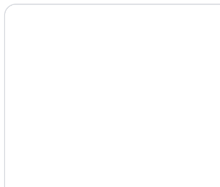
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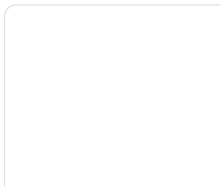
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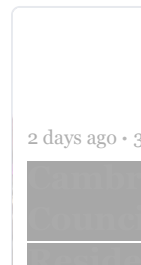
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