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# ONWARD & UPWARD

The astounding  
creative trajectory  
of avant-garde veteran  
**WADADA LEO SMITH**

By Josef Woodard





THIS YEAR, SMITH'S SOUND and artistic fervor are in the air, in terms of ongoing projects and performances and in the archival form of a gripping new live album, *Tabligh* (Cuneiform), which documents a special incarnation of his Golden Quartet, recorded in 2006 at the REDCAT Theater in Los Angeles. REDCAT (Roy and Edna Disney CalArts Theater) is the downstairs "black box" space in the grand Walt Disney Concert Hall in L.A., and the home of Smith's ongoing Creative Music Festival (which last year hosted the Art Ensemble of Chicago).

Smith's concert was one of the L.A. area's finest jazz events that year, due in no small part to the high level of intrigue and dialogue between Smith, volcanic drummer Ronald Shannon Jackson, pianist Vijay Iyer and bassist John Lindberg. Electro-acoustic timbres and shifting relationships of structure and improvisation conspired toward a refreshing new entity in the jazz scene, with echoes of '70s Miles electric-jazz voodoo,

IT'S FAIR TO SAY THAT VETERAN trumpeter-composer-educator Wadada Leo Smith has been in the midst of a renaissance during the last several years. Yes, it has been a good millennium for him so far, in terms of public visibility. But appearances are deceiving when it comes to jazz figures working steadily on the fringes, equipped with highly personalized visions of what his or her music can and should be.

SMITH, A BOLD, PROUD PRODUCT of the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians) revolution starting in the 1960s, has been linked to the avant-garde side of the jazz fence, but has been directly inspired and colored by the legacies of trumpeters from Louis Armstrong to Booker Little to Miles Davis and many stops in between. He has developed a fascinating and distinctive sound on his horn—at once cerebral and visceral—and has also forged his own musical language and notation system, called "Ankhrasmation," and been an educator for years, settled since the mid-'90s at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) outside of Los Angeles.

In general, Smith, now 66 and going as strongly as ever, has generally been going about his unique creative business for years, regardless of the degrees of external attention paid. Attentions, though, are headed his way with increasing frequency. Relatively recent releases have included live duets with fellow AACM alum Anthony Braxton, on the Pi label, and a valuable four-disc set of Smith's '70s recordings from his own Kabell label, *Kabell Years: 1971-1979*, on Tzadik. In another corner of his suddenly burgeoning discography, Smith has been the man with the horn in an ongoing Miles tribute project called *Yo Miles!*, in cahoots with guitarist Henry Kaiser, most recently releasing *Upriver* in 2005.

AACM ideals and something new and personal.

If the relatively new Golden Quartet provides Smith with a fine and fluid vehicle for his ideas, the specific form is an evolution-in-progress. The first edition of Smith's Golden Quartet, heard on the 2002 album *The Year of the Elephant* (Pi), included drummer Jack DeJohnette (for whom he wrote the song "DeJohnette"), bassist Malachi Favors (who passed away in 2004) and pianist Anthony Davis. A newer edition, heard in quintet format at this year's Vision Festival in New York City, featured Iyer and Lindberg along with the twin-drum force of Don Moye and Pheeroan akLaff.

"Over the last 15 years," Smith comments, "I would have to say that my works are not hidden anymore. The thing that reminds me about how I have moved and not looked back is that when I listen to some of those CDs, to me they're new, because I don't spend time listening to them. They're still new to me. I'm surprised. I wonder sometimes, 'Who is that playing?'" he says with a laugh.

At the time of this interview, Smith was ensconced in the remote, natural splendor at the Djerassi Resident Artists program, in the woody hills outside of Palo Alto, Calif. He was introduced to the Djerassi program through an involvement in the celebrated and adventurous Other Minds Festival in San Francisco in 2007, in which Djerassi plays a hosting role. Smith is an ideal candidate for the artist residency and also the Other Minds Festival, rooted in contemporary classical music as well as avant-garde jazz and experimental energies: Smith has been actively involved in all of the above cultural niches.

While in his Djerassi residency, Smith was avidly working on two larger projects: a collection called *Cosmic Music* and another multi-disciplinary work-in-progress dealing with "the issues of borders, refugees and immigrants." He plans to present the piece in several



American cities.

This opus, in fact, promises to be one of Smith's most ambitious projects yet, involving music for a 12-piece ensemble, video art collaborations and dialogues on the core subject. He comments that "all over the world, in Europe, in Asia and in the United States, (nations are) loaded with immigrants, refugees and so on. People don't know how to accept them into society."

Smith explains that "each of the programs will have different music and also I'll use a different set of filmmakers and video artists to give a little bit of an image, not necessarily images that depict the situation, but creative images that cause people to think in a provocative way. After each of those performances, I hope to have discussions about possible solutions to the problem."

DEALING WITH REAL SOCIO-POLITICAL and historical topics is nothing new for Smith. "I've always looked at what was happening out there," he says. "My *Tabligh* deals with the issue of the way people look at Islamic ideas and people in Islam."

On the morning before our interview, he had started working on a new tune in tribute to Mississippi political activist Fannie Lou Hamer, and the opening tune on *Tabligh* is called "Rosa Parks." Does he find himself drawn more to "real world" subjects of late?

"Yes, I do," Smith says. "I find, also, that when I do write about these subjects, there is enough written material on them to do the research. That boosts me tremendously." The back stories feed his musical thinking, as on "Rosa Parks," in which "the horizontal form keeps repeating and changing and being eclipsed—has to do with the kind of notion that Rosa Parks set out thinking about, the progressive movement towards an open society."

Projecting a conceptual basis in his music is central to Smith's aesthetic, which is never about penning old school head-solo-head type tunes. "Every one of my pieces has to have something uniquely occurring in them for them to be pieces," he says. "Otherwise, I won't do them."

Expanding on the connection of musical and political thought, Smith comments that "my contention has always been that the best model of democratic principles in action is the ensemble in creative music, or the ensembles in jazz. They are the perfect model, because the individual is celebrated and so is the collective, and neither one outweighs the other, which is quite an unusual event."

"If people had truly endorsed the music of the '60s—I don't mean just liked it, but understood that it was showing the best example of democratic principles and also the philosophical and actual notion of freedom—then our society would be way ahead. We probably would have already had an African-American and a woman as president."

Such inferences of culture-fueled idealism lead naturally to the subject of the AACM, which celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2005. "The AACM," Smith suggests, "looked at how you change perception about an age-old thing. People were running around talking about jazz. AACM was talking about creative music. That right there was a different kind of phenomenon. And then we talked about free music. We never said free improvisation or free this-or-that, or a free avant-garde—none of those names. We called it creative music and also free music."

"We understood that freedom to imply that there are differences between the notion of freedom in a philosophical context and also in

the idea of freedom as a true exercise of democratic practice. So the AACM has had a great impact."

In the mix of Smith's current projects, Golden Quartet holds a special fascination and future, and the specific group captured at its prime at REDCAT impressed him enough to put the live recording out in the world. In the group, Smith has now worked with several different drummers, starting with DeJohnette and also including the dazzling young Nasheet Waits.

But, he says, "The Shannon Jackson dates with Golden Quartet gave it this other kind of feeling for the drumming. He used two bass drums. He's also a little—how do you say it?—rambunctious and rough, which I like in drumming. And he has a good sense of dramatics in playing, which I also like very much. But the biggest thing is that he was just the opposite of Jack DeJohnette, which I wanted."

But he adds that, "When you start out with Jack DeJohnette at the drums, you've got to have a powerful drummer. Otherwise, you might as well erase the name and start out with something else."

"I decided at the very beginning that Golden Quartet would be a lifelong quartet of mine, no matter what the personnel was or which direction it might go, whether it goes to the Golden Quintet or whatever, it will still be in that genre. The idea is that of one horn player and rhythm. No saxophones, no trombones, no violins; just the

**"If people had truly endorsed the music of the '60s ... our society would be way ahead. We probably would have already had an African-American and a woman as president."**

trumpet and rhythm. If I expanded it again to the Golden Sextet, it may have two pianos or two basses, but that's the whole idea, trying to capture that classic sound of the early days."

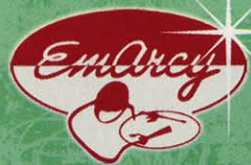
IN DISCUSSING THE TRUMPET PLAYERS he has been most affected by, Smith points to the styles—and band-leading qualities—of Louis Armstrong, Clifford Brown, Booker Little, Lee Morgan and Miles. He notes that "Those, to me, are like perfect models of trumpet-leading ensembles that show something different. The most perfect of those, of course, is Booker Little and Miles Davis."

And like those players, Smith has a keen approach to timbre and space, and melodic logic rubbing up against the outskirts of abstraction. Smith's affection and artful flair for Miles homage is well known, but he also learned much from Little, the innovative, lyrical and underrated figure in 1960s jazz who died far too young. "When you die too young and were kind of marginally recognized before you died, you never have a chance. In his day, that was a brilliant composer and trumpeter and music-thinker. I started thinking about multiphonics through an interview that Booker Little gave, where he was talking about being able to make multiphonics on the trumpet. Even though he never really did it, he was thinking about exploring that area."

Over time, Smith has moved laterally between rock-inflected electric music and more acoustic settings, and even in contexts with tentacles in contemporary classical and world music (as on his engaging ECM album *Kulture Jazz*). On that basis, Smith might seem an eclectic wanderer. But he sees a conceptual common thread in his projects.

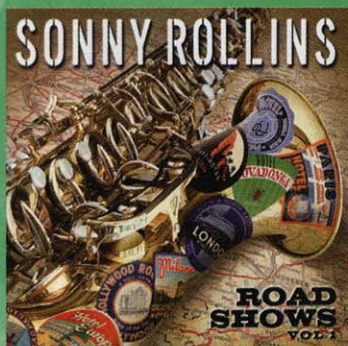
As Smith says, "I contend this: all the music I write is still creative



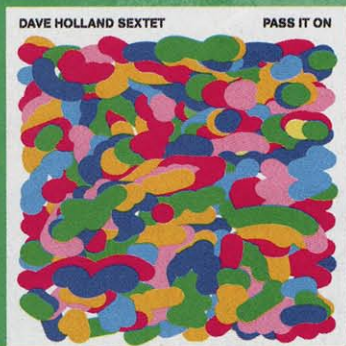


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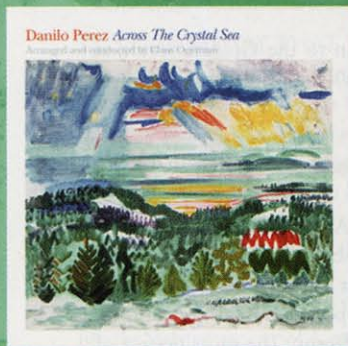
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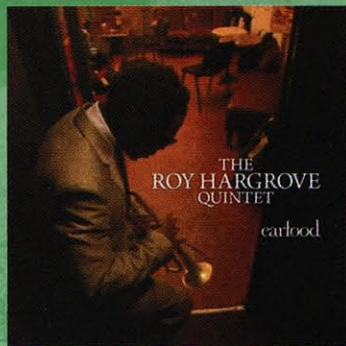
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music, written for those ensembles. The experiment is to see what kind of interplay, what kind of music intellect that these ensembles can grab onto, using these same kind of musical properties that come out of my own ensembles. So the experiment is with ensembles, as opposed to musical style and language. I use the same language. All of the music I ever write can be played by any one of my ensembles, and often they do play them."

Placing his music under the jazz umbrella doesn't seem complete or coherent, a point of view he agrees with and has carried over from the AACM ideology. Smith points out that, "When you match our music up and you play them right side by side with jazz, they stand out as un-jazz. If you talk to the players that play what they define as jazz from that tradition, they don't see us as playing jazz. And if you look at some of the writers who write about this music, they don't see us as playing jazz, even though they write about us as being jazz."

"There is kind of a heavy penalty that somehow doesn't give us the chance to say exactly what it is that we do. It's a political penalty. For example, the European players who came out and said they were playing free improvisation, nobody balked at them at all. Everybody writes about them in terms of free improvisation. No one put them in the jazz community. But when it comes to an American who happened to be African-American, they lump them in there. What is this thing? I don't know what it is except I think it's a political move. Maybe it used to be based around marketing, but now it's not based around that at all."

Forty-plus years into his musical journey, Smith still occupies a unique place in jazz—or just outside of it, depending on one's perspective. For much of that time, he has honed a vocabulary never indebted to any particular stream or mainstream. He has partly been enabled by making his livelihood in education, a position he takes seriously. But Smith has also been emboldened by an assured sense of artistic mission.



AS OF SUMMER 2008, Smith reports, "I feel more driven now than ever. I'm writing more music than I've ever written before. I have over a thousand pieces. This is just music on note staffs. I have another couple of hundred pieces dealing with the "Ankhrasmation" language. I'm in a flow that could not be better, and it has been that way since the turn of the century."

"Also, performance-wise, I've gotten a chance to play more of my music since the turn of the century than ever before. Two of the main reasons were the Golden Quartet and the Yo Miles! music. Both of those ensembles show something distinctly about what I was doing. They also gave people a chance to see that there was other stuff in the bag." He adds, with a laugh, "And there's still other stuff in the bag that they haven't heard yet, or seen."

Has Smith been frustrated by the lack of opportunities to get his music heard in the past? "No, not really," he says. "Right now, what I care about more than anything is discovering new ways and new ideas and new languages for how to create music. To me, that's very exciting—new languages, new systems, and having the courage not to be bothered when even your closest friends don't understand you."

"The idea of not-acceptance is fine. It's really fine, because look, somehow you get enough material out there and somehow it makes a difference or dents somewhere. To me, that's already success." **JT**



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