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PLUS REVIEWS OF
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MUSIC, BOOKS & MODERN JAZZ COMPACT DISCS**



REFLECTIONS

CDS REVIEWED BY
**ANDREW
BARTLETT**

JULIUS HEMPHILL • Reflections • *da music/Freedom 741012*
MARTY EHRLICH • Just Before The Dawn • *New World Records 80474*
ANTHONY BRAXTON/MARIO PAVONE Quintet
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REGGIE WORKMAN • Cerebral Caverns • *Postcards 1010*
ANDY LASTER's Hydra • Polyogue • *Songlines 1507*
JOE MORRIS • Symbolic Gesture • *Soul Note 121204*



JULIUS HEMPHILL & BAIKIDA CARROLL PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK WEBER (SEPTEMBER 1977)

After Sun Ra, Bill Dixon, and, somewhat later, Anthony Braxton, probably the most astute texturalist was Julius Hemphill. That Hemphill was able to mix the hard, tensile swing of his Texas roots with a wide-open sense of the Midwestern mix of the urban metropolis and the open flatland, is a wondrous occurrence which leaves an enormous legacy in American improvised music. Nowhere in Hemphill's career did he

combine the various elements of his compositional and improvisational aesthetic more brilliantly than on *Coon Bid'ness*, released by Michael Cuscuna's Arista / Freedom records. Re-issued as *Reflections* (*da music/Freedom 741012*), this collection from two sessions in 1972 and 1975 delivers all of Hemphill's tonal stretches and a good deal of the bluster the late alto saxophonist always swirled in amidst his often deceptively calm, open forms.

Hemphill's best known piece, *The Hard Blues* achingly closes out this re-issue with twenty minutes of a staggered swagger, an antiphonal bouncing of the melody that oscillates between Hamiett Bluiett (listed as Maniet Bluiett) on baritone saxophone, Baikida Carroll on trumpet, and a dizzying mixture of Hemphill's alto and Abdul Wadud's cello. *Hard Blues* has a spare rawness, a concatenation of voices that sling facets of the tune back and forth with

a casual-sounding resonance that rings throughout *Reflections*. The CD's multiple directions, beginning with the rough-hewn billow of Hemphill's 1975 session (with Bluiett, Wadud, Black Arthur Blythe on alto saxophone, Barry Altschul on drums, and Daniel Ben Zebulan on congas) approximate late-century chamber music at times and everywhere show the seams Hemphill enlarged in the jazz tradition. This is a long-awaited event and is echoed by other *da music* re-issues from Arista's catalogue, including important Art Ensemble of Chicago and Cecil Taylor recordings, as well as a 3-CD box set of Thelonious Monk's last commercial recordings.

Luckily, Hemphill's sometimes hard luck, his lack of exposure, and his failing health did not keep him from tutoring some of improvised music's important boundary-stretchers. Among his students is Marty Ehrlich, whose *Dark Woods Ensemble* returns with *Just Before The Dawn* (*New World Records 80474*). Opening with *Spirit Of JAH*, a whirling flute melody echoed on dumbek by Don Alias, Ehrlich pays homage to Hemphill in an unrestrained, bright manner that readily qualifies any description of this group as "Dark," at least in terms of tone or timbre. Ehrlich, a St. Louis native who was taught by Hemphill during the latter's years there, picks up promptly on the open-space motifs Hemphill excelled in, and likewise peppers these expanses with verily roaring leaps on bass clarinet, clarinet, and alto saxophone.

Augmented on several tracks by Vincent Chancey's french horn, the *Dark Woods Ensemble's* mix of Erik Friedlander's cello, Mark Helias' bass, and Alias' various percussions does a kind of shadow dance with what one expects from either a chamber group or an avant jazz ensemble. *Flight* enlists spacious duo moments between Ehrlich and Helias only to peak out in soaring high notes and flashes of hoarse extensions. Then Ehrlich unpacks his alto and urges from it a tonal attack that plays an enticing game of hide-and-seek with Friedlander's sparkingly mimetic cello. *The Folksinger* features Ehrlich's

Dolphy-esque flute tones played against Friedlander's pluckings in a quietly pretty melody that wanders askew of the expected and into a bumpy terrain where the only constant is Alias' rattling shaker-percussion. Ehrlich's fresh compositions are dauntingly sharp and eerily dark, sometimes all in a matter of seconds.

The Anthony Braxton / Mario Pavone Quintet's debut CD *Seven Standards - 1995*, (*Knitting Factory Works KFW-168*) bears the typically Braxtonian simply descriptive title (with date). Here he forgoes his horn arsenal and instead chops away at the piano behind bassist Pavone, the alto sax, piccolo, and flute of Thomas Chapin, the trumpet of Dave Douglas, and Pheeroan akLaff.

Where the quintet sometimes sounds beautifully patient, able to dig in and stay on-track in a very conventional bop groove, Braxton's solos are choppy, jumpy affairs that hop across the keyboard. The "Standards" are each so newly rendered as to be completely unstandard, and where at times there's an awkwardness of discovery happening between the group's constituent elements, the session is startling and fresh. *Dewey Square* begins things a tad languidly, a vibe carried on in *Autumn In New York*. The languid spots are where, though, we also see the wild juxtaposition of Braxton's fairly unloosed pianistic talent. In almost every case, the languid moments give way to bursting solos from Douglas, searing alto work from Chapin, and some great basswork from Pavone, who can chop with Braxton or can leap across his strings with an awe-inspiring depth of pluck.

Listening in on Chicagoan Malachi Thompson & Africa Brass might suggest that the city's an outer limit carried by some bedazzled second line following parade music routed through the disparate strands of tradition. *Buddy Bolden's Rag -100 Years Of Jazz* (*Delmark DE-481*) sports a pretty grand title, reaching back for the unrecorded Bolden and laying claim to capturing a century of music all at once. If anyone could manage

this grand historical sweep, it probably is a Chicagoan, whether Bolden, Lester Bowie (who sits in with Africa Brass on three tunes here), or the esteemed Mr. Braxton. Thompson's latest is an ebullient, broad-minded mix of historical stuff. There's good, solid parade marches dashed with multiple rhythmic underpinnings and complex brass voicings, fairly intricate forays into freely improvised realms, Brazilian sambas, and just about everything else one would expect in a CD with its subtitle laying claim to covering jazz's history.

Of particular importance is Thompson's arrangement skill. He's adept at an Ellingtonian antiphony and a Mingus swing, but also shepherds some rich, fluid warm tones across this disc's 70+ minutes. Lester Bowie makes characteristically solid contributions, full of gasps, bent-tones, windiness, and fast runs from top to bottom (or vice versa). Between *The Chaser In Brazil* and *The Chaser In America* is a brief tour of how the African Diaspora sounds through jazz and geographical histories, with the former infused with dancing rhythms and the latter fractured over drummer Darryl Evans' roilings and dissonant antiphonies from the brass. Bowie's on both and covers lots of ground, airy and cluttered alike. If you've dug Thompson's free-bop band and its variance of free elements, bop elements, and solid use of strong melodies and rich orchestrations, then this is your cup of tea. It may well be the best outing for Africa Brass thus far.

Rarely can composers pull off as far-reaching, energetic, and adventure-soaked projects such as this Rene Lussier collaboration with Vancouver's Now Orchestra on *Le Tour Du Bloc* (*Victo cd036*). Paul Plimley's thundering piano, Lussier and Ron Samworth's churning guitars, the twin drums of Pierre Tanguay and Dylan van der Schyff, all these throttling voices labour in stormy company with a quintet of saxophones and pair of brass players backing the ghostly front-end presence of Kate Hammett-Vaughan's voice.

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REFLECTIONS

Using NOW at times as a kind of symphonic breeze and then as a free music hurricane, Lussier keeps listeners on shaky ground throughout this disc. Lussier's got a dramatic expertise in making every slashing jab of Plimley, every baritone squawk of Coat Cooke and the chanted syllabics



RENE LUSSIER PHOTOGRAPH BY LAURENCE SVIRCHEV

on *Figure* all demand the listener's attention with equal verve. But above and beyond all, Lussier's got a sampler's overview and delight in quick, jump-cut snippets. Where he might share this leaping jitteriness with John Zorn, Lussier's got a better fix on enriching each jump, finding a spot to innovate each lurch, each jut, and each brief cavernous silence as they appear. Textures abound here so abundantly that the point may well be the intense multitude of moods, speeds, and densities.

Equally bumpy, without the gale force of a large ensemble or the fancy for the quickly-delivered jump-cut, is the now-infamous **Clusone Trio**. Han Bennink, Michael Moore, and Ernst Reijseger's 1994 Rambo release *I Am An Indian* (Gramavision GCD 79505) is now re-issued for Canadian and U.S. release on Gramavision. It sounds as smart-assed and wildly swinging as Clusone's other available recordings, with a heavy lean on both Irving Berlin's

once-wretchedly rendered *I Am An Indian* and on various tunes titled after Northwest Coastal Native Indian tribes and subjects. Berlin's tune is rekindled here amidst *Tlingit*, the ironic humour and shrieks of *Wigwam*, *Salish*, and such other ditties as Herbie Nichols' *The Gig*. Recorded across Canada and in Austria and Switzerland, this has the feel of a Bennink-related live set, with in-time rhythms pounded out with careful fury and a good deal of whooping, rim-shot humours, and sheer energy.

Reijseger and Moore are sonically tightly woven yet willing to unweave and freely scramble about. Bennink is at once

good glue, holding this all together, and then instigative in making these tunes sputtering, fluttering free improvisation platforms and all-out good time swingers. Reijseger and Moore, like Bennink, find the noisy qualities in their instruments with a nice, gleeful spirit of fun that clearly impacts the crowds on the record. It's not all game-playing in the loosest sense of that phrase, but everything here is spiced with a sense of play that few groups of any substance have maintained.

Assist **Reggie Workman** has a lengthy history working with his own and others' innovative ensembles, facets of which show up all over *Cerebral Caverns* (Postcards 1010). On this CD, Workman employs Geri Allen, Gerry Hemingway, Julian Priester, Al Foster, Sam Rivers, harpist Elizabeth Panzer, and tablas virtuoso Tapan Modak. They don't all sit in on any one tune, but each makes his/her presence felt.

The pieces featuring Modak and Panzer are the most unusual, especially when Priester and Rivers provide squiggly lines and buttery 'bone spreads against the precision of Panzer's runs and odd timbres of tablas played in such a context. Sonorously building on the electronic drum pads of Hemingway, Sam Rivers' flute, and Panzer's harp for the title track, Workman carries the group to rhythmic/melodically unexpected piano trios with Allen and Hemingway, as well as quartets featuring Priester and Rivers jousting over Al Foster's fast legato waves of drummed accompaniment and Workman's flashingly quick melody on bass. Pulse replaces strict time at numerous points here, and when Panzer's digging in on harp the effect is startling.

Rivers sounds as brusque and intense as ever on tenor, full-toned but not afraid of tonal shards on flute, and sharp as a tack on soprano. This disc is the best yet to abridge Workman's wide vision of where jazz can go in the wake of free improvisation and world music.

Andy Laster's Hydra has always found the mixture of melodic and harmonic complexity key to their mix of improvisational languages. With guitarist Brad Schoepach added to the group for *Polyogue* (Songlines 1507), things get even stewier for Hydra, creating yet more room for pointillist slurs from Herb Robertson, nascent rhythmic plasticity from Tom Rainey, and, of course, more driven saxwork from Laster himself. Like Braxton's bebop, Laster's pieces are full of choppy places where the group seems to be picking up stray pieces to build a melody, rather than stating a melody and then working from it.

Schoepach's mixture of distortion-strong chunks of sound, strangely expanded single tones, and singing accompaniments to the horns' melodies serves Hydra well. The music's more dynamic and has a voice that at once can be "with" the horns and then quickly "with" the rhythm, making this sometimes a spiky guitar-heavy CD and at times a richly careful inspection of and experiment with sonic stretches à la Hemphill. Schoepach's solos incorporate chordal progressions, bent note slurs (which recall fellow Hydra member Herb Robertson) and strums addled on each end with distorted skronks and spiky leaps. Hydra's enriched for sure by his presence.

Joe Morris, too, has a beguiling drive and mix of focal points to quicken the heart upon listening to his material, of which *Symbolic Gesture* (Soul Note 121204) may be the finest to date. There's a hard swagger to Morris, though he spikes his way out of any predictability and generally avoids stating complex chord progressions. His bent-string fastness is aided and abetted by bassist Nate McBride, who sounds as though he's hugging the bass close, hovering over it, and tearing through its ranges with a propulsive power. That said, this is a surprisingly calm CD. There's no real bombastic blasting from Morris, ample blues, and enough melody to win over the most skeptical traditionalist while still wowing the more out-inclined.

Morris has found one of the guitar trio's best modes of operation. Lumbering low-end rhythms set up the ideal foil through which to plink, pluck, and knock out pristine notes in flurries and skewed time warps. Forget the vitality of strumming through the tradition or comping to hint at influence, Morris verily blazes in a manner that's not at all obviously blazing. This one's for any guitar purist or Metheny-acolyte looking for light. □

ABOUT THE WRITER:

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