

In his program notes for a recent recording, Anthony Davis referred to Leo Smith as "one of the unsung heroes of American music." It is the kind of remark one can skim over half-consciously for a few reasons. Like "the Sun is hot" or "Mars is far away," the statement is so direct that it is innocuous. Also, "hero" is a status so trivialized in media-saturated cultures such as the United States that anyone who brings a cat down from a tree or shows a young person how to throw a curve ball qualifies.

Still, Davis' message is an important one -- Leo Smith *is* one of the unsung heroes of American music.

Artists become unsung heroes for a myriad of reasons, none of which has much to do with art, but rather with the life that informs the art. Such is the case with Leo Smith, who has pursued his art at the expense of his stature as an artist. The seventeen years since Smith's "The Bell" appeared on Anthony Braxton's **Three Compositions of New Jazz** (Delmark) could never be construed as a succession of career moves. Instead, Smith has chosen a course guided by aesthetic, political and spiritual diligence.

While Smith is a rarity among artists, his art has the common grounding in life experiences. In this regard, the unique mixture of blues, jazz, and world musics that are to be heard in Smith's music reflect an exceptional life, not simply a thorough education. Like any artist, Smith's life and work are analogous to a journey; yet Smith's is anything but typical.

Like countless Black Americans, the first legs of Smith's journey hinge on a northward migration from a provincial setting to an urban one. In his case, the provincial setting is the culturally rich Mississippi Delta, where he was born on December 18, 1941. Smith was literally raised in a blues environment -- his stepfather was Alex "Little Bill" Wallace and the family home in Leland was a meeting place for musicians. By the time he was a trumpeter in the Lincoln High School marching band and leading his first jazz group, Smith began to articulate the connections between tech-

nique, content, and philosophy that characterize not only Delta blues, but all the sacred and secular musics found in the Delta.

Most important art is rooted in provinciality, and Smith's early years suggest that his is no exception. Yet, art that is rooted in provinciality needs to be infused with large measures of formal training and prolonged exposures to constructive criticism for it to become vital high art. Smith's move north facilitated the growth of his art by supplying him with these prerequisites. A stint in the Army during the early sixties that centered about studies at the Army School of Music at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri provided training and experience -- he was also able to form an Ornette Coleman-inspired trio and tour Italy with Army bands for eleven months. His pivotal sojourn to Chicago, 1967, brought him in contact with the necessary peerage.

1967 was a nodal point in American musical history, primarily because of two events -- the death of John Coltrane, and the emergence of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians via their first recordings. Smith's role in the latter is considerable. Supporting himself by working in the horn sections of Chicago blues bands, most notably that of Little Milton, Smith intensified his study of theory and harmony while collaborating with Muhal Richard Abrams, Anthony Braxton, Roscoe Mitchell, and the other important figures that comprised the AACM's first wave. Later that year, "The Bell" was recorded for Braxton's Delmark debut, a recording that has taken on, over the years, an almost archetypal aura.

One factor of the significance of **Three Compositions** not to be discounted is "The Bell"'s use of Rhythm-Units, Smith's first formalized framework for improvisation. To an extent, Rhythm-Units is a theory that developed out of practice -- Smith did not fully explicate the concept until 1970, after European tours with Braxton and Leroy Jenkins that culminated in the momentous Creative Construction Company concerts in New York City, 1969 (documented in two volumes on Muse). Strictly speaking, "The Bell" represents the concept at an evolving stage. Yet, as **Cubano Be/Cubano Bop** laid the groundwork for George Russell's Lydian Chromatic

Concept, or pieces such as "Congeniality" foreshadowed Coleman's Harmolodic Theory, "The Bell" is something of a blueprint for Smith's subsequent work (to a lesser degree, the same can be said for Smith's **The Light on the Delta** and **Silence**; they appeared on Braxton collections on BYG and Freedom, respectively).

Rhythm: a study in rhythm units in creative music, Smith's self-produced 1976 booklet, explains the concept through notation in the form of twelve exercises for single instruments or groupings of instruments. His introductory remarks give the non-reader a solid understanding of the concept:

The rhythm-unit concept is one that accepts a single sound or rhythm, a series of rhythm-sound, or a grouping of more than one series of sound-rhythm as a complete piece of music and thus need not to be so-called developed further to appreciate as a whole fresh realized work or piece, IMPROVISATION. The correct understanding of each unit is: the value given to an audible unit is followed by the relative equivalence of silence... whatever duration is given a unit, its equivalent in silence must be supported - meaning that the audible, inaudible, and space aspect of the music is realized, the whole music - its sound, silence, and space.

The Rhythm-Units concept was formalized as Smith made several crucial decisions that, to a degree, dictated his activities throughout the seventies. Like many of his AACM cohorts, Smith moved east from Chicago; unlike Abrams, Jenkins, and others, who settled in New York City, Smith opted for the New Haven, Connecticut area. The artistic self-determination postulated by the AACM was taken to a most logical end by Smith during this period with the inception of his own record label, Kabell, and his first self-produced book, **notes (8 pieces)/source a new/world/music: creative music**.

Smith's first Kabell release, **Creative Music 1**, a collection of six solo improvisations recorded in December 1971, and **notes...**, printed in June, 1973, can be seen

as companion pieces, because approximately a fifth of the book is devoted to a discussion of the recording. Though Smith stated at the time of its release that he did not wish **Creative Music 1** to be reviewed in the music press, several sympathetic publications went to lengths to endorse the project with "non-reviews." Still, the booklet's **other notes part 3**, with its thesis that all instruments are creatively equal remains the definitive discussion of what has become a classic recording. Of particular interest is a comment on **Improvisation #4** that seems to pave the way for Smith's later concept of improvisation, Ahkreation:

...the structures are internally inherent in whatever the events are that are happening. The significant point is that rhythm is held together through color points, that is, color-rhythm textures...

Leo Smith documented his music exclusively, if sporadically, on Kabell during a period when other AACM artists were recording regularly; this, and his move to Connecticut at a time when transplanted AACM artists were gaining recognition in New York, may account for his relatively low profile during this period. Still, Smith produced two stunning albums with his ensemble, New Dalta Ahkri, that are considered to be among the important recordings of the mid-seventies -- **Reflectivity** (1974) and **Song of Humanity** (1976). His Connecticut base allowed him to cultivate a cadre of gifted young musicians that included Anthony Davis, and to study world music at Wesleyan University. This decision did not preclude Smith from participating in projects by Abrams, Braxton, Marion Brown, and others, for various labels. Smith's stance on recording changed in the late seventies, producing, in relative terms, a flurry of recordings; his Kabell output for the decade was surpassed in less than five years. In addition to surveying the evolution of New Dalta Ahkri, these recordings featured Smith in such unique settings as a soloist with a harp quartet ("The Burning Of Stones:" **Spirit Catcher**; Nessa) and in a trumpet trio with Lester Bowie and Kenny Wheeler ("Tastalun:" **Divine Love**; ECM). The most important aspect of the non-Kabell recordings from the late seventies is that they include examples of the fully realized Ahkreation concept in an ensemble context. Smith

explained the concept in an essay for the ECM album:

Ahkreanvention literally means to create and invent musical ideas simultaneously utilizing the fundamental laws of improvisation and composition. Within this system, all the elements of the scored music are controlled through symbols designating duration, improvisation, and moving sounds of different velocities. These symbols are depicted on two types of staves: sound staves divided into low, medium, and high; and sound staves of adjustable sound partials.

Unsurprisingly, however, it is a Kabell project that summarizes this phase of his work -- **Ahkreanvention**, a second collection of solo music released in the early eighties.

Creative music can be characterized, in a very general way, on a decade by decade basis. As energy and spirituality were the hallmarks of the sixties, and as structure and tradition were the watchwords of the seventies, the eighties are beginning to pivot upon a sense of ritual, which can be viewed as a sensibility that synthesizes those of the past two decades. Smith is at the hub of this development, his arrival being another case of the chicken-and-egg nature of theory and practice in his music. Certainly, Smith's conversion to Rastafarianism is central to his recent work as, he states in a 1983 **Coda** interview, it has inspired him to explore a multi-media genre he terms Ritual Dramas. Smith's Ritual Dramas tend to be more theologically explicit than, say, Braxton's Ceremonial and Ritual Works: Smith's **The Killing Of The Prophet**, a Ritual Drama incorporating song, dance, and drama which premiered in April, 1983, follows a classic story line of martyrdom and redemption.

An equally important aspect of Smith's work is updated on this fine collaboration with the Bill Smith Ensemble. The trumpeter has a history of working in cooperative settings with non-Americans -- he was among the first Americans to take part in Company events and is, to date, the only American to record with Gunter Sommer, the East German drummer. **Rastafari** is a notable chapter of that history. The trum-

peter's work with this sensitive and imaginative Canadian unit is exemplary: his solos brim with the lyricism, fire, and economy that has been likened to Miles Davis'; he is most sympathetic to the hues and contours of the compositions of Bill Smith and David Prentice; and, in the title piece, he has a composition that portends to be as important to his future as "The Bell" has been to his past and present.

Smith considers the album to be a cooperative effort -- it is Bill Smith, wearing his producer's hat, who made it "a Leo Smith record" as a respectful gesture. It is obvious upon hearing **Rastafari** that Bill Smith, David Prentice, David Lee and Larry Potter can not only cogently co-create with a major figure like Smith, but inspire him as well. An inspired Leo Smith is to be heard throughout **Rastafari**: ruminating about the spaces of the title piece; singing in the shimmering light of Prentice's "Madder Lake;" exhorting the madness of war in Bill Smith's anti-war statement, "Rituals;" and bantering throughout "Little Bits," the saxophonist's portrait of his daughters. In turn, **Rastafari** is an inspiring album. This should not be surprising, as inspiration is the function of the hero; and Leo Smith is a hero of American music.

Bill Shoemaker 1983