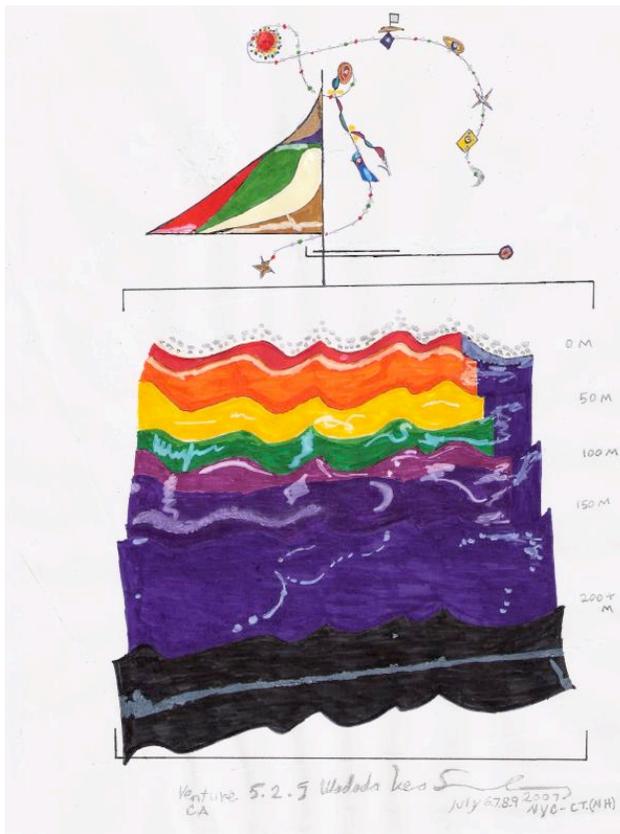


“What I’m Interested in Is Sound”: A Conversation With Wadada Leo Smith - Arts Desk

This image is a section of a musical score by **Wadada Leo Smith**, the avant-garde trumpeter. Obviously, he doesn't use notation as you and I recognize it; Smith has a musical system he calls "Ankhrasmation," which merges the ideas of composition, improvisation, and performance into a single construction.

Currently a faculty member at the California Institute of the Arts, Smith is working on a large set of these compositions, *Ten Freedom Summers*, commissioned by Chamber Music America and the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation; he and his Golden Quartet will be giving some parts their East Coast premiere at the Library of Congress. Ahead of that performance, Smith took time to talk about Ankhrasmation and the band that plays it, and to school WCP on his music's connection to **Miles Davis**.



Washington City Paper: This band seems inclined toward the Miles Davis mold of electronics in jazz. Tell me about that.

Wadada Leo Smith: I've been working with electronics for over ten years. And with Golden Quartet, the only recording where we have used any electronics is the recent recording [*Spiritual Dimensions*], the one that was done at the Vision Festival. And if you notice, only one or two pieces have electronics on it. And when you look at the electronics that we use, the only thing that makes it sound similar to the past is that there's a Fender Rhodes there. Most people can't get past the idea that the Fender is used that way again.

And let me say this about the comparison everybody likes to make with Miles Davis' music. Miles Davis' music was a fantastic music, and it's a major influence on modern music in America, and maybe around the world. But the language he used is quite different than any of the language that I use. Miles dealt with a much more refined notion of fusion; I'm not looking at fusion. What I'm interested in is sound, and all the possibilities that there are with sound.

The common ground is this: Miles Davis is a great trumpet player; Wadada Leo Smith is a great trumpet player. He has a tremendous dramatic use of his musical language; I do the same thing. He has an exceptional range; I have an exceptional range. Then, when you look at the language inside that range, it's very, very different. But still, the relationship is very deep. And I don't mean it just in terms of music; I mean it in terms of states of awareness. For example, I've had a series of dreams over the last 15 years that relate to Miles Davis and me.

WCP: Do you feel in communication with him when you are playing?

WLS: No, I don't feel that when I'm playing, because for me, the only way I can play is to be completely absent of all the stuff that is happening. One of the things that I used to reduce, let's say, 50 to 60 percent of the distortion around me, is that I close my eyes. And then the other part is deep focus—if you've got deep focus, you can hear the ensemble playing, but they are not going to control you or dictate the way you go because you have achieved this kind of connection yet detachment. So when I'm in that state of mind, and I open my eyes, I am literally surprised that I'm playing before somebody.

WCP: How does the Golden Quartet differ, as a concept, from other ensembles and projects you've worked on? How does it work in conjunction with those other projects?

WLS: This is the distinction: When I made the Golden Quartet, my intention was to make an ensemble that I would keep for life. It's the only ensemble that I've ever had that intention. And I wanted to make a nod toward the classical notion of the ensemble: piano, bass, drums, and the horn. It feels to me kind of like the four cardinal points that we have in creation, the north, south, east, and west. It's a perfect platform for solos, duets, trios, quartets; the ensemble or orchestral.



WCP: Speaking of which, you've just released a trumpet-drum duo [*Blue Mountain Sun Drummer*, a 1986 recording with the late **Ed Blackwell**], your second in two years and fifth overall. What attracts you to that configuration?

WLS: There's actually another one with a guy in Sweden that's not out yet, and there's one in the can with **Hamid Drake** that's not out yet. I love drum and trumpet things. It goes back to that whole early brass-band music, where the brass and the percussion kind of made things happen. Actually I was always impressed with duets, primarily because of

Louis Armstrong and **Earl Hines**. That music is fantastic. **Joseph Oliver** and **Jelly Roll Morton** also had duets, and they covered one of the same pieces, "Weather Bird." It's just a fascinating thing to me.

WCP: The fact that you play "Blue Mountain Sun Drummer" on your previous duet record [*America*, with **Jack DeJohnette**] suggests that the project meant a great deal to you.

WLS: It did, and I'll tell you what: on that duet with Jack, I was wondering how I could make a connection with the duet with Ed. So I put the same melody, with a few twists and turns, into that recording that I made with Jack. I did it because I wanted to make that connection with Ed, and see if I could pull it forward. And I'm glad I did, because to tell you the truth that's what inspired me to go back and get this project and look at it again.

WCP: Let's talk about Ankhramation. When you are going over this with musicians, how much of the images and symbolism do you explain, and how much do you leave up to their own interpretation?

WLS: Well, there's quite a bit that's left up to them. In playing an Ankhramation score, you have to do research, independent of anyone else in the ensemble. So let's say you've got one of those half triangles, which is a velocity unit, and let's say that velocity unit is colored red. Each person will take that velocity unit and determine how fast or slow that velocity unit develops, depending on which symbol it is—but even if they all have the same symbol, it would by nature never come out to be the same velocity.

As for the red, the color has to be symbolically referenced. Red could be referenced as blood, for example, or it could be referenced as a cherry. If it's referenced as blood, then they have to go and do the research and find out about all the properties of blood and come up with some reference of how blood is used in humans or other creatures. Then they start to transform that data about blood into musical property, which they are not allowed to tell me about because when we all get together, and we all got red, if there's two of us or nine of us, we end up with two or nine different ideas about that red, and two or nine different ideas about that velocity: how fast it evolves, and how fast it's moving horizontally.

But if you take the cherry, the cherry's got an outer skin that's red, and it also has a pit inside of it. It has a stem that comes out of the center of it. And you would take all of those elements and break them down into different parts and research them. Or you could make the color red have a relationship with sunlight, and that would mean you would reference off the spectrum of light. It's left up to the musician to decide what the color red references.

WCP: With so much research and depth, doesn't the music lose some of the spontaneity?

WLS: No, it doesn't lose any. Because once the person does their research and begins to transform that into music, it's just like practicing a score for any other kind of music. For example, when a guy plays music off a five line staff, he's gotta know how to make that E-flat or that B-flat or that F. That's the same kind of information; before, they've practiced that E-flat, F, B-flat, to make sure they can play it properly. That's what's happening with an ankhramation score: we actually work through it and find the level of creativity that

comes out of it.

WCP: Do you consider yourself a composer?

WLS: I still call myself a composer, yes: a composer-performer-improviser. A composer is one that makes notes on some kind of surface or something; it could be musical notes, or it could be images or whatever. A performer will interpret those notes, and an improviser will bring that other quality, which is himself or herself, and transform those two other qualities into something that no one could ever imagine it would be until after it's done.

Photo: California Institute of the Arts

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