

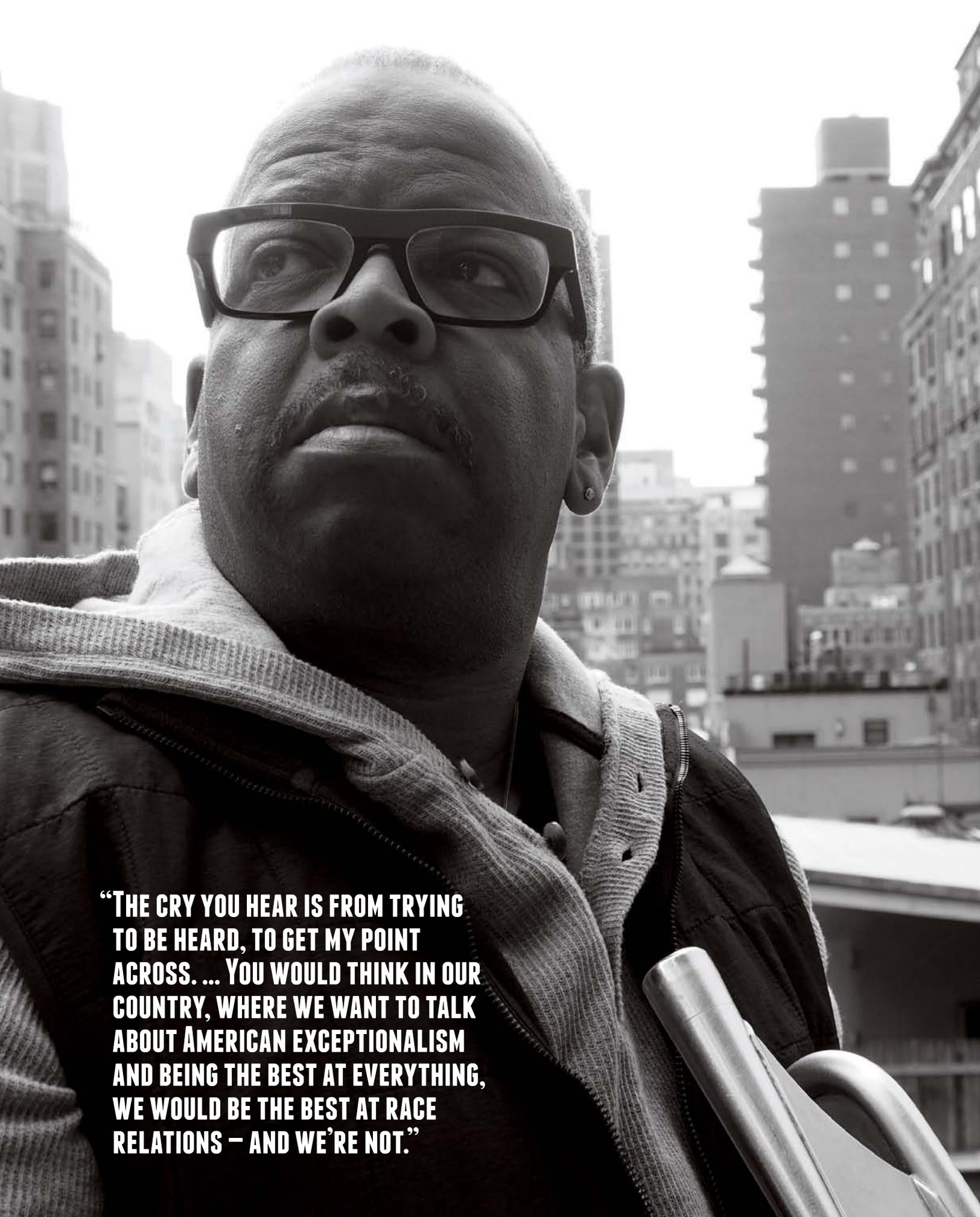


# Blanchard's Groove

Terence Blanchard's sound continues  
to evolve in fascinating fashion.

By Ted Panken • Photos by Henry Adebonojo





**“THE CRY YOU HEAR IS FROM TRYING TO BE HEARD, TO GET MY POINT ACROSS. ... YOU WOULD THINK IN OUR COUNTRY, WHERE WE WANT TO TALK ABOUT AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND BEING THE BEST AT EVERYTHING, WE WOULD BE THE BEST AT RACE RELATIONS — AND WE’RE NOT.”**

**The origin story of *Breathless*, Terence Blanchard's spring Blue Note release with his new group, E-Collective, dates to 2006, when Blanchard recorded the soundtrack he'd composed for *Inside Man*, the Spike Lee caper film in which Denzel Washington plays a hard-boiled old-school detective. He hired drummer Oscar Seaton for the session, and dug Seaton's mighty grooves. Seaton enjoyed the process, too, and they agreed to collaborate in the future. Around this time, Blanchard, who lives in New Orleans, where he was born and raised, had a similar conversation with bassist Donald Ramsey, an old Crescent City acquaintance.**

Nothing happened right away. Blanchard attended to his duties as Artistic Director of the Thelonious Monk Institute and, after 2011, the Henry Mancini Institute at the University of Miami. He composed more soundtracks, two Broadway shows, an opera, and music for several albums by the working quintet — in this period, either Bryce Winston or Walter Smith on tenor saxophone, Fabian Almazan on piano and keyboards, Derrick Hodge or Joshua Crumbly on bass and Kendrick Scott or Justin Brown on drums — that had been his default base of operations since the early 1990s. Then, last spring, Blanchard decided to commit. He asked Almazan to join a plugged-in band with Seaton, Ramsey and guitarist Charles Altura, whom he'd heard on a YouTube clip with Ambrose Akinmusire, once Blanchard's student at the Monk Institute.

During the summer, Blanchard, 54, wrote a batch of danceable tunes built on funk, Afro-pop and hip-hop beats, with succinct melodies and enough harmonic information to facilitate improvisational flexibility. In October he brought E-Collective to New Orleans for two days of rehearsal, and embarked on a three-and-a-half-week European tour for beta-testing and refinement. In December, he reconvened the musicians in New Orleans for the recording.

In February, Blanchard brought a modified version of E-Collective — Burniss Earl Traviss played bass; Kimberley Thompson played drums — to Russia's Triumph of Jazz Festival for three weekend concerts at separate venues in St. Petersburg and Moscow. During the final, Sunday event, at Moscow's International House of Music, they played five instrumentals from *Breathless*, among them "See Me As I Am," a funky-yet-plaintive 9-note theme with a stomping, work song feel; "Confident Selflessness," which refracted Afro-fusion *a la* Joe Zawinul; and "Soldiers," a brisk blues over a skittery New Orleans groove. It was a compelling tour de force — freewheeling, experimental, kinetic — marked by balls-out, thematically cogent solos from the front-liners.

The leader directed the flow with body language and transitional passages on laptop synth, and said his piece on a string of inflamed declamations that exploited his full-bodied command of the trumpet's higher register and an ability to calibrate cries, shrieks and whoops precisely, sometimes unplugged, sometimes with real-time, foot-pedal-triggered processing. He danced his way through the rhythmic web in the manner of '70s-era Miles Davis, bobbing and weaving, leaning back and bending forward, prancing left and right, forward and back.

On *Breathless*, Blanchard contextualizes the instrumentals with a palpable narrative arc, mirroring such recent opuses as 2007's *A Tale of God's Will (A Requiem For Katrina)* and 2009's *Choices*. As on *Choices*, he conveys his core message via a soliloquy by Cornell West, in this case a meditation on Dr. Martin Luther King's "prescient and prophetic"

warnings on the enduring costs to America of economic inequality, racism and militarism. "You break the barrier at the highest level, break through the ceiling, even with a black man and a black woman and two impressive black children in the White House," West intones. "But too many folks are in the basement — because they've never been concerned about the poor ... nobody on his economic team."

Unlike its recent predecessors, *Breathless* features a vocalist, the New Orleans singer P.J. Morton, who opens the proceedings with an incantatory reading of Gene McDaniels' cynical, demotic Vietnam-era lament "Compared to What," his sweet, church-inflected tenor setting up a fierce Blanchard solo. Morton quiet-storms Hank Williams' melancholy, posthumously issued ballad "I Ain't Got Nothin' But Time." His rendering of Blanchard's despairing lyric on "Shutting Down" oozes plaintiveness, echoed by the composer's long, piercing wails on trumpet.

**Blanchard's bandmates, each young enough to be his child, returned to the United States on Monday morning, but he**

remained behind for a Tuesday concert with the Moscow State Jazz Orchestra at Spaso House, the official residence of the U.S. Ambassador to Russia. He took time off from fine-tuning the rough mix of *Breathless* to meet me for lunch in the restaurant of the opulent hotel next door to the concert hall.

"At the rehearsals, I told the band I wanted groove-based music, to appeal to young people and get them more interested in playing instrumental music on a high level," Blanchard said. "But I vacillated about how far to go creatively. Should it be more like Weather Report or more R&B-based? Then I decided not even to go down that road, but let it unfold as the guys played together — let it be what it's supposed to be."

Blanchard was asked about the match-up of his no-holds-barred attitude to improvising and the detailed, painstaking process of composing movie soundtracks. The Internet Movie Database lists 58, including 13 for Spike Lee, among them *Malcolm X*, *Jungle Fever*, *Four Little Girls* and *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*. "Some people think it's limiting to stay within the context of the story, but it's actually very liberating," he said. "The story contains various emotional components, and you see the limitless nature of music, how one idea, one through-line, can be expressed in so many ways. We try to tell a story throughout the entire show, not just on a particular piece. My background as a composer shows me how to develop my ideas, while keeping the content within that context. I remember watching Betty Carter, who went seamlessly from tune to tune, not even giving you a chance to blink. It involved you in her world."

Through film, Blanchard added, "I've realized you're trying to tap into a bigger purpose than the notes or the rhythm or the harmony." He referenced aphorisms to this effect from Art Blakey, who employed him in the Jazz Messengers between 1982 and 1986 ("We're all trying to find our grits"), and Cornel West ("We're always trying to find our own truths"), and also paraphrased John Coltrane ("You've got to learn how to become in tune to the universe when you play"). A tour with Herbie Hancock about a decade ago introduced Blanchard to Buddhist practice; he meditates and chants to still his mind.

"You need to remove that chatter in the brain," he said. "Am I good

# Punchy Music

**Terence Blanchard has recently been making his mark as a composer in Broadway theater, with credits that include**

the Chris Rock vehicle *The Motherf\*\*ker With A Hat* and a revival of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. But no recent achievement gives him greater joy than his first opera, *Champion: An Opera In Jazz*, commissioned by the St. Louis Opera Theater, which staged six sold-out shows in June 2013.

*Champion* is a two-act, 10-scene account of the life and times of welterweight boxing champion Emile Griffith. (The libretto is by Tony-Award winning playwright Michael Cristofer, with whom Blanchard worked on the films *Gia* and *Original Sin*.) Griffith, who died in 2013, is best remembered for the denouement of his third title match with the Cuban boxer Benny "the Kid" Paret, who Griffith knocked out to win the championship in 1961, lost to in a split decision later that year, and defeated again in 1962, attacking his opponent — who had outed and mocked Griffith's closeted homosexuality during the weigh-in — with such ferocity that Paret died as a consequence.

Blanchard is no stranger to contact sports, having played Pop Warner football well enough in late-adolescence to be placed on an all-city team ("I was strong for my age"), before his father forbade further activity. "My dad sang opera, and it was very important for me to get through this," he said. "When they brought me onstage to take a bow after the premier, Arthur Woodley, who plays the older Emile, grabbed me and said, 'Your dad would be proud.' I was like a little baby."

For Blanchard — who trains with former world heavy-weight champion Michael Bentt, who he met during the early 'oos while working on *Dark Blue*, with director Ron Silver — boxing is analogous to jazz. "After you learn the fundamentals and proper technique, it all goes out the window when the bell rings," he said. "It's a chess match — out-thinking your opponent, being a couple of moves ahead. Michael never felt one of his greatest knockout punches; he was in a zone, and it seemed effortless. I feel that way sometimes on the bandstand, that I'm witnessing myself as the audience is."

He stated that high-level boxers feel the same passion for their sport as his own peer group feels for music. "I was in the gym with Virgil Jones, who trains [WBA super-middleweight champion] Andre Ward. I was hitting the heavy bag, and some trainers saw me. They didn't know who I was. They said, 'Man, you got a nice power shot.' They don't care. I'm not competing! It's the same thing with musicians. If you go out and hear a kid who can play, you go, 'Man, that guy's got a good sound.'" —TP

terms of a soulful calling — trying to express an honest emotion. Let it roll. Sometimes it's through melody. I try to make sure the melodies are free and not bound by what's happening harmonically. Sometimes I get caught up in what the guys are playing, and I stop just to let it hang.

"The cry you hear is from trying to be heard, to get my point across. When are people truly going to learn that we're all the same? You would think in our country, where we want to talk about American exceptionalism and being the best at everything, we would be the best at race relations — and we're not."

Blanchard attributed his embrace of a no-safety-net attitude to private lessons with composer Roger Dickerson circa 1977-78, when he transferred from a prestigious Catholic high school to spend mornings in a public high school and afternoons at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. His classmates included Wynton and Branford Marsalis, who would facilitate his recruitment to the Jazz Messengers, and Donald Harrison, his front-line partner in the Messengers, with whom he would form the influential Harrison-Blanchard Quintet in 1984.

"Roger told me to learn to listen to the music tell you what it's supposed to be," Blanchard said. "When you compose, these little ideas are screaming at you; your ego is telling you it needs to be something else, that it's not related to what you're writing." To reinforce this truism, Dickerson taught a concept called "If I could tell you, I would," which he had distilled, Blanchard found out a decade later, from Arnold Schoenberg's *The Craft of Musical Composition*.

"I teach it wherever I go," he continued. "I have the students manipulate those words into as many sentences as they can, to show how many permutations one can create in what appears to be a limited set of circumstances. Then I take any musical theme they have, and run it up every degree of the scale or whatever key it's in. All the intervallic relationships change, but the melodic shape stays the same. That proves that the shape, not the intervals, is the musical idea; they can create an entire composition using only their original ideas."

Moving in the fast company provided by the Marsalis brothers and Harrison also facilitated Blanchard's development and spurred his work ethic. "I first met them after fifth grade, and when I saw them again, those dudes were playing their behinds off," he stated. "I knew I had a lot of work to do, but I had a passion for it. My dad had put in a fake bar with lights that turned when you turned on the record player in it, and weekends, instead of going out, I'd sit home and play my Miles Davis records. I'd listen to one track over and over, first listening to the trumpet, then the saxophone, then the bass — trying to figure out what is jazz. But all of us were driven. Wynton and I made a pact that if we ever caught each other doing some bullshit, we needed to call each other on it."

Blanchard also cited the active influence of a cohort of African-American male role models, not least his father, Joseph Oliver, who sold insurance and sang opera locally. "Dad would practice his pieces at the piano, and when he finished, he'd balance his books on an adding machine on a cardboard table," Blanchard said. "At NOCCA, Ellis Marsalis constantly talked about practicing and how much he had to work. He and Kidd Jordan and Alvin Batiste and Roger were my benchmark for being a successful African-American man in this country. They weren't making money or getting stardom. They were serious about their craft because they loved it. That's my orientation. I work hard at this stuff for no other reason than the mere fact that I love it."

enough to do this? Should I be here doing this? Man, look at all the records I've listened to.' When you start to play, you might have an idea — a shape — of what the solo should be. You've got to throw that away, or someone else will play something unrelated to what's in your mind, and you'll be fucked. I always tell myself to try to find my voice. Think in

**“I’m looking for musicians who are inquisitive,” Blanchard said. That aspiration was evident throughout Sunday’s concert** in Moscow, not least on Almazan’s “Everglades,” which emerged from Blanchard’s dreamy synth line that steered the composer into a Chopin-esque ballad upon which he created stark, forceful variations from which Blanchard piggybacked into a fiery, processed solo that incorporated mysterious overtones and echoes into the flow.

“Sometimes in jazz, you learn a certain style and improvise within that style,” Blanchard said. “Well, Wayne Shorter said jazz means ‘I dare you.’ I want people who are willing to try anything, and then help me to learn from those things as they are learning.”

If the band’s unconstrained approach to the raw materials reflected Blanchard’s leadership style, so did the inclusion of Almazan’s contribution, the latest in a string of pieces Blanchard has incorporated from younger personnel — Edward Simon, Eric Harland, Lionel Loueke, Aaron Parks, Derrick Hodge, Bryce Winston, Walter Smith III and Almazan — on the leading edge of 21st-century jazz expression.

“I’d never really played in 5/4 and 7/4, and those guys did it well, so I felt like the one who was behind the 8-ball,” he said of the salutary effects of eliciting original music from younger partners, as Art Blakey did when he and Donald Harrison played together in the Messengers. “To develop a high level of expression, they have to write and have a place to perform it and work it out. Where better than in a band with people you play with regularly, whose rhythmic and harmonic sensibilities you trust? Hearing your composi-

tions up against something else can be a wakeup call, but that only happens with guys who really are trying to find themselves.”

In a sense, Blanchard said, he experiences this dynamic in meeting the varied challenges presented by film scoring. “I always say that my jazz background allows me to think quickly on my feet in the film world,” he said. He described his process on *Inside Job*, which includes old-school funk, atonal string music and remixes of the Sufi-based pop song “Chaiyya Chaiyya,” which Spike Lee appropriated from the Bollywood romantic thriller *Dil Se*.

“Spike found the Indian song, and told me he’d use it for the opening and closing, which made it an element. For one area at the end, he wanted a string quartet. ‘Oh-kay! A string quartet it is.’ He decided to use a love theme I’d written as the main theme. I had to figure out how to make this very intimate sound that I initially heard into something more menacing. The Roger Dickerson experience was extremely helpful. It allowed me to see all those musical ideas in various forms.”

Blanchard’s experience with Dickerson and his other New Orleans mentors is a key reason why he returned to the Crescent City from Brooklyn midway through the ‘90s, as was his desire to be near his children after a divorce. “I learned a lot in New York, but every time I went home I’d remember why I was doing this,” he said. “Being in New Orleans kept my feet to the ground, reminding me every day of the guys I heard growing up whose dedication came from sheer passion.

“Art Blakey and Dizzy Gillespie aren’t around to tell people any more. It’s up to us. We have to start saying, ‘Listen, this is how I did this, and this is how you can do this.’” ▲

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