

Wadada Leo Smith

By Marc Medwin



"Since 2007, I see America changing, becoming not a divided multi-cultural society, but a pluralistic cultural society where everybody has a chance. Creative music announced the change in the '60s, but the music had been democratic since New Orleans, with its collective improvisation., where the collective had value and every individual had equal value. This is a unique moment in this country's history, so now I call the music I make American music."

It is a momentary shock to hear such pronouncements from Wadada Leo Smith. The composer, multi-instrumentalist and philosopher/ educator has never shied away from the subject of race relations, but now, his assessment of the situation has changed. "It's obvious that over half of the population of this country is thinking about change--that's an overwhelmingly powerful number! Obama's election proves that structural racism can be erased and that every member of society can make a historic contribution."

To hear Smith speak, to chase after each fleet idea as he moves on to the next, is as exciting as following the trajectory of his own ceaselessly inventive contributions to music. In sound and in speech, his energy is boundless, informing each phrase with vitality and infectious vigor. Yet, as with only the greatest musicians, there is a unity to his achievements, a discernable path through myriad soundworlds he's created. Smith's vision is not that of a simple "all men are brothers" unity; rather, Coltrane's complex vision of unity, manifest most directly from Ascension onward, is a better model, not to mention the pioneering work of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), of which Smith has been a member since 1966. However, even these models cannot encompass the totality of his vision, which is a product of his

starkly individual approach to music making, in both the improvisational and compositional realms. As with Schoenberg's articulation of the Musical Idea, Smith believes that creation begins with an atomistic moment of inspiration. "If you allow memory to be stripped away, you realize the immense power of a single moment, which becomes the seed for all that follows. Then, through reflection, your experience as an artist will show you how to proceed."

Smith came to a form of this realization quite early; he began composing when he was 12, the day he got his trumpet. "I knew four notes," he now smiles and yet he remembers refusing to allow what he did not know to keep him from composing. "Tradition can kill you if you let it. A person does not need to know everything about a tradition to proceed. In fact, too much knowledge can inhibit individual growth. Look at Coltrane--he needed to change, because he was a transitional artist, but those changes were difficult for him because of his knowledge of the tradition. He proved that he could erase some of that knowledge so that the new creation could occur."

Smith's unique ideas concerning the many facets of an individual contribution were solidified, dramatically, when he joined the AACM. "You had to play in one of Muhal [Richard Abrams]'s groups and at some point during your first concert, all of the musicians would walk offstage and leave you up there by yourself. You'd hear them making comments about you as you play and this ritual was to dispel any fear of making an artistic statement. They'd drift back one by one, but not until you'd passed the test of making art."

Such a baptism by fire leaves its mark and Smith has spent his life honing the craft born of his initial artistic visions. With "The Bells," recorded in January of 1967, he began to craft his musical language, a multi-tiered notational and performative system called Ankhramation, about which he has written extensively. He developed a unique language that confronts issues of rhythm, the sound/silence dichotomy, velocity and improvisation using pictographic notation which, in combination with standard notation, allows the composer to dictate certain activities while retaining the artist's individual voice. The language was refined and expanded while Smith sojourned in Paris, exploring various world cultures and musics. The results of this research can be heard on Smith's first Kabell recording, a solo effort. A track such as "Creative Music 1" demonstrates the sound/silence relationships that are at the heart of early Ankhramation's construction.

It was then Smith's goal to hone his language to be as specific but as inclusive as possible, necessitating many more years of research and development. Much of the work was done in solitude. Originally, the reason for Smith's relative seclusion was practical. "It was really quite simple--I stayed in Connecticut for ten years. While my colleagues toured and recorded constantly all over the planet, I played and worked at home. What happens when you're playing in your house? You develop. You grow, because you have to make yourself grow; you can't become lethargic or displaced, you become even more excited!" During that period of introspection and continued research, Smith refused to request performing opportunities, focusing instead on his ensemble, New Delta Akhri, whose membership included Pheeroan akLaff, Wes Brown, Oliver Lake, Dwight Andrews and Anthony Davis. "We had access to an office at Yale because Dwight Andrews was getting his doctorate there. We'd rehearse every week, six or seven hours at a stretch. We needed to do that to grow, because the only way to keep a band from getting stale is to introduce new music. I'd bring new compositions all the time, as if each rehearsal was a performance. These long hours of rumination and expansion led to the first version of "Reflectativity," recorded in 1974; it's an astonishing demonstration of telepathic group interplay. From the first notes emanating from Smith's trumpet, the title seems absolutely appropriate. In the liner notes to Tzadik's reissue of Smith's Kabell recordings (Kabell Years: 1971-1979), Henry Kaiser writes of Smith as a listener and his reactions can be heard as the ensemble enters and reacts to his first multifarious gestures. Smith's notes lengthen, but the longer tones are complemented by an increased presence of silence, indicative of Ankhramation's development. Later evolutions of the language can be heard on Spirit Catcher, recorded for Nessa, and on the beautifully translucent trio album Mass On the World, released on Moers Music.

Yet, the ideas inherent in Smith's approach to these pieces of music inform the way he interacts with every group with which he performs. "Every ensemble is like a planet in the cosmos and every leader of an ensemble has a master plan about creation. By creation, I mean every aspect of

how that group performs, travels and interacts." Yet, it becomes clear that the way in which Smith confronts each moment of a performance bears remarkable similarity to the way in which he first confronted composition. Of soloing, he says, "When you pick up your instrument, there should not be a preconceived set of information inside of you. Even though you may have knowledge before you play, you proceed as if there is no future and no past--there is only now." Smith is not proposing that the soloist should be detached from the music; in fact, he hears every note while maintaining a distance in which his focus is on intuition and creativity.



It is this philosophy of active stasis that informs every note played by the Golden Quartet, a group that has been through several incarnations and which will be performing at Symphony Space this month. A quintet version performed several pieces, involving various uses of Ankhramation, at last summer's Vision Festival; the group alternated long sweeping passages of sparse pointillism and supreme reflectivity with blistering forays into electric jazz, which Smith is eager to separate from what is commonly called jazz-rock fusion. "We're not playing rock and roll," he asserts; "Yes, there is influence from rock in what we do, but influence does not define the product. If you put Golden Quartet music beside most any fusion, you'll hear big differences." Certainly, distortion and electricity are present in the group's sound, but the broad sweeping gestures, punctuated by sharp shocks and dialogic rebounds, put the music in a different space. Vijay Iyer, Pheeroan akLaff and John Lindberg are all veteran improvisers and their diverse and pan-idiomatic contributions reflect Smith's emphasis on the individual/collective dialectic. Judge for yourself, as the Vision performance will be released on Cuneiform in September as part of a double CD called Spirit Dimensions, along with music from Smith's electric ensemble Organics.

The Cuneiform set will be one of several important Smith projects to emerge this year. The pioneering Nessa label has just reissued the wildly experimental but blues-inflected homage album *Procession of the Great Ancestry*, where Smith pays tribute to musicians of the past; Tzadik is also set to release *America*, a series of duos with Golden Quartet alumnus drummer Jack DeJohnette. Smith is also busy working on five new compositions for his Silver Orchestra, the ensemble on 2004's *Lake Biwa*. These are to be premiered in Symphony Space in 2010 and Smith has just received a much deserved Guggenheim grant to fund the project.

These projects are simply continuations of an astonishing series of timbral explorations that began with "The Bells" over 40 years ago, Smith's well-nurtured artistic spirit overcoming the obstacles imposed by neglect and indifference, leading him to the many opportunities of the present and, doubtless, to an equally inventive future.

Recommended Listening:

Anthony Braxton, *3 Compositions of New Jazz* (Delmark, 1968)
Wadada Leo Smith, *Kabell Years* (Kabell-Tzadik, 1971-79)
Wadada Leo Smith, *Procession of the Great Ancestry* (Nessa, 1983)
Wadada Leo Smith, *Kulture Jazz* (ECM, 1992)
Wadada Leo Smith, *Tabligh* (Cuneiform, 2005)
Wadada Leo Smith/Günter Baby Sommer, *Wisdom in Time* (Intakt, 2006)

Photo Credit

Bottom - Scott Groller



For more articles like this one, download our latest issue of *All About Jazz: New York*. Each issue is packed with regional articles & profiles and useful & timely information.

Click the **BACK** button to return to the previous page.

All material copyright © 2009 All About Jazz and contributing writers.
All rights reserved.