

# Jazz Double Bill Combines Influence and Invention

The best bands, in jazz or in any other kind of music, are those with some generosity, those willing to reach out to an audience and embrace

## Off Beat

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them in a spirit of participation before engulfing them in whatever variant of sound they choose to pursue. These bands don't treat their listeners as passive objects that need to be blasted into submission or beguiled into compliance. They assume that the people who turn out to see them are there out of some active interest and feeling of kinship. And whether they play gentle folk music or hard-core punk, what they put out on stage is as much an invitation to partake in some sort of spirit of play as it is a product to be consumed.

There's no monopoly on this quality, although it is rare and elusive: D.O.A. has it, and so do Pied Pumpkin, Cymbali, and Bill Henderson, to name just a few local

performers that we've heard lately. And many of our local modern jazz ensembles have it, which, in a way, is only natural: playing in an environment where very often your audience will be made up almost exclusively of your friends, peers, and fellow musicians, there's an obvious well of shared experience and emotion just waiting to be tapped.

The musicians who make up the New Orchestra Workshop are well aware of the need to make their music communicate, even though they are working in the outer fringes of jazz.

We've written before about the Glass Slipper, the N.O.W. group's new performance space/rehearsal hall at 11th and Main, and now it's time to point out that two of the organization's most communicative ensembles, Unity and Chief Feature, will be performing there this Friday and Saturday (August 25 and 26).

It's an interesting double bill. Although the bands take very different approaches to their music, they also have some profound similarities,

starting with their instrumentation. Both groups are pianoless quartets: in Chief Feature, Bruce Freedman plays saxophone, Bill Clark plays trumpet, Clyde Reed plays bass, and Claude Ranger is on drums, while Unity includes saxophonist Graham Ord, trumpeter/violinist Daniel Lapp, bassist Paul Blaney, and drummer Roger Baird.

Though both groups are more or less collective efforts, the saxophonists are the nominal leaders, and it's interesting to note that Ord and Freedman have played together for years, both in various N.O.W. projects and with percussionist Albert St. Albert's salsa/jazz/Afrobeat fusion band, Rio Bumba.

Of the two groups, Chief Feature is the more firmly rooted in what we think of as the jazz tradition. Freedman notes that his main influence is John Coltrane, another musician who managed to make even his most extreme musical moments resonate with passion. "He has a much greater depth than any other musician I know," claims Freedman, obviously

still in awe of Coltrane's massive talent. "I don't play two notes of Coltrane's material, but what I try to do, constantly, is emulate the sort of emotional space that his music came from. I owe it all, 100 percent, to that man."

There are other musicians in town who might be able to play Coltrane's solos note for note, but Freedman has effectively plugged in to the Coltrane spirit, and his group's music is hard hitting and fierce, yet paradoxically full of an ecstatic joy. On a good night, Chief Feature can make the music soar and burn.

Unity casts its musical nets further afield, incorporating Lapp's country fiddle tendencies and Baird's Eastern leanings on tabla and "little instruments" into a sound that is also largely drawn from the radical jazz experiments of the '60s. But the group puts a greater stress on collective improvisation and takes greater chances, something they can well afford to do: whenever things are in danger of collapsing they can always lean

back on the incredible strength and drive of the under-appreciated Blaney's basswork.

When the group isn't playing "free", they play Ord's tunes, which often run attractive, almost folkish, tunes through the prismatic refractions of Ornette Coleman's complex harmolodic approach to pacing and melody. Ord credits his compositional strengths to his weaknesses as an imitator, noting that while there is a whole tradition in jazz of learning to play through copying other players, he was never able to do that. "It has taken me an awful lot longer to get to the point where I am now," he admits, "but at the same time it has made me a lot more open to hearing different things, different sounds and different approaches."

But who needs imitation, anyway? With Ord's inventions and Freedman's spirited *hommages*, Unity and Chief Feature will certainly deliver a weekend's worth of some of the most vital and communicative music to be found in this city. ■

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