



**The Microscopic Septet**  
**Lobster Leaps In**  
(Cuneiform)

Already twenty years have passed since the time when the bizarre US "para-jazz" line-up called the Microscopic Septet released their fourth (and last) album. *Beauty Based On Science (The Visit)* was in many ways the apex in the career (though I have to admit that "career" is definitely not the word that best describes the group's musical journey) of an ensemble that was as original as it was misunderstood. The actual split, of course, taking place only a few years later, when the players had to admit that things appeared destined not to change anymore (except for the worse). Let's put aside the monetary aspect for now (it's not only on stage that careers are made); what is in many ways quite strange, given the fact that the music of the Microscopic Septet is not at all difficult to listen to, is that neither audiences nor critics demonstrated any great amount of warmth and appreciation for the group. Which could make one discuss such notions as "subtleness", and so on.

I think it can be said that the group's back catalogue being re-released (with added material) on CD, two years ago (the *Two Volumes of History Of The Micros*, respectively titled *Seven Men In Neckties* and *Surrealistic Swing*), has not really provoked a new evaluation, a fresh examination, of the group's music. Not that I thought this to be expected, given the fact that those traits - of the group's music, and of the system of the media - that had previously made the group a "non-entity" are still alive and well.

It had been this state of "non-expectation" that at first made me regard Phillip Johnston's words as a bit mysterious, at the time of our interview, when we had discussed the newly re-released CDs. It suddenly became clear to me that for Johnston the chapter titled *Microscopic Septet* was not really closed, that for the composer and

band-leader this was a kind of "unfinished business" that he still regarded as being important to him, and not just in a sentimental way. So I was quite glad to know about some concerts on the horizon, with a new CD (featuring "vintage" material, newly performed) soon to follow.

But my happiness was tainted by fear, for many reasons. First, it's true it could be said that the music written by Johnston (and by pianist Joel Forrester, the group's other main composer), never really "new", could never sound "old"; but it also could be said that a way of "putting material together" (= composing) is typical of a time and a place. Then, since the music by Microscopic Septet is quite complex, all made of layers and counterpoints, playing and rehearsing a lot is absolutely necessary in order to have everything working to perfection - and how could it be now, with just a few concerts under their belt? (Not to mention things like that ever-slowng "biological clock", and so on.)

So I can't really say I was that surprised when I thought that Lobster Leaps In didn't sound as fantastic as I had hoped it would. Sure, all the right ingredients were there: nice compositions, fantastic instrumental performances, variety, proportions... But still, there was something really wrong, like the group had decided to simplify their instrumental attitude by employing a "soloist + rhythms" strategy which definitively went against the grain of what had been the group's original approach (this decision, however, obviously being the right one for an under-rehearsed group). But given the fact that no "outside" pressure pushed me to go fast-forward so that my review appeared at the same time of the album's release, I decided to go on listening to it. Which I did.

I found myself listening to both Lobster Leaps In and its predecessor, Beauty Based On Science (The Visit). Quite strange, this, I noticed that every time I listened to the older album I decreased both the volume and the highs, the opposite happening when I listened to Lobster Leaps In. I wondered why.

So, after listening to it for about a month and a half, at "respectable" volume, with "generous" highs, I came to the conclusion that Lobster Leaps In is a really, really good album. Not "a masterpiece", mind you, nor the album it could have been had the band played about one hundred (does it sound like too much if I add "well-paid"?) concerts before entering the studio. It's also an album where the recorded sound sometimes masks a lot of those ingenious arrangement parts that make the whole really worth listening to. Here listeners are required to employ a little extra care, like nowadays it's maybe not so common anymore. But to me it's definitely worth it.

With the exception of the first track - a composition by Wayne Horvitz that the group often performed in concert as piece #1 - the repertory here is equally split between Phillip Johnston and Joel Forrester. Hoping readers will forgive me for simplifying things too much, I'll say that those pieces written by Johnston are shorter and use counterpoint more, while Forrester's appear to be longer, with more space for solos. From Dixieland to Ellington, from Monk to Carla Bley, a lot of the history of "good jazz" gets referred here. I could not say whether by chance, or because the group had not played together in

such a long time, I noticed more "mid-tempo" tracks. Also, Charles Mingus's shadow appeared more often than I remembered as being typical of this group.

We have excellent reeds, my favourite being Dave Sewelson, a versatile and spiky baritone, but Mike Hashim on tenor (replacing Paul Shapiro), Don Davis on alto, and Johnston on soprano are just as good. As usual, the "rhythm sections" is fine, even if on this album Forrester's piano, Dave Hofstra's double bass, and Richard Dworkin's drums are sometimes a bit under-recorded; they are sonically at their best when in a situation where fewer instruments play.

Concise, Horwitz's Night Train Express starts the CD: a swing, fast, track, with fine counterpoint, and excellent solos (by soprano, alto, tenor, baritone, and piano).

The long track titled Disconcerto For Donnie, by Forrester, acts mostly as a vehicle for Don Davis on alto. There's a nice overture by alto sax/piano, then a calypso tempo, followed by a joyous theme, nicely harmonized. We have a "dramatic" variation at about 5', then a nice close.

Lobster Leaps In is a typical jumpy theme by Johnston, halfway between a police serial and a cartoon, played ensemble. Fast solos by alto sax, tenor, and baritone (the last solo getting a very fine counterpoint by the reeds, not that clearly recorded - push the volume up).

Got Lucky is another fine theme by Johnston, with complex articulation. There's a nice trio moment - piano, double bass, drums - then something with a swing/mariachi feel. There's also a fine soprano sax solo, sounding almost "Dixieland", with nice background by the ensemble, and tasty counterpoint work by baritone.

Lies is another theme by Forrester. Intro for tenor and drums, piano, it opens up in a theme whose melody and orchestration I'd call "Mingus-like". Excellent intermezzos by the piano, fine solos by soprano, piano, and baritone.

Life's Other Mystery by Johnston is a swinging track with a strong R&B flavour, the main theme played on tenor sax; a nice episode, a change of atmosphere, for double bass, drums, and baritone sax, follows, then an uninhibited solo by tenor. There's an unexpected coda in  $\frac{3}{4}$  starting from 5' 30" ca., very bitter-sweet.

Almost Right by Johnston is quite brief, with a very "Mingus-like" theme (one can almost hear the muted trumpets), a nice moment for solo piano + rhythms, and a fine baritone solo with good counterpoint work by the other winds.

To me, the long Money Money Money by Forrester is the album's only weak moment, due to its excessive length (though I'm positive it'll sound OK on stage). An excellent start (almost a Mingus track with Dennis Charles keeping the time on ride cymbal), and excellent work by double bass and baritone sax. Starting from 3' there's a nice moment that outstays its welcome.

Lt. Cassawary by Forrester is a fine jazzy theme with a nice opening for reeds, a good solo by piano and rhythms, a "fight" between alto and tenor, a baritone solo, then an excellent long soprano solo sounding quite a bit Lacyan. Theme, close.

Twilight Time Zone by Johnston is a "light", multi-themed, composition, with fine orchestration, and nice solos by tenor and soprano saxophones. A millimetric unison by reeds, then the soprano brings the track to its close.

The Big Squeeze by Forrester is in a sense my favourite track on this album, and a perfect close. Nice interlocking melodic phrases by reeds, mid-tempo, with counterpoint by soprano. At about 3' there's a swinging 4/4 with parallel reeds. Soprano, then starting at 5' 04" a circular arpeggio by the piano with baritone and soprano playing "almost-Free" (à la Mingus), with a fine cymbal playing mid-tempo. A more "swinging" moment starting at 8', the end.

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