

## THE JAZZ SOUND OF RICKY FORD

New World Records 80204

*(Original notes reprinted from 1977 LP)*

This album presents a young jazz artist in his debut recording: Ricky Ford, a member of that youngest generation of musicians that is providing much of the musical energy for the current jazz revival. He is partnered here with several other relative newcomers to the recording scene as well as two veterans, Richard Davis, bassist extraordinaire, and Dannie Richmond, the remarkable percussionist who has been Charles Mingus' right-hand man for nearly two decades. Both Ricky Ford and Bob Neloms are also currently with Mingus. (Besides being one of jazz's truly creative composers, Mingus is no less than a traveling conservatory who has over the decades taken under his tutorial wing a host of fledgling players and trained them in the high art of jazz performance.) Another first of this recording is the bringing together of Davis and Richmond, whose musical paths—unbelievably—had never crossed before. The natural musical combustion that resulted from rubbing together these talents—plus the arranging capabilities of Paul Jeffrey (featured on two tracks)—creates a strikingly representative example of what's stirring in jazz these days.

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Very likely many people happening on these notes will be surprised to hear and read of a jazz revival, with the implication that jazz had somehow faded or disappeared and was now making a comeback. Indeed, for many it may not be entirely clear *what jazz is* and what therefore is supposed to have been revived. For many people jazz is Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller and the Swing Era of the thirties; for others it is Dixieland or, more accurately, the traditional New Orleans- or Chicago-style jazz of the twenties and its various revivals through the decades; for still others jazz is Miles Davis of the fifties and sixties, or Charlie Parker, or the postbop free-jazz explorations of Ornette Coleman; for yet many more, alas, jazz is identified with the music of Lawrence Welk and Guy Lombardo or with the top-forty music of the rock decades. Nor do many people understand that jazz is at heart an improvisatory art, occasional arrangements notwithstanding, and that you can't just walk into the nearest music store and buy a score of Duke Ellington's "Cotton Tail" or Bennie Moten's "Toby" or Mingus' "Fables of Faubus."

When you think of it, a jazz performance of the quality represented here is a phenomenon. And perhaps what went on here—on a couple of days in June 1977, in a New York recording studio—is worth describing as indicative, even typical, of the nature of jazz, of its mechanics, its creative process.

What is phenomenal is that a few chord changes and a few sheets of paper with a single melody line written on them served as the entire point of departure for four of these performances; in two others even such basic materials were lacking, the musicians improvising—that is, creating, *composing* instantaneously—out of memorized chord changes of standard tunes. The art and craft of creating out of virtually nothing, with very little, if anything, predetermined, and creating in milliseconds, is what the jazz musician must master. It is an aural art, where the ears—not the eyes—are the musical generator. Whereas the "classical" musician *reads* the music as notated, in an admittedly often imperfect notation—imperfect because it cannot capture every nuance, detail, and refinement of musical communication—using the ear only in a secondary function, as it were, checking on the results produced, the jazz musician must work entirely with his ear. If he cannot *hear* the music, if he cannot hear/create with his inner ear and hear (in the case of traditional jazz) the harmonic changes

on which he is improvising, he literally cannot perform. Similarly, in a freer jazz he cannot perform—or certainly not very well—if he cannot aurally relate to, respond to, or assimilate with the other musicians in the group, as they in turn must with him: musical democracy at work.

Each jazz performance is thus unique. (There are exceptions, but they are neither so plentiful nor so basic as to negate the foregoing axiom.) A jazz performance exists generally in a one-time-only rendition. Being improvised, the next time and every other time it will be different—vastly or perhaps only slightly so, but different. It is therefore both a blessing and an anomaly for jazz to be recorded: a blessing because it fixes for all time that which was *once* improvised or created in a unique version for us to hear again and again; an anomaly because fixing that which was extemporized at a given time on the part of a given musician (or group of musicians) and which was not intended to be perpetuated is a contradiction of the spirit of jazz.

By analogy—and even more of an anomaly—a jazz performance is like a performance of a Beethoven sonata that exists *only when it is performed* and has different pitches, rhythms, dynamics, form, and duration each time it is performed. A more contemporary analogy could be made to much avant-garde music that employs aleatory (that is, chance) or improvisatory procedures and therefore is also different at each rehearsal and performance—how *much* different (or alike) being determined by the composer. The implication here is not that *all* performances of "classical" or fully notated music are identical, even when performed by the same artist or artists. But at least in such music the pitches will be the same at each performance, and, with relatively minor deviations, so will most other aspects of the piece.

In jazz, on the other hand, the performer—who is, of course, acting as composer—determines totally the degree of identicalness or difference of one performance to or from another, with identicalness being much, much the rarer.

Improvisation is a venerable art, not only in non-Western musics all over the globe, often for millennia, but in Western "composed art music" as well, from the semi-improvised music of the late-medieval/early-Renaissance troubadours to the highly developed ornamental techniques of the high Baroque. The parallels between jazz and Baroque performance techniques are many and have often been drawn. Certainly the differences are less than one might suspect (which probably accounts for the fact that jazz listeners often relate most easily to Baroque music). And, indeed, a description of how a jazz performance (of the nonarranged sort) is put together might easily read like a description of how Monteverdi's *Orfeo* may have been put together in his time: a skeletal score or blueprint with basic harmonic changes, rhythms, and melodic lines preset but all other details of performance determined in a one-time, not-necessarily-to-be-repeated form *at the moment of performance*.

Unfortunately, improvisation became a lost art in the nineteenth century. Beethoven and his contemporaries were the last to improvise their concerto cadenzas, and, except for organists who continued to improvise preludes, postludes, and transitions from sermon to hymn, improvisation as a creative force came into *disuse*, probably as a result of the *abuses* inflicted on compositions by improvisers, in reaction to which composers—most of all Beethoven, but also Bach—fixed *all* details of their music.

It was inevitable that jazz, a folk art, would bring back improvisation. Played, especially in its early

decades and even to some extent today, by musicians not learned or trained in the traditional European conservatory manner (for all kinds of racial and socioeconomic reasons), jazz was and is performed by musicians who play by ear, not necessarily by those who *read* and *play*. (Ricky Ford is one of the growing number of younger jazz musicians who *has* enjoyed conservatory training—in his case at Boston's New England Conservatory, where he was discovered as a fourteen-year-old prodigy.) Today, as a result of musical acculturation, the formerly mutually exclusive roles of jazz and "classical" musician are fast becoming a relic of the past, although one must state that far more jazz musicians have learned to read music than classical musicians have learned to improvise.

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After microphones and recording levels have been set by the engineers, Ricky Ford passes out his four new "charts"—really melodic lines with chord changes, which he has composed in the previous two or three weeks while traveling with the Mingus group in South America. Trumpeters Oliver Beener and Charles Sullivan immediately run through Ricky's line for the first piece to be recorded, "Loxodonta Africana," for it is well known that such lines, ever since the days of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, are a little harder to assimilate quickly on a trumpet than on a saxophone. Oliver and Charles don't want to be caught unprepared.

Meanwhile Richard Davis has glanced through—and heard—the underlying chord progression, notated on Ricky's sheet of music in symbols—D-flat<sup>7</sup>, D<sup>9</sup>(flat<sup>5</sup>), etc.—above the notes of the melody. They are familiar chords, but assembled in an unfamiliar sequence. Richard feels he'll be able to handle the assignment readily enough.

Ricky, Oliver, and Charles practice the theme line—in jazz musicians' parlance the "head"—which is going to be played in unison at the beginning and end of the performance, a thematic frame around the improvised choruses. A few intervals still give Charles trouble, as does the intonation on some notes; and Ricky has written the line so that some of the notes, if played an octave higher (which he wants), lie a little awkwardly on tenor saxophone—they'd be fine on alto, he avers. He keeps working on that spot, like a dog patiently licking a wound.

Meanwhile Bob Neloms is studying the chord progression avidly: he will not only have to accompany the soloists extemporaneously but will have his own solo choruses to contend with.

Soon the little band is ready to start recording. Take 1: a false start. Take 2: a breakdown further on. Ricky gets mixed up in the structure of his own piece. Take 3 goes all the way through but still has some shaky moments.

By now the musicians have realized that Ricky's composition is not in the usual 12-bar blues or 32-bar song form. Indeed, it's a form they've never encountered before, which makes them stumble in the improvisations—seemingly inexplicably.

The mystery is clarified: Ricky's piece consists of an unusual chord pattern (so do his other three tunes, as the musicians will learn later in the session): a 15-bar structure divided into 4 + 5 + 6 bars. Moreover, the "5" segment is tricky: it consists of four bars with the fifth bar an extension of the fourth—in other words, 4 + 1. The "6" is subdivided into 2 + 2 + 2, really a 2-bar vamp on a familiar descending chromatic progression repeated twice.

It's clearer now. Still, to improvise three choruses at a relatively fast tempo on these unfamiliar changes will take some real concentration, especially on such short notice.

Take 4. Richard Davis is the first—besides Ricky Ford, of course—to assimilate the tune, chord progression, structure, and feeling. Davis takes off, quickly freeing himself from the root positions of the chords but still retaining the essential tonalities Ricky has composed. Neloms comes in next, having assimilated the 15-bar structure, and turns in a brilliant, virtuosic melodic improvisation that has its own compositional form (exposition, development, climax, closing, and transition to the next soloist). The trumpet players are feeling more at home in the chord patterns, are beginning to move around and explore more easily, but are still not happy with themselves. Besides, Ricky gets so carried away that he plays five choruses instead of the intended four, which momentarily confuses the rhythm section, especially Neloms, who is all set to solo after Ricky's fourth chorus, only to find himself deferred: not a disaster, but a noticeable minor flaw.

Take 5 is again a false start. Take 6 has a good opening. In the control room we hold our breath. Is this going to be it? Is everyone going to remember everything—the chord progression in all its details, the number of choruses? Is the improvisatory invention of each player going to measure up to everyone's best creative level?

The take is excellent. But honest, self-critical musicians are not easily satisfied. They all want to try another one. Take 7. It goes well, but in a replay of takes 6 and 7 later between sessions, it is decided to stick with 6.

Another Ford composition, "Dexter," is recorded next. This time it's a deceptively easy-looking 36-bar structure. Not 32. Somehow Ricky has ingeniously sandwiched in an extra four bars that fit so naturally that they offer no counting/feeling problems but also can easily be left out (as indeed Ricky—the composer!—does on one take).

Four takes, and "Dexter" is in the can.

"Aerolinos" (alluding to Ricky's recent encounter with the Argentine airline) is next, this time a 20-bar structure with a subdivision of 4 + 4 + 8 + 4. ("Just a regular twenty," Richard Davis jokingly jibes at Ricky—this is the third irregular tune structure.) The second and last "4" require a special feeling in the rhythm section, which takes a while to organize. But take 1 is a winner, to everyone's delight and relief. Everyone is getting familiar with Ricky Ford the composer and is impressed, particularly with this Monkish tune with a Tadd Dameron uplift.

"Blues Peru" is next: a strangely poignant blues line. Charles Sullivan—in more familiar harmonic territory now—contributes an ingenious bitonal solo.

The next day a quartet date has been set: Ricky alone with the three rhythm players. Rodgers and Hart's "My Romance"—no chart at all this time—is done in one take. It is fresh, spontaneous, free: the musicians are really beginning to enjoy each other musically, responding sensitively and creatively to each other.

Another improvisation starts out on Thelonious Monk's "Straight, No Chaser." After some free atonal episodes (including a startling exploratory bowed bass solo by Davis) they work their way into "There Is No Greater Love," a 1936 standard, eventually returning to Monk's tune. It is mostly great—but, alas, in its complex, somewhat rambling twenty-five-minute duration, too long for inclusion in the album.

In the afternoon, the two nonet sides, Ricky's "Ucil" and Coltrane's "One Up, One Down": classy and not altogether easy arrangements by Paul Jeffrey. Throughout, Ricky Ford—all of twenty-three years old—more than holds his own, meeting every performance demand like a veteran. There is a singular avoidance of clichés, and there are no Coltrane imitations, as is common among so many young tenor players. Indeed, Ricky already has his own voice; he knows the difference between being inspired by his musical ancestors (Coleman Hawkins, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman) and imitating them. He seems to have already absorbed a large chunk of the jazz tradition, *all* jazz traditions, from Louis Armstrong and Hawk to Mingus and Eric Dolphy and Coltrane.

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It is nice to know that the fundamental ideal of jazz musicians listening hard to each other, reaching out for each other aurally, complementing and inspiring each other in superior musical intercourse, "talking" with and through the music—that all these things are by no means dead. Therein lies the significance of the present jazz revival.

The dark years, when rock had all but crowded jazz off the scene, have passed. While on the one hand we now have a new musical amalgam called "jazz rock," we also have many musicians and audiences who, looking beyond rock, have rediscovered jazz and the roots from which rock 'n' roll sprang, a music black people used to call "rhythm and blues" (later, "soul").

But even more interesting, perhaps—and certainly crucial for the future of jazz—is that many musicians of Ricky Ford's generation are revitalizing jazz in an unexpected way. Many of these young players are returning to that point in the development of jazz when it still enjoyed a wide audience—the late fifties and early sixties. I get the impression that they feel that not everything in the jazz of the last decade and a half is worthy of continuation or perpetuation. There were the individual contributions of an Ornette Coleman, a John Coltrane, a Cecil Taylor, but no really strong movement permitting development (rather than mere imitation) had appeared by the early seventies. Indeed, much of the avant-garde experimentation of the interim years had led to serious impasses and had alienated what little loyal audience jazz had left.

I think the young musicians like Ricky Ford are saying in their music: "Hey, let's do this all over again." For they have savored the freedom of "free jazz"; they have learned from Coltrane's extensive and impassioned explorations into the world of modal music; they have readopted bop where Charlie Parker left it twenty-odd years ago; they have had their ears opened by all manner of nonjazz influences (ethnic music, "classical" contemporary music, etc.); and they have, with their ears full of these sounds, hooked up somewhere before the split between rock and the jazz vanguard nearly destroyed jazz. They seem to be traversing some of the same routes, but with a better understanding of the past, of the mistakes of some of their immediate predecessors, and above all with a profound comprehension that a music cannot isolate itself for very long and survive. Ricky

Ford's music is neither narrow nor isolated; it is satisfied with neither yesteryear's avant-garde clichés nor the financial blandishments of today's jazz rock. It is solidly rooted in the past; its heart is big; its ears are wide-open, and so is its mind. It is more than a revival—it is an important new beginning.  
—Gunther Schuller

Gunther Schuller *is a composer and conductor. From 1967 to 1977 he was president of the New England Conservatory of Music. He has written extensively on jazz, and his book Early Jazz: Its Roots and Development (Oxford University Press, 1968) is considered a definitive history of the first three decades of jazz.*

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### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

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**LOXODONTA AFRICANA 80204-2**  
**RICKY FORD**

- 1 *Loxodonta Africana* (Ricky Ford) (publ. Jazz Workshop, Inc.) 4:37  
Ricky Ford, tenor saxophone; Oliver Beener and Charles Sullivan, trumpets; Bob Neloms,  
piano; Richard Davis, bass; Dannie Richmond, drums.
- 2 *Ucil* (Ricky Ford) (publ. Jazz Workshop, Inc.) 5:07  
Ricky Ford, tenor saxophone; James Spaulding, also saxophone; Oliver Beener and Charles  
Sullivan, trumpets; Janice Robinson, trombone; Jonathan Dorn, tuba; Bob Neloms, piano;  
Richard Davis, bass; Dannie Richmond, drums.
- 3 *Blues Peru* (Ricky Ford) (publ. Jazz Workshop, Inc.) 4:55  
Ricky Ford, tenor saxophone; Oliver Beener and Charles Sullivan, trumpets; Bob Neloms,  
piano; Richard Davis, bass; Dannie Richmond, drums.
- 4 *Dexter* (Ricky Ford) (publ. Jazz Workshop, Inc.) 5:39  
Ricky Ford, tenor saxophone; Oliver Beener and Charles Sullivan, trumpets; Bob Neloms,  
piano; Richard Davis, bass; Dannie Richmond, drums.
- 5 *My Romance* (Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart) (publ. T. B. Harms Co.) 8:26  
Ricky Ford, tenor saxophone; Oliver Beener and Charles Sullivan, trumpets; Bob Neloms,  
piano; Richard Davis, bass; Dannie Richmond, drums.
- 6 *One Up, One Down* (John Coltrane) (publ. Jowocol Music) 4:19  
Ricky Ford, tenor saxophone; James Spaulding, alto saxophone; Oliver Beener and Charles  
Sullivan, trumpets; Janice Robinson, trombone; Jonathan Dorn, tuba; Bob Neloms, piano;  
Richard Davis, bass; Dannie Richmond, drums.
- 7 *Aerolinos* (Ricky Ford) (publ. Jazz Workshop, Inc.) 6:53  
Ricky Ford, tenor saxophone; Oliver Beener and Charles Sullivan, trumpets; Bob Neloms,  
piano; Richard Davis, bass; Dannie Richmond, drums.

All tunes arranged by Ricky Ford except: "Ucil" and "One Up, One Down," arranged by Paul  
Jeffrey.

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