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Archie Shepp Band

Geneva Concert [DVD]

(in-akustik)
 US release date: 21 November 2006
 UK release date: 21 November 2006

by **Daniel Spicer**

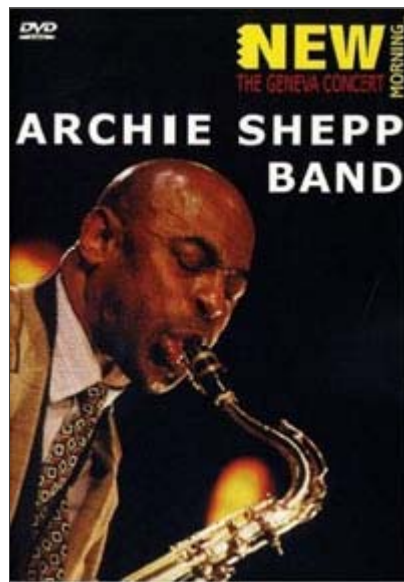
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The most fascinating element of this live set, recorded in Geneva in 1994, is Shepp's physical presence itself, and more specifically his face. It's not just his instantly recognizable, heavy-lidded physiognomy—both dangerous and gentlemanly at the same time, like some switch-pen carrying street-scholar—seeing him in action here, we can finally understand how he manages to produce the distinctive honks and shrieks that form his sound. He seems to have developed a number of physical approaches to playing his horn, each representing a different mode of expression, a different way of producing the 'cry' of jazz improvisation.

In essence Shepp plays the saxophone with his *entire face*. One moment he's blowing with his lips apart, his tongue fat and red against the reed, bringing forth a deep, loose sound; then he's shifted the horn over to the side of his mouth, jaw clenched, calling up a compressed, rasping call; then his cheeks and neck bulge up like a bullfrog's, the horn squarely in the middle of his face, setting free a huge, round blast of power. In each solo, we see him deliberating, carefully choosing which timbre to call upon next, running through each variation as the emotion of the piece demands – and suddenly we understand the unique trajectories of his solos, broken and stumbling with pauses, gaps and hesitations. It's quite a revelation.

Clearly, Shepp is every bit the master he's been lauded as ever since he received the patronage of John Coltrane as a young man, playing on such seminal works as 1965's "Ascension" and making a major contribution to the development of avant-garde Fire Music. But no matter how far out he's pushed things, Shepp has always had a very clear vision of the heritage and tradition of jazz, approaching the music from a scholarly, almost curatorial role, and taking great pains always to remember the debt he owes as a jazz musician to the blues. So it's no surprise to find this set touching on several important cornerstones of African American musical forms: there's a mid-tempo, hard-bop swinger; a jumping funk number with fat-back bass and drums; an Art Blakey-style blues stomp; and—one of the mainstays of Shepp's repertoire for at least the last 35 years—the Duke Ellington ballad, "Sophisticated Lady".

On all, we find Shepp staying true to his own idiosyncratic vision of jazz, bringing all his odd intonations and skewed shapes into even the most straight-ahead numbers. He also sings on almost every tune, with a deep, lustrous tone that swings from commanding blues howl to insouciant croon to a Leon Thomas yodel. It's very obvious that, whatever he's doing, he means it with all his heart and soul, but the musical highlight of this set finds Shepp revisiting the radicalism of the '60s with a heavy number in 3/4 time called "Revolution", an exhortation to militant disobedience that raises the hairs on the back of the neck. Throughout all of this,



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the band's absolutely solid cooking, and it's fascinating to watch the late Horace Parlan at the piano playing with the unique left-hand style he developed with Mingus in the '50s—a necessity that arose as a way of overcoming the crippling effects of polio in his right hand. Art will always find a way, it seems.

If all this isn't enough to persuade you to watch this disc, there's a couple of storming extras included, too. The 21-minute track "Sweet Bird of Youth", recorded in Paris in 2001, has Shepp's quartet joined onstage by the Moroccan group Les Gnawas de Tanger, wearing full ethnic, North African costume and contributing percussion and call-and-response vocals to an unstoppable modal jam that proudly holds aloft the flame of Shepp's ground-breaking Pan-African explorations recorded for the Paris-based BYG label in the late '60s. Add to that a candid 'conversation' with Shepp in which he recalls his famous feud with Miles Davis with humour and honesty (and doing a pretty good impression of Davis too) and this is, without doubt, something of a must for those searching for the real sound of jazz among the modern-day mire of corporate imbecility.



Archie Shepp Quartet - Jazz Club '90 Stuttgart Germany Part I

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