

THE JOURNAL OF JAZZ AND IMPROVISED MUSIC

# CODA MAGAZINE

MAY/JUNE 1995 • ISSUE 261 • \$3.95 CDN/\$3.50 US

**ELLA FITZGERALD**  
**CASSANDRA WILSON**  
**WES MONTGOMERY**  
**JEAN DEROME**  
**JOHN STEVENS**



**SPECIAL REVIEW ISSUE FEATURING THE BIG BANDS  
BLUE NOTE RECORDS • ACTUELLE MUSIC • POST-  
ORNETTE • WOMEN IN JAZZ & NEW YORK NOTES**

# BIG BANDS: ONE

REVIEWS BY  
RANDAL McILROY



SOME WORKS DEMAND a larger canvas and more colours. Working to the larger scale then becomes a matter of justification. Either you plump for the giant-sized gesture or the greater network of detail. Sometimes, rarely, you can do both.

Ever since spiralling costs and changing tastes thinned the big band ranks, leaders are more pressed to vindicate the many extra hands. Adversity has a way of encouraging, fortunately, and a recent batch of big-band sessions shows a variety of innovative responses. One thing is clear: orchestral thinking (layering the colours, playing cells of activity against each other, measuring the tension, etc.) holds sway. Somewhere Gil Evans is grinning.

SUN RA continues to report from beyond the grave, or beyond this planet at least, with two decidedly different interstellar communiques. *The Magic City* (Evidence ECD 22069-2) dates from 1965. Ra and his (Solar) Arkestra had recently moved to New York from Chicago, and according to Ra biographer John F. Szwed's valuable liner essay quickly found their home in a scene that embraced art without barriers.

Both the 27-minute title track and *The Shadow World* find Ra and his musicians conjuring shapes from the shadows. In the first, the high, shuddering, siren of Ra's clavoline, echoed by flute, piccolo, and bass clarinet, summons the Arkestra's collective power, with John Gilmore's whalesong tenor leading the first assault. The amorphous opening is situated musically somewhere between the 'little instrument' scratching of the early AACM bands and the later explorations of such early German rock alchemists as Amon Duul II, though neither would produce such might, nor show such a sense of galvanizing purpose. In the second, Ra prowls between tympani, piano, and amplified celeste as the horns spiral.

Completed with two short tracks (*Abstract Eye and Abstract 'I'*) that never develop beyond some ominous rumblings, *The Magic City* frames Ra as the man with the vision. That's a useful reminder when listening to another Evidence release, the soundtrack to Jim Newman's Ra biopic *Space Is The Place* (Evidence ECD 22070-2). Where *The Magic City* is about sweat and precision in the rehearsal loft, *Space Is The Place* is all about the showmanship of the stage, complete with invocations, poetry, and chants. Such adventures brooked no middle ground. Ra, bless him, could go on a bit, and the tedious "I am the Wind" declamations in *Blackman/Love in Outer Space* for one strike these outside ears as a near-endless preamble to the good stuff — here, Marshall Allen's wailing Morocco-via-Saturn oboe and the boiling drums. It would be wrong to disregard the recitations and other dramatics

as extraneous when Ra lived his art, but this time the music works better without them. It may be fitting that a chart called *Discipline 33* cues some of the hottest playing, underpinned by Danny Thompson's grooving baritone sax. *Satellites Are Spinning* is a poignant reminder that singer June Tyson, gone now like Ra, never got her due beyond the family.

One of Ra's greatest strengths as a bandleader was his orchestration of uncommon colours, especially in reeds and percussion. Where a big band typically involves the terracing of different voices in one drive, he pitched colours in virtual competition with each other.

VINNY GOLIA marshalls enough reeds to be an orchestra unto himself. The Large Ensemble displayed on *Decennium Dans Axlan* (Nine Winds NWCD 0140) saves him the bother.

The 25-member ensemble numbers a staggering list of voices, including violin, cello and tuned percussion in addition to a hefty brass section and five multi-woodwind players including Golia himself. Yet it remains a writer's vehicle — he founded the ensemble in 1982 to perform his larger works — and the four long compositions make full use of those colours.

The mood is tense, with Golia raising dissension to make the skin itch. In *Tapestry of Things Before*, the crosshatched marimbas nag like Steve Reich's patterns while the strings rise slowly. An acapella bass conversation in *Front Back* gives way to a furious swing session, with Bill Plake sounding like Eric Dolphy on tenor. Tolling brass figures shadow the darting clarinet and loose swinging drums of Mr. Justice. Jeff Gauthier's opening violin solo in *Man in a Bottle* suspends like ice over a crevice.

There's always something happening, and it always makes sense. Golia paints on a larger canvas than most, but he justifies every inch. It's a shame that unsentimental economic realities prevent the ensemble from performing live more often.

WITH a looser game plan that encourages open improvising by way of a score that promotes options over unanimity, English bassist/composer BARRY GUY's *Witch Gong Game II/10* (Maya MCD 9402) would seem to be the diametric opposite to Golia's planning. Yet the players of the Vancouver-based NOW ORCHESTRA react with such empathy and robust individuality that the effect is much the same — a large force in multiple, with ample contrast and no waste.

These two long works (16 and 53 minutes respectively) are episodic but organic. Like a garden, there's order and chaos in such naturally occurring proportions that the division soon seems irrelevant. The three basses and one cello loom, large brass/woodwind shapes emerge, then break in various simultaneous motions, to recombine and dissolve again and again. Occasionally a soloist emerges — Saul Berson's alto sax and Kate Hammet-Vaughan's voice compelled frenzied note-taking — but in a wild garden you don't fix on one bloom for long. Just dip in, but remember those heady fragrances can be heady in multitude.

GERMAN pianist/composer ALEXANDER VON SCHLIPPENBACH has worked in that raw territory even longer, notably with Globe Unity. *The Morlocks and Other Pieces* (FMP CD 61) is likewise beyond borders in every respect, blending structure and personal initiative, group identity and ego, and using an international cast. This time, he even shares piano and conducting duties with Japan's Ali Takase.

Everyone contributes, but Evan Parker still rates a paragraph of his own. There's a thrilling moment in *Contrareflection*, for example, where all other action suddenly cuts out for a good minute of the Englishman's impossible soprano multiphonics.

Some kind of hummingbird, Parker is often darting through the surging horns and Schlippenbach's trap-door approach to piano continuity.

Schlippenbach's compositions span 10 years of writing, with the diversity that suggests. *Jackhammer* swings without irony, much less apology. Marcia di Saturno is at once sombre and romantic, with tenorist Walter Gauchel plumbing both streams. The leader's stated interest in providing "the highest possible level of attention to an individual musical idea or a compositional concept, and try to observe and trace its inmost laws of momentum to the utmost, and then use this to create larger forms" is most electric in *The Morlocks* itself, where twin prepared pianos provide the brittle foundation for a mad circus parade of marching brass, dizzy piccolo and Parker's circular soprano.

DIFFERENT orchestral ideas abound in *Joy* (Candid CCD 79531), soprano saxophonist DAVID LIEBMAN's latest tribute to John Coltrane ("the major inspirational figure in jazz for me"). This time, he's used the James Madison University Jazz Ensemble under Gunnar Mossblad, along with the university's flute choir and a few guest soloists, to create frameworks for his straight-horn explorations.

The key word is enhancement. Forget any starchy notions of Trane mollified for the masses. The flute choir adds an unearthly grace to *After The Rain*. Strings and brass bring out the devotional beauty of the music. It's Liebman who cuts to the heart of the sound, though, with a keen technique on soprano that Trane himself had the chance to develop. The fiery leaps of *India* and the jeweller's-sharp melody in *Naima* confirm Liebman as one of the best on a notoriously difficult horn; what price a duet with Steve Lacy?

RAY ANDERSON is the trombone's cheeky virtuoso, unafraid to acknowledge the comic potential of the instrument's voice (in the same way that Don Byron accommodates that aspect of the clarinet) as a noble part of the heritage. His technique is wide, but he's also self-effacing to the degree in which he looks for context before expression, trying to find the best way to show what he can do.

*Big Band Record* (Gramavision R2 79497) is very much a collaboration with pianist/leader George Gruntz, who paces Anderson's catholicity with the charts to match. The New Orleans hilarity of *Seven Monsters*, the wild Latin dances of *The Literary Lizard* and the quietude of *My Wish* sit together naturally, cajoled or cushioned by layers of brass and reeds. Anderson is all over his horn, especially in the fluid structure of *Annabel At One* and the playful *Raven-A-Ning*, but there's plenty of room left for some of his formidable partners, notably in the clarinet and violin passages (Marty Ehrlich and Mark Feldman respectively) in *My Wish*.

This time, Anderson saves his vocal turn for the end, with the testifying *Don't Mow Your Lawn* suggesting he could always find work in the amen corner.

BIG-BAND history may be implicit rather than explicit in most of the aforementioned. Not so with the COUNT BASIE ORCHESTRA on the live *Basie's Bag* (Telarc Jazz CD83358), where the spry hands of the gone Basie are never too far away. Granted, Frank Foster's band sometimes owes more to Las Vegas than Kansas City, down to the *One O'Clock Jump* coda. The Basie swagger rises only occasionally; these players sound happier with the tidier memories, like the natty piano and rhythm guitar intro to *Way Out Basie*. Foster has some sturdy players on board, though, including hungry drummer David Gibson and trombonist Robert Trowers, and his own tenor chops are still on the strength.