

Moment's Notice

Recent CDs Briefly Reviewed

Wadada Leo Smith's Golden Quartet
Talbligh
 Cuneiform Records Rune 270



The Golden Quartet is the closest thing to a standard jazz group that Wadada Leo Smith ever used to present his own music. Sometimes traditional elements such as jazz-funk and marches emerge on the first two albums, *Golden Quartet* (Tzadik) and *Year of the Elephant* (Pi), both of which featured the original band with Anthony Davis, Malachi Favors, and Jack DeJohnette. But the music rarely sounds conventional, thanks to Smith's elliptical lyricism and his unique method of blending improvisation and composition. Now, with Vijay Iyer, John Lindberg, and Ronald Shannon Jackson aboard, the energy level is noticeably higher and with the new quartet's greater reliance on real-time electronic processing of sounds, the music displays a wider timbral palette. On this live recording from 2005, the band is as comfortable and attuned to Smith's compositions as any band he's ever led; the music is lively, even explosive at times, yet still exquisitely balanced.

No other composer accommodates the independence of the individual and the unity of the ensemble in quite the way Smith does. His compositions let each member pursue his or her own course; each player can move independently, but interaction is not excluded from the field of possible choices. There are always several things occurring simultaneously, with connections between events being often just barely implied. Yet the collective sound always coheres into something purposeful and beautiful. This is surely by design and not co-incidence, since it's been true of Smith's New Delta Ahkri units of the '70s, his West Coast N'Da Culture of the '90s, as well as the Golden Quartet.

To achieve this clarity and poise, Smith pares everything down to fundamental building blocks. Sound and silence, vertical and horizontal movement, an enormous catalog of timbres and textures, attack and decay, fast and slow tempos, staccato and legato notes and phrases, these are a few of the nucleic acids out of which he assembles the DNA of any performance. On "Rose Parks," he contrasts staccato and legato passages, manipulates timbre, and varies the speed and density of his lines with great deliberation. Each time he returns to one of this small handful of ideas, he does something different with it and each time he moves on to another, he takes a different route. On "Caravan of Winter," he works with attack and decay, making his notes appear to advance and recede, and he contrasts bright, clean tones with wet fuzzy textures. There is so much happening inside one tone, that it feels as if he can make just one note swing all by itself. To a large degree, Smith's solos are microcosms of what's happening in the larger scale of the composition. For instance during "DeJohnette" (first heard on the eponymous debut), Smith directs the group in and out of a loosely grooving tempo and calm rubato meditations, each



photo by Laurence Svirchev@2008

time with different results. All these shifts and contrasts happening at every level in the piece achieve something really majestic.

The player-interpreters have as big an impact on the performance as the composer-leader. Lindberg's use of electronics adds a rubbery rhythmic layer to "Rosa Parks" that runs through whatever is unfolding around it, like a river in a landscape. His unaccompanied solo on "Caravan of Winter" is a virtuosic display of strumming, snapped strings, deeply bent notes, and intricate line. The long title track is the best showcase of Iyer's grasp of Smith's music. Throughout this long and eventful piece, his every contribution is apt, from the mystery and beauty of his synthesizer and Fender Rhodes at the opening, to his chiming chords in a duet with Lindberg, and his delicate duet with Smith near the end. Jackson is an unprecedented presence in Smith's music, exerting a constant forward pressure, whether it's the grooves of "DeJohnette" and "Rosa Parks" or his thundering fills and embellishments on "Tabligh."

Remarkably, the personalities and forces are kept in balance. The music is like a mobile: there's a sense of great independent movement taking place within a strong framework, of an artwork that can change from moment to moment and still retain its integrity as a formal entity.

– Ed Hazell

The image displays three ECM Records album covers arranged horizontally. The background is a dark, textured blue-green surface. The first cover on the left is for 'Distances' by Norma Winstone, featuring a black and white photograph of a crowd of people walking at night. The middle cover is for 'The Door' by Mathias Eick, showing a landscape with a road leading towards a large, dark structure under a cloudy sky. The third cover on the right is for 'Currents' by Wolfert Brederode, depicting a road with white dashed lines receding into the distance.

ECM

Norma Winstone *Distances*
Norma Winstone voice
Glauco Venier piano
Klaus Gesing soprano saxophone, bass clarinet

Mathias Eick *The Door*
Mathias Eick trumpet, guitar, vibraphone
Jon Balke piano, electric piano
Audun Kleive drums, percussion
Audun Eriksen electric bass, guitar
Stian Carstensen pedal steel guitar

Wolfert Brederode *Currents*
Wolfert Brederode piano
Claudio Puntin clarinets
Mats Eilertsen double-bass
Samuel Rohrer drums

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