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MOBILITY AGENDA

GEORGE LEWIS

REPOSING AFTER an espresso at a sidewalk table on Vancouver's Commercial Drive, George Lewis summarizes his strategy in evading what he calls the "culture police" for the past quarter-century:

"I ignore them!"

The trombonist/composer/interactive computer-software engineer/sound-installation designer/educator/scholar/historian then launches a joyous, throw-back-your-head, open-throated sonic boom of a laugh, lasting longer than seems humanly possible. Not only do the patrons at adjacent tables do a double take, but a passenger in a passing car, a bicyclist and a dog do as well.

By ignoring preconceptions of African-American creativity and intellectualism, of which the "if you're black, then Lincoln Center is your boss" syndrome is but a recent wrinkle, Lewis has moved freely between IRCAM (the Parisian musical-acoustic research center house that Pierre Boulez built) and Fred Anderson's Velvet Lounge; between his own music, which employs everything from complex "Pan-European" notation to asynchronous MIDI controllers, and colleagues' projects, like the Steve Lacy quintet that helped kick off this year's Vancouver Jazz Festival; and between his community building as professor of music in the University of California at San Diego's (UCSD) critical studies/experimental

BY BILL SHOEMAKER
PHOTOGRAPH BY ALON NAHIGIAN





LAURENCE SVIRCHEV

musical areas once thought to be mutually exclusive, making mobility integral to his aesthetic. Mobility is perhaps the most important tool Lewis has used to galvanize UCSD, and the Left Coast as a whole. Just in the limited arena of recordings, Lewis' mobility has contributed to one of the year's more rewarding al-

bums, *The Shadowgraph Series: Compositions for Creative Orchestra* (Spool).

The album fills in two glaring discographical gaps: It is the first recording devoted exclusively to Lewis' orchestra music, and it contains first recordings of pieces from Lewis' "Shadowgraph" series of composition from the '70s; more importantly, it documents Lewis' ongoing work with Vancouver's NOW Orchestra, which Lewis considers to be "one of the finest large creative ensembles active in the last 20 years." Throughout the bracing program, which ranges from pore-opening Latin grooves to ear-twisting realizations of graphic notation, the Vancouverites hand in strong individual contributions, confirming what Lewis calls their ability "to code switch, to work back and forth between the scores and their own improvisational approaches without getting stuck."

Even though Lewis' teaching, scholarship and participation in collaborative public-art installations are well under the radar of a recorded-media-driven press, they are arguably more essential to understanding Lewis at this juncture than even a

likely year's-best-list item like *The Shadowgraph Series*. As Lewis talks at length about specific multimedia aspects of his work, the underlying issues of all these activities are so finely meshed, that talking about one quickly brings them all into the mix. Additionally, regardless of his starting point, Lewis evokes the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) paradigm in short order. His erudite scholarly postulations and strategies for student empowerment flow directly from the AACM's inclusive African-American perspective and its aversion to labels. Lewis cites early AACM events as a foundation for his cross-platform work with artists from other fields.

But Lewis' articulation of a mobility agenda is ultimately born of his own diverse interests.

"A lot of this mobility talk comes out of scholarship, but the scholarship is related to life experience," Lewis reflects. "Basically, I got involved in writing through being a professor at UCSD, and realizing that a lot of students coming through our interdisciplinary program, Critical Studies and Experimental Practices [CSEP], within the music department, really needed a field in which they could talk about their concerns. They are crossing so many boundaries—they come out of music, they're open to collaboration, performance, composition, installation and technological work. They're seriously confronting cultural issues of race, gender and so on. There didn't seem to be a place within traditional music scholarship to address that."

Lewis is dismayed that much of the scholarly literature on improvisation and

related issues driving the work at CSEP is "written from a strict ethnomusicological perspective, which is so narrow." Instead, Lewis employs a broader cultural approach in essays like "Too Many Notes: Computers, Complexity and Culture in *Voyager*" (*Leonardo Music Journal* 10; 2000), by citing visual artists like Africobra arts movement leader Jeff Donaldson, and against-the-grain scholars like anthropologist and improvising cellist Georgina Born, among others.

Lewis claims that the shortcoming of most of the current literature stems from the presumption "that you have to have a focus, which implies that all this interdisciplinary activity is not focused. What we're focusing on is getting as large a handle on the situation as possible. And that's a mobility issue. The real focus is accounting for as many different stories and perspectives as you can. What you run up against is what people in the AACM were respond-

ing to when they said they don't like to be labeled. People want to be free to work in any media, work across media and to address the entire spectrum of creativity they are involved in. That's why within the AACM you find computer music, performance art and various approaches that are outside a specific style. So, what do you do with that? What you start to find is that words like 'tradition' are very important, but when they are used for cultural policing, then mobility is reduced. That's where we start thinking that we don't have to pay attention to the cultural police."

Lewis has repeatedly encountered many of these issues in writing *Power Stronger Than Itself*, reinforcing his conviction that the AACM "is the source of the mobility discourse. Nobody in the AACM really talked about what you should be doing," says Lewis, who conducted nearly 100 interviews and pored over both the voluminous AACM archives and the Darm-

stadt Jazz Institute's renowned collection of jazz periodicals. "There wasn't any particular dogma. And, even if someone tried to impose a litmus test, they would be in dialogue with people who felt free to ignore them. As a composite unit, there was no way to impose a unitary style or ideology in the AACM. This was encapsulated by a comment by Joseph Jarman, who was confronted with a comparison between the AACM and Sun Ra's Arkestra: In Sun Ra's group, Sun Ra can say and do, but in the AACM, everyone can say and do. When you take that approach into the academic environment, I see it as my responsibility to make sure that the students have mobility."

Mobility is not instantaneously attained, Lewis cautions. It requires carefully laid foundations, the first being the atmosphere that promotes mobility. "One of the things you hear about on the tapes of the early

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practices program, and the more solitary pursuit of writing the forthcoming *Power Stronger Than Itself: The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians* for the University of Chicago Press.

"You have to ignore a lot of things to have the mobility required to be an experimental artist," says Lewis, who established his own mobility immediately upon arrival on the international scene in 1976. In a span of months, he toured with the Count Basie Orchestra, joined Anthony Braxton's fabled quartet and recorded there recently reissued *Solo Trombone Album* for Sackville.

The Sackville CD is a fine starting point for mapping Lewis' mobility, as it includes inspired takes on blues, jazz balladry and a crucial first step in integrating technology into his work: "Starburst," a bracing, 20-minute composition, realized through overdubbing three complex parts.

Technology took on an increasing role in Lewis' music, beginning with the electronic drones of late '70s albums like *Homage to Charles Parker* (Black Saint), and continuing with his original interactive software on '93's *Voyager* (Avant), and the use of text samples on 2000's *Endless Shout* (Tzadik). While this caused some culture-police agents to question his Great Black Music bona fides, Lewis' immersion in technology nevertheless facilitated his transit into international computer music and electroacoustic circles rarely accessed by African-Americans. Other doors opened for Lewis through his early encounters with Derek Bailey, Misha Mengelberg and other principals of the European free-improvisation scene.

Subsequently, Lewis has flourished in

listening pleasures

John Coltrane "Naima" from *Live at the Village Vanguard Again!* (Impulse!)

Steve Coleman *Genesis & the Opening of the Way* (RCA)

Greg Osby *Banned in New York* (Blue Note)

Jon Jang/Jiebing Chen/Max Roach *Beijing Trio* (Asian Improv)

Sam Rivers Rivbea All-Star Orchestra *Inspiration and Culmination* (RCA)

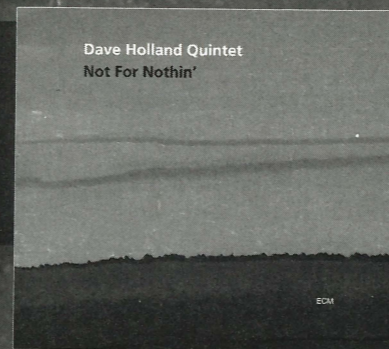
Roscoe Mitchell *The Flow of Things* (Black Saint)

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Dave Holland Quintet Not For Nothin'

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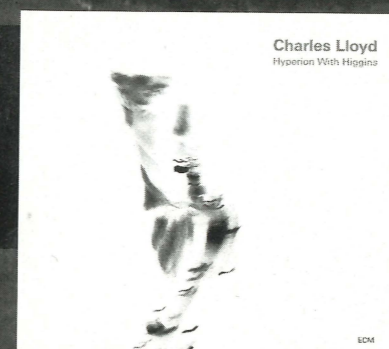


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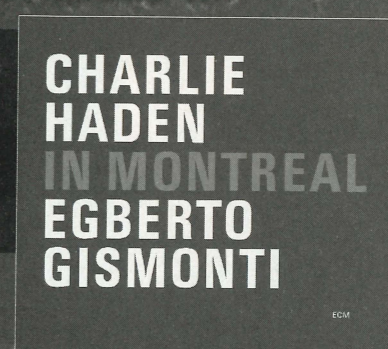
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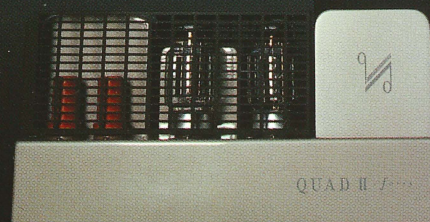
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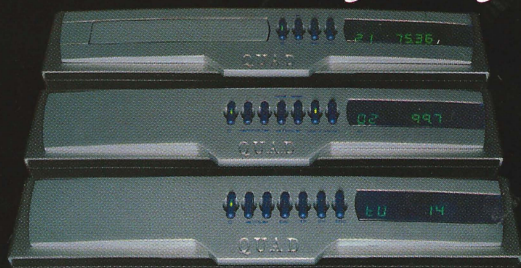


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