



Pulitzer finalist Wadada Leo Smith symbolizes Chicago jazz power

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Wadada Leo Smith (April 15, 2013)

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Arts critic

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Ever since the late 1990s, the forces behind the Pulitzer Prize in music have tried to push the award outside the narrow precincts of classical composition.

On Monday, the Pulitzers made the next dramatic step in that evolution, with jazz musician Wadada Leo Smith, an early member of Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, announced as a finalist for the most prestigious award in music. Caroline Shaw's "Partita for 8 Voices," a wholly unconventional work encompassing a sweeping range of a cappella techniques, won the music Pulitzer.

The provocative improvisational and compositional techniques long championed by the association, which was founded in Chicago in 1965 and now flourishes and around the world, course through Smith's epic recording "Ten Freedom Summers" (Cuneiform Records). Never before has an artist associated with the association — and its oft-radical approaches to inventing music — gotten so far in the Pulitzer Prize competition.

I served on the music jury that recommended Smith's "Ten Freedom Summers" as one of three finalists to the Pulitzer board, which selects winners ("Pieces of Winter Sky" by previous Pulitzer winner Aaron Jay Kernis completed the

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list). I also served on the jury that recommended Wynton Marsalis' "Blood on the Fields" to be the first jazz composition to receive a Pulitzer, in 1997.

Neither award, nor Ornette Coleman's Pulitzer in 2007 for "Sound Grammar," could have been imagined in the 50-plus years that preceded Marsalis' breakthrough. Ever since 1943, when the great symphonist William Schuman won the first music Pulitzer, all forms of American musical expression — including jazz, blues and gospel — were shut out in favor of a single, slender realm: classical.

When a Pulitzer jury recommended that Duke Ellington receive a special citation, in 1965, the board refused, prompting jurors Winthrop Sargeant and Ronald Eyer to resign.

"I'm hardly surprised that my kind of music is still without, let us say, official honor at home," Ellington told writer Nat Hentoff in a New York Times magazine piece titled "This Cast Needs no Pulitzer Prize."

"Most Americans," added Ellington, "still take it for granted that European music — classical music, if you will — is the only really respectable kind. I remember, for example, that when Franklin Roosevelt died, practically no American music was played on the air in tribute to him ... by and large, then as now, jazz was like the kind of man you wouldn't want your daughter to associate with."

The Pulitzer board made a passing nod to nonclassical music in 1976, the year of the American bicentennial, by giving a posthumous honor to ragtime genius Scott Joplin. But classical composition maintained its chokehold on the music Pulitzer until 1997, with subsequent special citations going posthumously to George Gershwin (1998), Ellington (1999), Thelonious Monk (2006), John Coltrane (2007) and Hank Williams (2010). A special citation also went to Bob Dylan (2008).

Smith's "Ten Freedom Summers" significantly pushes out the definition of what can be considered Pulitzer-worthy music. As its title suggests, it examines key moments in the quest for civil rights, from "Dred Scott: 1857" and "Emmett Till: Defiant, Fearless" to "The Freedom Riders Ride" and "Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, 381 Days."

As Smith's score reveals, these pieces and others — 19 in all on the recording — bristle with jazz, improvisational and European compositional techniques. Smith's trumpet lines soar above the instrumental swirl of his Golden Quartet/Quintet, with musical commentary from the strings, winds and percussion of Southwest Chamber Music. Some passages are thick with dissonance and clashes of instrumental colors; others are spare and translucent.

Unlike Marsalis' "Blood on the Fields," however, "Ten Freedom Summers" does not constitute a single, extended work. Instead, each of the vignettes represents a free-standing composition in and of itself: musical portraits of turning points in American history. They're linked by subject, however, and Smith has grouped them into three subsets that can be performed live over three evenings: "Defining Moments in America," "What is Democracy?" and "Ten Freedom Summers."

This episodic approach weakens the work and exposes its musical shortcomings. If "Blood on the Fields" proceeds steadily through its narrative, which traces the travails of two lovers caught in the maelstrom of slavery, "Ten Freedom Summers" sounds less cohesive and persuasive. Smith composed most of the music over the past several years and some of it much longer ago, which may help explain why certain passages sound dated today.

Yet this music surely receives a stunning performance by Smith and colleagues, particularly the core group: pianist Anthony Davis, bassist John Lindberg, and drummers Pheeroan akLaff and Susie Ibarra. Their work made a deep impression on the jury, which also included composer-pianist Muhal Richard Abrams, a founder of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians; composer and Swarthmore College professor Gerald Levinson; Harvard University music professor Carol Oja; and Carnegie Hall director of artistic planning Jeremy



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Geffen, the jury chair.

By selecting "Ten Freedom Summers" as a finalist among 157 entries, this jury made a clear statement that American music has ventured far beyond the noble traditions of Bach, Beethoven and Brahms.

How fitting that an artist indelibly linked with the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians — which has been redefining music in America for nearly half a century — should carry that message forward.

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