

Piano master inspires break from Western art forms

By ANDY HOPE

Piano master Cecil Taylor, winner of the 1975 Downbeat Magazine Record of the Year award for his long-play album "Silent Tongues," will perform two shows in Juneau on February 24. Taylor, whose first record, "Jazz Advance," came out more than 20 years ago, is one of the finest musicians in America. He graduated from the New York College of Music and the New England Conservatory of Music in the early fifties. He was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from his alma mater in May of 1977.

Taylor has released three records in the last year: "Indent" on Arista records, a solo performance recorded during his residency at Antioch College in 1973; "Dark Unto Themselves" on the German Enja label, recorded in 1976 with his ensemble, and "The Great Concert of Cecil Taylor" on Milestone, another solo performance, this one recorded in France in 1969.

Taylor's approach to music is uniquely his own, following the traditional language laid down by Fats Waller, Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, Erroll Garner, Bud Powell, Thelonious Monk, and Horace Silver.

"Again, it's Ellington who influenced my concept of the piano as an orchestra, which meant that the horn players and all of the other players other than the piano were in a sense soloists against the background of the piano. It's like studied improvising."

Improvisation. A maligned term, downgraded by academic critics like Contrapunctus of the Alaska Advocate who declared recently that "Improvisation in the concert hall is dead."

Taylor's interests/inspirations include dance, theatre, poetry and music. His book on black aesthetics, "Mysteries," will be published later this year by Ishmael Reed and Bob Callahan in Berkeley. The Juneau performances will be held at the Crystal Saloon and Ballroom and are sponsored by Raven's Bones Foundation, a tax-exempt Native arts organization, with funding from the Alaska State Council on the Arts. Raven's Bones wishes to present artists that counter the trend in which metropolitan art forms have dominated and overwhelmed Native and rural art forms. Cecil Taylor is a man who has retained artistic and cultural integrity in the face of difficult economic circumstances throughout his career, a man who can give us ideas on how to "Nativize" Western art forms.

"The investigation of oneself means the attempt to hear the calling of those great black minds that have preceded one, and to understand the responsibility, through the investigation of the orders that they maintain, to define what the essential and aesthetic perimeters are that make this music, coming originally from Africa, and combining with other forces, the really supreme Africanization of Western music."

Can Alaska Native artists end their dependence, both cultural and economic, on non-Native values and aesthetics in the manner of Cecil Taylor? It's a tall order for sure, but exposure to people who have done it can only help and inspire, which is what art should always do.