

## A Blog Supreme

# 5 Expansive Wadada Leo Smith Recordings, Picked By Vijay Iyer

Categories: [Take Five: A Weekly Jazz Sampler](#)

03:15 pm

November 17, 2010

by VIJAY IYER

*This Saturday, Nov. 20, Wadada Leo Smith brings his Golden Quartet to the Library of Congress' Whittall Pavilion in Washington, D.C. We asked bandmate and pianist [Vijay Iyer](#), whose recent [Solo album](#) is very much worth your time, to list his favorite Smith recordings, which span more than 30 years. — **Ed.***



[Enlarge](#)

Wadada Leo Smith.

Scott Groller

It's a great honor to present a handful of tracks by my hero and friend, the composer and trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith.

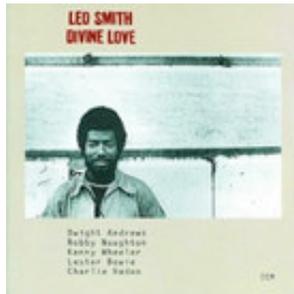
I first heard about Smith in the early 1990s, when I was starting to learn about the artists of

the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. I'd read an interview with [Anthony Braxton](#) in which he spoke of Smith in the most superlative terms imaginable. Because of this, I got my hands on a classic album by saxophonist Frank Lowe, *The Flam* (1975), featuring one Leo Smith. I put it on, eager to hear this genius of the trumpet. I was expecting some flashy post-[Freddie Hubbard](#) stylings, maybe — but instead I heard great silences, toneless columns of air, long tones that cut diagonally across the hubbub of the ensemble. I felt the same way I'd felt when I'd first heard [Thelonious Monk](#) eight years earlier: All I could do was ask, "Is this legal? Is this even music? Does he know something that no one else

knows?"

The answer is yes. And it's a good feeling when music can lead you to the brink of your own understanding and still sound beautiful, true and ripe with significance.

## 5 Expansive Wadada Leo Smith Recordings



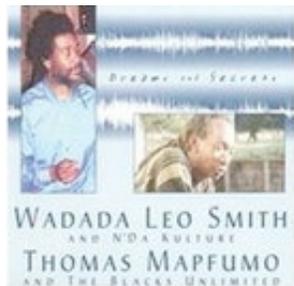
### Divine Love (Excerpt)

Artist: Wadada Leo Smith  
Album: Divine Love

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This is a lovely, delicately unfolding and mysterious suite. The particular way in which sound, space, gesture, composition and improvisation entwine on this piece provides an excellent exposition of Smith's creative language. Released on Manfred Eicher's famous label ECM, it's a testament to Smith's influence that the label's name was his idea -- an acronym for "Editions of Contemporary Music."

[Divine Love is available from ECM Records.](#)

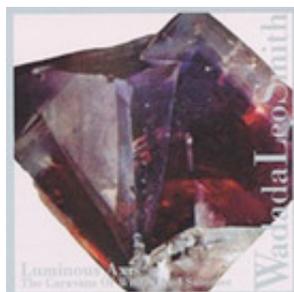


### Masimba/Strength to Overcome

Artist: Thomas Mapfumo & Wadada Leo Smith  
Album: Dreams & Secrets

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*Dreams and Secrets* is a beautiful collaboration with the legendary Zimbabwean singer-activist [Thomas Mapfumo](#). The ability to address political struggles in music with grace and power is something the two artists have in common. I love the way Smith's shimmering trumpet glides across the mbira textures.



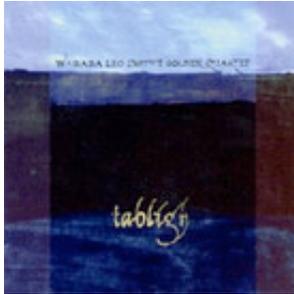
### Caravans of Winter and Summer (Excerpt)

Artist: Wadada Leo Smith  
Album: Luminous Axis

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An incredible duet with one of the doyennes of electronic music, laptop artist Ikue Mori. I believe this piece deals with Smith's *Ankhrasmation* system, which is a compositional language he developed using multidimensional visual symbols as stimuli for improvisation. The word combines the Egyptian word for "vital life force" ("Ankh"), the Amharic word for "head" or "father" ("Ras") and a universal word for mother: "Ma." Smith has said that Mori has dealt with the language of Ankhrasmation with more depth and rigor than anyone else with

whom he's worked.



## Rosa Parks (Excerpt)

Artist: Wadada Leo Smith  
Album: Tabligh

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Wadada Leo Smith's Golden Quartet (captured here in 2005 during its final performance with its previous drummer, powerhouse [Ronald Shannon Jackson](#)) has enjoyed many exciting developments in the last several years. Wadada's prolific compositional output for this ensemble has drawn particular inspiration from the history of the civil-rights struggle. "Rosa Parks" was the beginning of a massive cycle of civil-rights-themed works for the quartet, which could now fill four albums (and I hope they soon will). I feel immensely privileged to take part in this project.



## South Central L.A. Kulture (Excerpt)

Artist: Wadada Leo Smith  
Album: Spiritual Dimensions

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Smith's devastating slabs of sound slide across electric bassist Skuli Sverrisson's oceanic drone, cellist Okkyung Lee's meticulous arco scribbles, and the hue and cry of four guitarists, including the leader's 12-year-old grandson. The majestic, roiling funk of this album is the sonic trace of bodies in action; the music of a multitude.

Wadada Leo Smith is a wise man with much to teach us. I often return to [this clip](#) from the Golden Quartet concert film *Eclipse*:

The artist is the consciousness of society... but musicians' role is very special. It's a way of making an example of the perfect state of being for the observer, causing, if it's successful, the observer to forget just for a moment that there is anywhere else existing except that moment that they're engaged in, and to eclipse everything that was happening to them before they began that process of being the observer, or being involved in/engaged between art and music and listening... and to transform that life in just an instant, so that when they go back to the routine part of living, they carry with them a little bit of something else.

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