

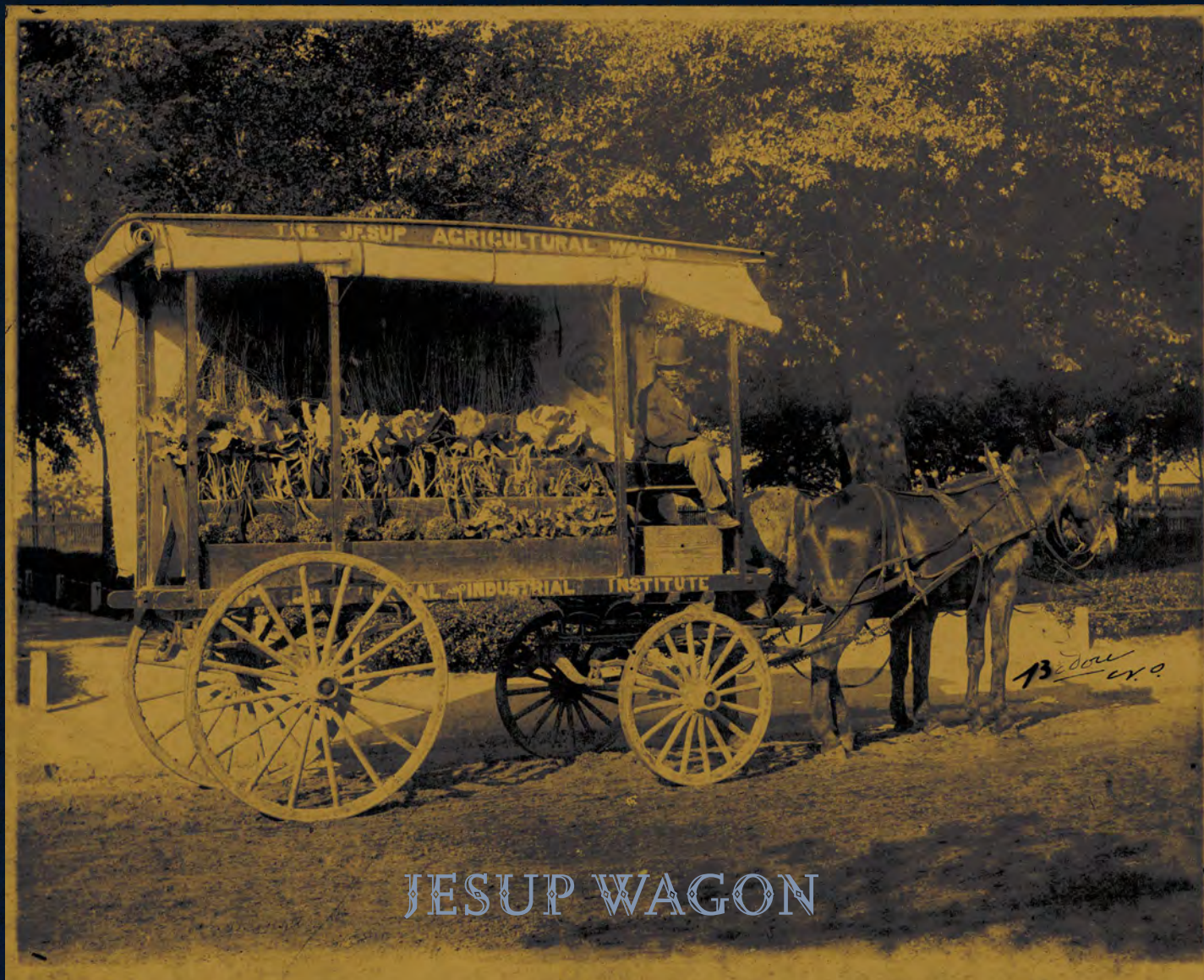
JAMES BRANDON LEWIS
RED LILY QUINTET



JESUP WAGON

James Brandon Lewis

Red Lily Quintet



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James Brandon Lewis
tenor saxophone, composition

Kirk Knuffke
cornet

William Parker
bass, gimbri (tracks 2 & 7)

Chris Hoffman
cello

Chad Taylor
drums, mbira (track 6)



TRACKS

1. Jesup Wagon (6:20)
2. Lowlands of Sorrow (7:03)
3. Arachis (8:30)
4. Fallen Flowers (6:49)
5. Experiment Station (8:37)
6. Seer (3:59)
7. Chemurgy (9:53)



TAO 05

Liner notes by Robin D. G. Kelley

“**JESUP WAGON**” is more than a tribute or homage to Dr. George Washington Carver (1864-1943). It is a revelation. James Brandon Lewis has composed a body of work that captures the essence of Carver’s life, work, and vision. A serious student of Carver, Lewis peels back the façade of the old, kindly man conjuring up new uses for peanuts, to reveal the artist, botanist, ecologist, aesthete, musician, teacher, and seer who anticipated our current planetary crisis.

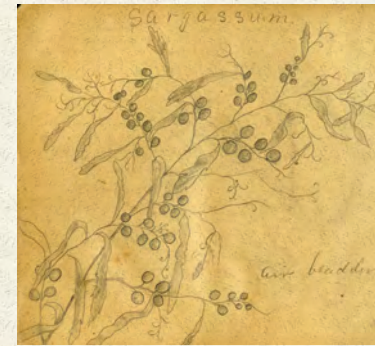
As a creative musician, composer, poet, and intellectual, Lewis was immersed in Carver’s philosophy at a very young age. His mother often quoted Carver: “Education is the key to unlock the Golden door of freedom.” As a kid growing up in Buffalo, Lewis loved science and fondly recalls writing a paper on Carver. He came to embrace Carver’s vision of art and science as inseparable, and his mantra to “do the common things in life in an uncommon way.” Carver was a fine painter and a serious musician; he studied piano and voice at Simpson College and possessed impressive skills on violin, guitar, and accordion. And he made art out of botanical science, listening to voices while collating data. He was no respecter of boundaries. “Folk” knowledge occupied the same universe as scientific methods of empirical observation, theory, and experimentation.

Building on Carver’s oft-quoted observation that the scientist and the artist are both on a quest for truth (“his writings, his weavings, his music, his pictures are just the expression of his soul in his search for truth”), Lewis conceived of “Jesup Wagon” as “attempting to paint a visual experience through sound, but also strong emotional sentiment.” Which is to say, truth that defies language, beyond the biographer’s reach or the scientist’s findings. “The idea of using just strings and horns with drums,” he explained to me, “brings about a certain kind of blues earthy vibe, a certain blues in feeling not in theory. I wanted the music to be folk,” which in his words meant encompassing “folk elements - nature, nurture, and plant life.”

Unlike Carver, who usually had to work alone, Lewis summoned to his “Experiment Station” a magnificent ensemble of truth-seekers steeped in the science and art of the uncommon.

Cornetist Kirk Knuffke left Colorado for New York in 2005 and dropped right into the avant-garde scene, beginning with the late Butch Morris. He brings to freedom a kind of lyricism and sure tone one hears in Lester Bowie, Don Cherry or Graham Haynes.

Cellist Chris Hoffman, known partly for his work with Henry Threadgill and Butch Morris, is a poet on his instrument. As a writer/filmmaker with a flair for storytelling, he also brings a cinematic and literary sensibility to the music.



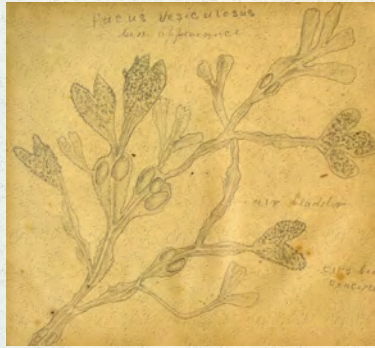
The legendary William Parker—arguably the greatest living innovator on the bass—also shares Carver’s renaissance qualities. Author, poet, educator, bona fide genius, Parker remains the central figure in experimental music and a bridge between Cecil Taylor, Milford Graves, Bill Dixon, Billy Bang and Nicole Mitchell, Matthew Shipp, Craig Taborn, and James Brandon Lewis.

And then there is Chad Taylor—percussionist-extraordinaire, composer, teacher, student of the science and art of rhythm, and navigator. Having come of age in one of the centers of experimentalism and Black culture, Chicago, Taylor played with Fred Anderson, Pharaoh Sanders, Malachi Favors, and was already on a mission similar to that of Carver: to tap into the natural world and the folk whose wisdom, myths and morals have protected the earth for millennia. He and Lewis undertook this journey together beginning in 2017, producing two stunning duo recordings and a quartet collaboration, *Molecular*.

“JESUP WAGON”

Soon after Carver joined the faculty at Tuskegee Institute, he envisioned a “movable school” that could bring knowledge and new techniques to poor Southern farmers. In 1906, with funding from Morris K. Jesup, Carver designed the Jesup Agricultural Wagon and equipped it with products and implements from his laboratory—better known as the Experiment Station. (Carver’s drawing of the Jesup wagon graces the cover.)

The wagon promised to bring innovation to the Alabama countryside, but it was slow, ponderous, a relic of the traveling medicine shows selling miracles and entertainment. Lewis opens unaccompanied, a solitary, plaintive country blues. Crying, moaning, hollering into a sunrise, preparing for the journey ahead. Then the wagon takes off, a black horse strutting to a funky New Orleans-style rhythm, drums and wheels rolling resolutely over a blues modality. Calling folk from the fields to gather ‘round, Knuffke and Hoffman take the first demonstration, followed by Lewis and Parker. The lesson is clear: remember the old ways, learn the new ways.



“LOWLANDS OF SORROW”

Carver moved from Iowa to Tuskegee in 1896, one year after the school's founding president, Booker T. Washington, famously told Black Southerners to “cast down your buckets where you are.” His first act as head of the Agriculture Department was to survey the countryside. What he found shocked him. The “lowlands of sorrow” is how he described the unsustainable conditions of poor Blacks and whites in Macon County. “Low land of sorrow” was a common phrase found in African American prayer and song; it refers to the downtrodden, the oppressed, but also to the secular world of wickedness.

For Lewis the lowlands of sorrow extend across the Atlantic to Africa. Parker's sinewy bass line on gimbri, Hoffman's dense counterpoint, and Taylor's masterful African rhythms (the triple meter bell pattern, 12/8 time, and everything in between) anchor the entire song. Lewis blows like a spirit possessed, pure, raw, deeply emotional. Knuffke and Lewis trade beautiful long tones and phrases, drawing the entire band into the ring. A gathering of souls shouting, moving counterclockwise, ending unresolved. I begin again.

“Lowlands of Sorrow” reminded me of Carver's dedication to the continent. Upon hearing a sermon about an African child dying of tuberculosis, Carver asked, “Can't something be done to help such sufferers?” He retreated to his Experiment Station and invented a cough syrup of beech wood creosote and peanut juice.

“ARACHIS”

Here is Lewis's elegy to *arachis hypogaea*, Latin for peanut. The music reminds us that the arachis genus of perennial flowering plants is in the pea family. Peanuts are legumes that grow in pods underground and produce lovely yellow flowers. “Arachis” tracks its journey, its delicate, slow beginnings marked by bass and cello arco. Once gathered its seeds cross oceans and hemispheres and then are cultivated. Rising from the underground, its flowers break the surface of the soil and, like the music, blooms, freely, wildly, signaling to the world its presence. Listen to Lewis, Taylor, Parker and Knuffke bloom wild sonic petals, talking back in spirited, virtuosic conversations with “the man who talks with flowers.”

“FALLEN FLOWERS”

“Many are the tears I have shed,” Carver wrote, “because I would break the roots or flowers of some of my pets while removing them from the ground.” When he couldn't preserve his “pets” as living entities, he drew them. Art was how he advanced scientifically. Observation opened a path to a beautiful world shrouded from so many of us. “Fallen Flowers” compels us to submit to the beauty, complexity, vulnerability, and unknowability of the natural world. The melody appears as simple repeating phrases and contrapuntal passages. But there is nothing simple here. I struggled to find the time signature, which seemed to shift. Once I gave up trying to tap it out, I could feel the tune's natural flow, its Time signature. Symmetry is not a mathematical problem; it is about balance, which can never be fixed or stable in an unstable natural world. We need not count flower petals to understand the rhythms and harmonies of the natural world. Balance is life and death and life again. And this is where Lewis closes out the song, with a poetic meditation on life and death; on resilience in the face of colonial violence, on the regenerative and destructive qualities of water; on tears shed for “fallen flowers.”

Embedded seeds crack through tormented shells of one color, giving
birth to many hues.

A storm is an 'ism' that tries to destroy that which was never bound by it

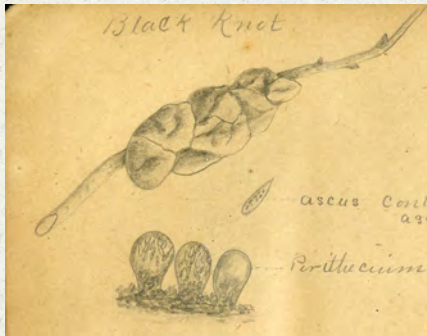
A seed never ran a race of its choosing

Before and after its displacement across miles of blues

It still blossoms

“EXPERIMENT STATION”

During the late 19th century, college agriculture departments across the country introduced “experiment stations” in order to make farming more efficient and productive. Carver didn't always run Tuskegee's experiment station, but when he did he turned it into his laboratory. Exploration, not productivity and profit, was his *raison d'être*. Experimentalism and improvisation prevailed. Lewis's “Experiment Station” is a chamber of exquisite beauty. Cello and horns open fugue-like until they are joined by drums and bass. Momentum builds into a dense thicket of sound which grows into a forest of percussive, multivocal, radically ensemblic freedom. The lab comes alive. Flowers sway and shout back.



“SEER”

Harry Abbott once wrote to Carver, his longtime friend, “You are a prophet, a seer, a man among men, and truly a man of God.”

“Seer” is Carver’s spirit sculpted in sound. Four minutes of contemplative soul searching. Taylor abandons the drums for the mbira, which he plays masterfully in 7/4 time over the ensemble’s slow triple meter and single mode. The horns play Lewis’s gorgeous melody in unison and improvise together, exchanging lyrical, reverential phrases.

“CHEMURGY”

“Chemurgy” refers to a movement founded in the 1930s to find industrial uses for organic, renewable sources. Carver inspired the movement, having discovered numerous ways to turn plants and their byproducts into fuel and industrial products. But unlike the leading chemurgists of the day, he wasn’t interested in profits and commercial growth. “Conservation is one of our big problems in this section,” he remarked three years before his death. “You can’t tear up everything just to get the dollar out of it without suffering as a result.” Chemurgy ultimately died with Carver, as fossil fuels and other petro-chemical products proved more profitable in the short-run but more costly to the planet.

“Chemurgy” takes us back before Carver, to indigenous and African ways of living in harmony with the earth, and forward into present struggles to stop the suffering. Evocative of Ornette Coleman’s beautifully haunting theme “Lonely Woman,” the ensemble literally gathers organic materials from blues, group improvisation, the rhythmic and stringed traditions of the African diaspora, voice and breath. Taylor’s drums, Hoffman’s cello, and especially Parker’s dazzling gimbri—a large three-stringed lute played by Gnawa musicians of Morocco—creates the ground over which Lewis and Knuffke sing, soar, shout, and pray.

The song ends with Lewis reciting his own poem:

Streams of tears run through trails of unseen landscapes
Soulless water never seems to dance like ballerinas
Raindrops of a thousand needles pierce skin
A punctured heart
A collapsed wall amounts to ‘I don’t give a damn’
Talking plants hug resilient vessel

I read it as a perceptive rumination on a history of diaspora, enslavement, forced migration and an inexorable quest for freedom and life, embracing fugitivity over forcible cultivation. We carry the blues across the blue oceans and it sustains us. We leave the tortured shells that hold and nurture us, weather the storms of colonialism and capitalism, and join in the earth’s refusal to allow its sundry harvest to die. Resilient seed “still blossoms.”

James Brandon Lewis is a prophet, a seer, an artist among artists. “Jesup Wagon” is both a thing of inestimable beauty and an act of reclamation. Listen. Learn. And never fear talking plants.





Original drawings of Jesup Agricultural Wagon and botanicals by George Washington Carver; photos of Jesup Agricultural Wagon courtesy of Tuskegee University Archives, used by permission.



I WOULD LIKE to thank my friends and family for your constant support over the years! I would also like to thank Tuskegee University as well as the late George Washington Carver for giving me inspiration as a young person who was curious about science. Special thanks to the amazing individuals that make up this Ensemble and thanks to TAO Forms for believing in this project. To Bill Mazza, I have enjoyed working with you over the years, you rock! To Robin D. G. Kelley, you have supported my work over the years unbeknown to many, I am thankful to have you involved in this project. – *James Brandon Lewis*



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All compositions by James Brandon Lewis
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Recorded, Mixed & Mastered by Jim Clouse in late 2020
at Park West Studios, Brooklyn, NY

Produced by James Brandon Lewis

Executive Producer: Whit Dickey

Project Coordinator: Steven Joerg

Liner notes by Robin D. G. Kelley

Original drawings of Jesup Agricultural Wagon and botanicals by George
Washington Carver

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Design by William Mazza Studio

Special thanks to Dana R. Chandler at Tuskegee University

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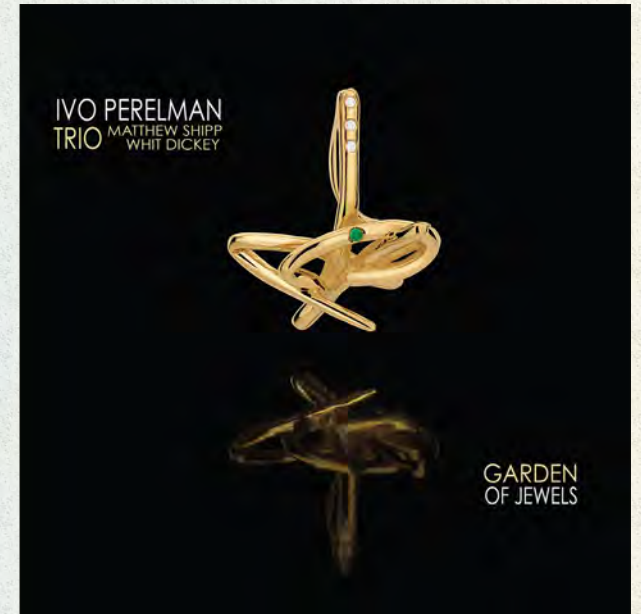
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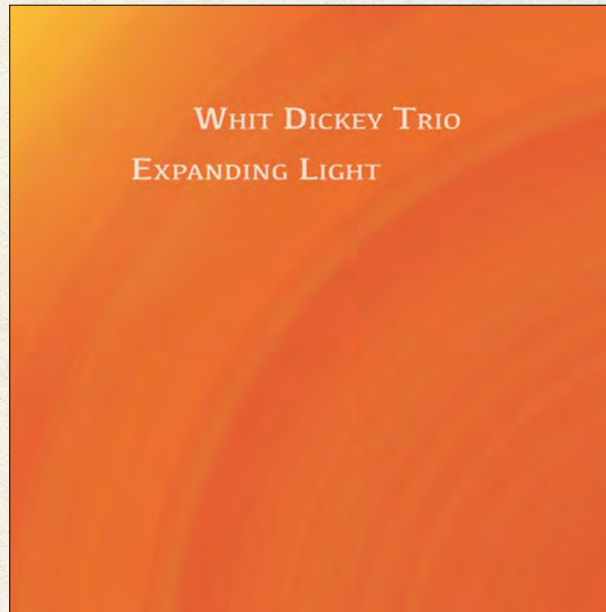
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