



Steve Lacy - Roswell Rudd Quartet
Early And Late
 (Cuneiform)

There are always a lot of topics of a "perennial" nature - things such as "expression", "form", and the like - that always keep those who write about music thinking long and hard. Lately, though, a problem of a decidedly more "modern" vintage has occupied the centre of the stage, thanks to its dramatic - and much-feared - consequences: downloading. This topic has, first of all, a harsh "practical" side: who will buy those oh-so-desired "review copies" when downloadable files will replace the CD as a physical object? (It'll be interesting to see if the now-so-common "high grades", as a means to get the highest possible number of "review copies" one hopes to eventually sell, will get lower.)

But there's another side of the problem, which to me looks a lot more dramatic in light of its consequences: here the importance of (free) downloading is not to be seen as a source of financial effects (both direct and indirect consequences, for both records companies and artists) but for its representing to perfection a "volatile" kind of consumption that - thanks to technology - allows consumers to satisfy each and every whim, every passing fancy, by making their capacity to spend as infinite as their desires. (If only downloading shoes were technically feasible...) Commentators have argued that the consumers' low propensity to spend (real cash) has to be linked to the low quality of most of the goods currently on sale; provided this was really the case, it would be easy to declare albums such as *Early And Late* as being potential "million sellers". In truth, "instant gratification" needs goods to be "soaked", not things to think about. A fact that - as it's sadly well-known - makes the life of an album like *Early And Late* pretty hard.

Given the stylistic coordinates that will become clear in a minute, I

can't picture an attentive listener not being intrigued by Early And Late (almost) on first listening. Roswell Rudd on trombone and Steve Lacy on soprano sax: instrumentalists whose sound is quite easy to recognize, starting from the first note (the classic Rudd sound: "big", "vocal-animal-like", so versatile and at the same time so individual; while Lacy's sound is at times quite thin and agile, at times so warm and old-sounding: what an odd couple!), they are two giants who have been main characters in the history of jazz of the last half-a-century, though in a discreet way. We have an excellent rhythm section: Jean-Jaques Avenel on double bass, and John Betsch on drums; both had been part of Lacy's groups for a long time.

While it's an easy one to like immediately, it's only in time that Early And Late will fully reveal the richness of its relationships: between writing and improvisation, and between those musicians on stage; also between tradition and innovation (we have Nichols, Monk, and the early Cecil Taylor side-by-side with originals by Lacy and Rudd); also between the present and the past: at the end of the second CD, we have four tracks that in a way could start it, an unreleased session (extremely well-recorded) from 1962 which - incredible, but true - is the only studio trace we have of a stubborn quartet whose musical ideas can still be listened to today with much satisfaction. Obviously, one can put the CD in "repeat" in order to see how yesterday and today are part of the same thread.

An often-repeated - but true - observation tells of a strange trait that links Lacy and Rudd: both musicians coming from a traditional kind of jazz in the 50s becoming leading figures of the avant-garde of the 60s skipping the be-bop. Lacy (who died in 2004) was the famous one, a leader whose quite large discography could rival even that of an Anthony Braxton. While personality reasons, family problems... who knows?... made Rudd - always held in high esteem by both critics and colleagues - often disappear from the scene; today he looks like he's living a second youth; I perfectly remember him, a few years ago at the Controindicazioni Festival in Rome, making fireworks with the Ab Baars trio.

The unreleased tracks that close the second CD see the quartet (Bob Cunningham is on bass, Dennis Charles on drums) perform two tracks by Thelonious Monk (Eronel, in two versions, and Think Of One), and one by Cecil Taylor, Tune 2. Those who are only familiar with the "modern" Cecil Taylor will maybe see the Monk/Taylor couple as a strange one, even if the Taylor composition performed here resembles Monk quite a bit. But let's not forget: the first track on Jazz Advance, the 1956 Taylor album on which Lacy played, is the by now famous Bemsha Swing (and what a bold version, if we consider how bold the piece sounded in its original version!). While The Straight Horn Of Steve Lacy, from 1960, features compositions by both Taylor and Monk. The four tracks from '62 performed here are really good, with a round double bass by Bob Cunningham and the typical ride cymbal by Dennis Charles, who on both Tune 2 and Think Of One plays some drum figures that to me sound as highly reminiscent of Art Blakey. Tune 2 has some sharp corners that - forty-five years after the fact - are easy to recognize; the performances of the Monk pieces are also excellent.

Both Rudd and Lacy played with Cecil Taylor, the latter also with

Monk. But talking of 60s-era Roswell Rudd means first of all to mention his performances alongside saxophone player Archie Shepp; also the New York Art Quartet, an experience he shared with saxophone player John Tchicai. But here I'd really like to mention two highly-celebrated albums from the end of the 60s that - each in its own way - perfectly represented the spirit of an age: Liberation Music Orchestra by Charlie Haden and Escalator Over The Hill by Carla Bley. I also like to mention three later albums by Carla Bley - Dinner Music (1976), European Tour 1977 and Musique Mecanique (1979) - as albums that well represent the Roswell Rudd of the 70s, where his instrumental timbre - bold and very old-fashioned at the same time - matches to perfection the leader's bitter-sweet, and stylistically quite varied, atmospheres.

I first met the Lacy & Rudd couple on Trickle (1976), an album where they performed alongside double bass player Kent Carter and drummer Beaver Harris. It's with great pleasure that I listened to it again a few days ago: Rudd sounds more or less the same, while - compared to his round sound of his later days - here Lacy has a breath that's harsher and thinner; a thing that, coupled with a melodic development that was a lot more difficult to follow, didn't really make him at the times "an artist for the masses". There were also some later experiences for our two heroes: a nice album titled Regeneration (1983), where Lacy and Rudd played alongside Kent Carter, Misha Mengelberg on piano, and Han Bennink on drums for a joint homage to Monk and to another largely unknown influence: Herbie Nichols; the album features a version of Twelve Bars that can be played side-by-side with the live version appearing on Early And Late. There was also an album dedicated to the music of Nichols, Change Of Season (1985), and a tour: but Rudd was not there. (On the other hand, on trombone there was one George Lewis, so one could not ask for a refund, right?)

Lacy & Rudd came back as a couple with a studio album recorded in 1999, Monk's Dream, whose line-up and repertory don't differ that much from Early And Late. It's a good album, but after listening to them side-by-side, I have to admit I prefer the new one, though the sound of the old one - so full and clear - is better. It's Rudd that in my opinion plays with greater verve on Early And Late, sporting a risk-taking attitude which makes the pieces come alive. One has to notice the different playing attitude on Lacy's part when performing this material while having Rudd at his side.

I've already discussed those pieces from 1962. A good part of the CDs was recorded at a show which took place at the Bimhuis, Amsterdam, just a few days before they entered the studio to record Monk's Dream. Opening the first CD, we have a long version of The Rent, with its impossible-to-mistake theme which adds the blues to the cha-cha-cha; we have an excellent solo by Rudd, backed by a cymbal and a nice counterpoint from the double bass; then a solo by Lacy, then one by Avenel, then it's Rudd again, theme, and end. Another famous Lacy theme follows, The Bath (does anybody remember Momentum?), with its typical swing air of "Slow Big Band" and those gruppettoes made of three notes; a nice solo by Lacy, with strong backing by "walkin'" double bass, the drums played using brushes; enters Rudd, with a strong "vocal" effect, an excellent solo, and a nice performance by Avenel. The Hoot is a swinging tune, 11' that

disappear in a flash.

Blinks was recorded at a concert held in Tucson a couple of months earlier, here the drums sound a lot larger and heavier; theme, double bass solo, then a solo by Rudd which also quotes (I think) Flight Of The Bumblebee and Chatanooga Choo Choo; then a solo by Lacy, with a strong backing by the rhythm section. Then we're back at the Bimhuis, with the drums played using brushes, the quartet performing a song by Monk, Light Blue: it's a nice version. which made me listen again to the one Lacy recorded on his solo album Only Monk (1987). We have the "fat" drums again on Bookioni, whose theme will definitely bring Monk to one's mind.

The second CD starts with a long version of Bamako, the only track here penned by Rudd, recorded at Iridium in 2002: maybe a bit on the long side to be listened to at home, it reminded me a lot of the composing style of Chris McGregor and of his Brotherhood Of Breath. We stay at the Iridium for a performance of Twelve Bars which is pleasantly "old-fashioned"; we have a relaxed solo by Rudd, then Lacy. We are back at the Bimhuis with Bone: a fine double bass intro with harmonics, then a long solo; a "dancing" theme follows, then a solo by Rudd, then one by Lacy (maybe his best on the album), then a drum solo, theme, the end.

Beppe Colli

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