

Avant-Garde Jazz

by Micah Holmquist

No exact definition exists for avant-garde jazz. Yet there exists a large body of material that rejects jazz conventions but at the same time remains clearly in the genre. And so far 1999 has been a tremendous year for recordings in this poorly defined category. Among the most interesting of these recordings are the following:

Lester Bowie's Brass Fantasy *The Odyssey of Funk & Popular Music Vol. 1* (Atlantic, 1999)

Lester Bowie is best known as a founding member of the Art Ensemble of Chicago (AEC), a legendary jazz group that began performing and recording in the second half of the 1960s and continues to do so up until the present. AEC has always had the ability to seamlessly combine various jazz styles. On his own—or more precisely as the leader of Lester Bowie's Brass Fantasy—the trumpeter has recorded many pop hits with results that are equally stellar and unexpected. *The Odyssey of Funk & Popular Music Vol. 1* is no exception.



The cd begins with the burlesque standard "The Birth of the Blues" and moves on to cover Marilyn Manson's "Beautiful People" and the Spice Girls hit "Two Become One." The latter song is performed sans embellishments until about midway through, at which point Tuba player Bob Stewart begins to mutate his playing as a segue into a cataclysmic yet still tasteful ending. Along the way the group does a somewhat conventional version of Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" as well as two songs of tribute to the late Notorious B.I.G. Lester Bowie's son Joseph co-wrote, raps, and performs a trombone solo on the most interesting of the pair, a tune called "Next." The best cuts, however, are versions of the r&b standards "In the Still of the Night" and "If You Don't Know Me by Now." Both soulful tracks feature excellent solos by Bowie that experiment with the well-known tunes but do not lose sight of why they are so popular in the first place.

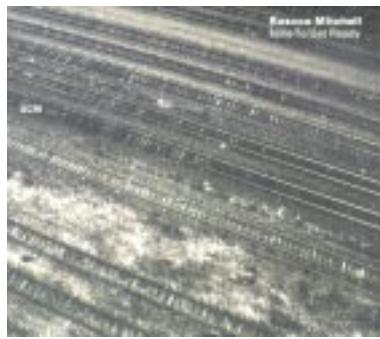
Roscoe Mitchell Quartet *In Walked Buckner* (Delmark, 1999)

Roscoe Mitchell and the Note Factory *Nine to Get Ready* (ECM, 1999) Multi-instrumentalist Roscoe Mitchell is also a founding member of the AEC but, in contrast to Bowie, his solo work has tended to be more "out there." *In Walked Buckner* is a virtual case study in that tendency. A



quick glance at the line-up suggests that a hard-driving affair is in order. Bassist Reggie Workman is best known for a 1961 stint with John Coltrane and then working with drummer Art Blakey. Jodie Christian considers himself to be a primarily bebop-influenced pianist while drummer Albert "Tootie" Heath has played with a literal Who's Who of bebop. These recordings turn out to be a collection of understated musings. A couple of the tunes such as the title cut are somewhat standard in their format but more often than not Mitchell's saxophone, flute, and clarinet playing steers clear of the ordinary and moves at its own pace. Mitchell's cast of supporting musicians follows his lead and blends with it quite well.

Nine to Get Ready is every bit as reflective but even more fun to listen to. The cd booklet quotes Mitchell as saying that "*Nine to Get Ready* is the coming together of a dream I had many years ago of putting together an ensemble of improvising musicians with an orchestral range." And such is the Note Factory, an eight piece group (add Mitchell and you have nine, hence the album title) that includes Jaribu Shahid on bass and Gerald Cleaver and Tani Tabbal on drums and percussion. All three are from Michigan and Cleaver and Tabbal have played many times around Ann Arbor.



The disc begins with haunting harmonizing on a piece called "Leola" and moves from there to cover much terrain in a somber, delicate, and relatively quiet fashion. The only breaks in this are a blues-inspired song called "Bessie Harris" and the blowing session that is "Hop Hip Bip Bir Rip." But there is enough thoughtfulness behind both of those recordings so that the focus is not lost. In these and the other tunes it is Mitchell that sets the mood with his horn playing but all of the other musicians are also improvising and adding essential elements. The musicians show a great deal of discipline and style on a piece called "Jamaican Farewell," as they show Jamaican influences but avoid getting bogged down in them.

Mitchell's comment about wanting a group with an orchestral range is especially astute because much of this music could easily come from a classically trained orchestra. Probably the biggest difference is that

Nine to Get Ready is the result of improvisation whereas classical musicians tend to shy away from that sort of thing. Don't take this music too seriously, though. The album ends with a short and funky number called "Big Red Peaches" that features only a groove. After over 50 minutes of serious and thought-provoking music, it is a wonderful pie in the face.

Pharoah Sanders *Save our Children* (Verve, 1998)

Saxophonist Pharoah Sanders is most often associated with John Coltrane. The two toured and recorded together extensively from 1964 to just before Coltrane's untimely death in 1967. Coltrane and Sanders created music in a way that relied less on what notes they were playing and more on the emotions and sense of energy that they were conveying. Musicians and writers often refer to this style as "energy music" and there is universal agreement that Sanders is a pioneer and master of this form. Sanders has, however, only sporadically returned to this style since leaving Coltrane. Instead his work has run the gamut from straightforward bop to world music. *Save our Children* belongs in the latter category.



Sanders used 10 other musicians for this album. The instruments that they play range from African talking drums to electronic synthesizers. African, Asian, and Middle Eastern musical influences, both of the traditional and pop variety, appear readily throughout the disc and give it a unique feel. Ultimately, however, the cd suffers because of a lack of focus. Sanders solos on all of the cuts but never sets a tone for any tune, much less the album as a whole. The only thing that comes close to filling this void is the excellent percussion and drum work from Tikor Gurtu and Zakir Hussain. It becomes evident after repeated listenings, however, that these parts were not intended to take center stage but rather to be in the background. There is much to like here in the way of fine playing and intriguing concepts but it could be so much more.

Archie Shepp meets Kahil El'Zabar's Ritual Trio *Conversations* (Delmark, 1999)

Conversations is an appropriate title for this disc both because it brings together two different schools of the avant-garde with splendid results and because the interactions between the musicians involved are especially interesting.

Archie Shepp, like Sanders, worked with Coltrane in the mid 1960s and is best known for his energy-music work of that period. Ritual Trio, on the other hand, comes from the Chicago school that is best

exemplified by the previously mentioned AEC. In fact, Malachi Favors is both the bassist for Ritual Trio and a founding member of AEC. Drummer and vocalist Kahil El'Zabar and pianist and sax player Ari Brown make up the other two-thirds of the group and are both firmly rooted in the Chicago jazz scene. The cutting edge jazz musicians of Chicago distinguished themselves from the sound of people like Coltrane by utilizing more varied sounds, humor, and basing their performances around themes. It would be a mistake to make too much of these differences, however. Shepp showed his humorous side and sense of irony in a 1965 recording of "The Girl from Ipanema." Furthermore Shepp explicitly supported the anti-imperialist, Black Nationalist, and civil rights struggles that were going on in the 1960s and 1970s. This had far more in common with the Chicago scene than did people like Coltrane and Sanders, both of whom limited themselves to vague, if not cryptic, comments when it came to politics.



Despite this, the digitally encoded pudding contains the ultimate proof that these two styles are compatible. The four musicians mix and match their collective skills and styles without fail as they move through the material. That said, more often than not Ritual Trio sounds like it is adapting to Shepp and his style. It is Shepp's blistering solos that stand out most of the time. This should come as no surprise as Ritual Trio is the rhythm section for 6 of the 7 cuts. But even on "Kari," a tune where Brown plays the sax and Shepp moves over to the piano, the ball seems to be in Shepp's court, so to speak. Special credit for accomplishing this should go to El'Zabar and Brown for authoring tunes suited for a style different from their own. Shepp does do a fair amount of adapting here. The group shows clear Chicago influences on the cd's two strongest cuts. El'Zabar employs the tradition of field hollers and traditional hand drumming as a means of paying tribute to Malcolm X on "Brother Malcolm" and the late bassist Fred Hopkins on "Big Fred." The last cut also features Shepp quoting "Mockingbird" in a quite enjoyable fashion that also reveals notable nuisances about his playing. Shepp appears a bit uncomfortable on both of the previously mentioned tributes but never totally lost. In fact he adapts quite well.

Matthew Shipp Duo with William Parker *DNA* (Thirsty Ear, 1999)

DNA opens with pianist Matthew Shipp playing a standard, and thus unexpected, version of "When Johnny Comes Marching Home." Bassist William Parker does the exact opposite by hacking away at his

instrument as if the goal was to produce the most awkward and agonizing sounds possible. It works beautifully.

There is a great deal of thematic similarity between a traditional and mournful tune about war and unorthodox bass playing. Both essentially express agony but putting them together takes a daring spirit like Shipp. *DNA* is the 15th album that Shipp has released in less than a decade. In addition to solo recordings, the pianist has maintained a busy touring schedule and served as a sideman on various projects, including Mitchell's *Nine to Get Ready*. (For the record, Parker also joined Mitchell and Shipp for that session.) Shipp developed a unique style during this period that draws equally on blues, classical, and jazz influences. Some critics have lauded him as a unique voice, perhaps the most original and innovative piano player in jazz since the 1960s.

Shipp shows that he deserves this praise on this cd. No other musicians appear on this album except Shipp and Parker. The two take advantage of this sparse instrumentation by playing intricate parts. After the opener, Shipp shows some of his blues roots on "Cell Sequence." That tune is the first of three "scientific" cuts. The powerful and nearly 13-minute-long "Genetic Alphabet" is next and then the mini-trilogy ends with the title cut. At times it sounds as if Shipp is plunking random combinations of keys or making a large number of mistakes. Similarly, brief snippets from this album might suggest that Parker lacks the ability to play the bass or is just doodling for really long periods of time. The interactions between the two musicians that appear on pieces like "Mr. Chromosome" brush aside such thoughts, however. At those moments the rapid flinging of notes appears perfectly natural and it becomes apparent that a great deal of intelligence went into the making of *DNA*.



Both Shipp and Parker demand a lot of intelligence from the listener as well. A half-hearted listen just won't cut it. But those who do spend the time will find that *DNA* is both great fun and great stimulation.

Shipp has said that this will be his last solo recording for the foreseeable future. He is still more than a year away from 40—fairly young by jazz standards—but does not know what else to do or what direction to go in. The cd marks this occasion by ending with a rendition of "Amazing Grace." Shipp gives the tune a treatment that is as straightforward as the opener and this time Parker does not clash with the keyboardist's sentiments. The outcome is a moving statement of personal and artistic self-fulfillment. ☑