



# SING TO THE SUN

A conversation with Alvin Singleton, Atlanta's foremost composer

BY MARK GRESHAM

**ALVIN SINGLETON HAS** lived in Atlanta for 18 years, ever since he was invited to leave Europe in 1985 to become composer-in-residence with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. Following the ASO residency, Brooklyn-born Singleton has continued to make Atlanta his home, and has established himself as the city's most internationally prominent composer.

Singleton's music has been commissioned and performed by major symphony orchestras, chamber groups and festivals throughout North America and Europe. He has composed extensively for the musicians of Atlanta-based new music ensemble *Thamyris* ever since it was founded. His frequently lean, abstract style can be described as often demanding but able to engage the listener in anticipation of what might, or might not, happen next.

This coming Tuesday, a special all-Singleton program at Spivey Hall will celebrate his music. *Creative Loafing* talked with Alvin Singleton about the forthcoming concert and his work as a composer in Atlanta.

***Creative Loafing:* You've been living in Atlanta for almost two decades. This week, a concert celebrating your music will be presented at Spivey Hall. I understand the impetus for this came from someone fairly new to the city?**

**Alvin Singleton:** Chris Arrell. He is currently chair of composition and theory at Clayton State College and University. He was a student at University of Texas in Austin, school of music, when I did a short residency there.

Little did I know, he got it in the back of his mind when he had an opportunity he

would like to perform [a concert my music]. All of a sudden, I got rumors. "Did you meet the new composer at Clayton College? He wants to present an evening of your music." And here we are today. He's been able to get the school behind it, Spivey Hall behind it, the children's choir and *Thamyris*.

**Aside from orchestral music written for the Atlanta Symphony, how does this music, all written after you arrived in Atlanta, serve as a snapshot of your work here and relate to your overall personal journey as a composer?**

I think that all creative artists work on one piece his or her entire life. And while thinking they're writing a new piece, it's just a different understanding of what they've been writing all along, and that understanding is based upon a certain maturity. You can [look back] and see seeds of ideas you're using today, but then you did not understand how to develop them, because you didn't have the experience or the maturity to do so. [This program] certainly reflects a certain kind of maturity that has come as a result of my coming from Europe and living in Atlanta, growing up in Atlanta I should say, and my work with *Thamyris*, because I've worked with them a very long time.

**Some of the works on this program are products of your close connections with African-American poets like Rita Dove, Mari Evans ...**

And Ashley Bryan, the narrator, poet and visual artist who's 80 years old this year. For many years, he was the chairman of the art department at Dartmouth, and he retired off the coast of Maine. We had a mutual friend who said to me one day, "Do you know who Ashley Bryan is?" I said, "No." She said, "He is one of America's well-kept secrets, he's a national treasure." So she had him send me his book called *Sing to the Sun*. It was a group of his own poetry and illustrations. It is one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen.

**So you set five of the poems for narrator, children's chorus, oboe, clarinet, viola piano and percussion. And Bryan will narrate the work?**

He has a sister who lives here in Atlanta, and he spends Thanksgiving [here] every year. So when this concert was being programmed, I suggested that we do *Sing to the Sun* because he has [performed it] with the Children's Chorus of Spivey Hall before in Atlanta as part of the National Black Arts Festival. It was commissioned by a consortium, so instantly we had [a number of] performances. Ashley's done every one of them.

**Some of your compositions, even those without words, point to incidents, often tragic, in American history and culture, and to which you frequently give striking titles. One that is provocatively titled is having its first Atlanta performance in this concert, your "Jasper Drag."**

"Jasper Drag" is for violin, clarinet and piano. It's written to commemorate the incident that happened in Jasper, Texas, where a

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black man, James Byrd Jr., was dragged to death behind a pickup truck by three white men. It isn't meant to tell a story or evoke images, but to be a marker on our collective memory. Titles are how I identify my pieces. What it has to do with my music, there's no telling. [My compositions] are never, never programmatic.

**And you also write works that commemorate happy events. Three of the pieces on this program honor birthdays, and one of them will have its premiere at this concert.**

It's called "Helga." Helga Siegel lives in Atlanta, and Charles, her husband, wanted to commission a work for her 70th birthday, so he asked me to write it. They're dear friends, and I thought it would be significant to put on this program.

**In what ways has being an African-American, in what is considered a predominantly white and European genre, had an impact on your composition — on the music itself, that is?**

I don't know. I've never thought about color and music at all, or genre. The only thing in which color plays a role is opportunity. The real question should be: How do you function in a world of music to which very few Americans listen in the course their daily lives? Art music is what I know. Jazz is art music as well. People have these general notions of what that all means based upon their own personal experiences.

**And what has been the impact of life in Atlanta itself upon your work?**

The city is very protective in the sense that nobody bothers you. You're not bombarded the whole time by so many events, or noise for that matter. I travel a lot, but I'm always happy to come back here. My friends in "big" places always wonder, "Why are you staying there?" I'm staying here because I'm productive, I've got a community of friends, and my wife — I met my wife, Lisa, here. And I've had significant work done here. To be able to work over a period of years with one ensemble [like Thamyris] is a gift. I was composer-in-residence with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and at Spelman College, and I've really got a lot of respect within this community.

**So why should you go somewhere else?**

Exactly. Home is home. And when does home become home? It's not only because you're born there, but because you've spent a significant time growing there. And also, I think more importantly, because both of my parents are Southerners, and they always talked about experiences that they wished I could have. And when they learned I was coming to Atlanta, they were pleased.

**They were both from South Carolina?**

My mother was from a town called Clinton, which is near Greenville, and my dad from a

little town called Ehrhardt, which is in Bamberg County, near Orangeburg. Ehrhardt is a farm town. My grandfather knew everybody in that town. And the people you didn't know, you'd still say hello and wave at them. I remember sitting on the porch at the end of a workday with my grandfather, and he'd see somebody going by in a wagon or a pickup truck [and wave].

**A Southern cultural tradition. I would not expect that in New York.**

New York is very different. I think New York is friendly, but it's friendly on a need-to-know basis. Like for instance, if you stand in New York on a corner and look like you're lost, two or three people will come up to you and say, "Can I help you? Can I show you where to go?" Other than that, people go about their business. You can be anonymous in New York.

**Yet, with family that has Southern roots, you wound up being born in Brooklyn?**

At the time that [my parents] went to New York, everyone was going to industrial places for work. They met in New York, and got married in 1938. I was born in 1940.

**So as a youngster in Brooklyn you had a particular, let's say, geographical perspective of the world?**

Well, no matter when you grow up, you don't travel that far from home. As a teenager, going to Manhattan was a big deal. I mean, when you said you're going to get on the train and go to Manhattan, you'd immediately tell all your friends so they'd be impressed.

**Did you have to "get dressed" to go downtown, and spent the whole day there?**

Absolutely! That's just my parents. That's from their Southern roots. We had to get dressed to go into town, or just to go shopping. And of course I hated it, and my sister hated it.

**But you still wanted to impress all your friends.**

Oh yeah, for sure. I got accustomed to that, and years later when I was looking for some part-time work in the summer, I got a job working for a CPA firm just because I happened to have been the only one with a coat and tie on at the interview. [Only] later I found out it was because of that. After high school, I started studying accounting, and they wanted me to stay at that firm because they said I had a future there. I did until I couldn't bear it anymore, because the music thing was growing inside of me, and I eventually quit.

**It sounds like you were intensely motivated, to quit such an offer of secure employment and pursue a musical career.**

It's what I like to do. I'm lucky that I've found a thing in life that I enjoy doing, and through which I can see the world.

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