

FAR EAST SIDE BAND

Caverns

New World Records 80458

When Louis Armstrong disparaged bebop as incomprehensible "Chinese music," he could not have foreseen a time—now—when American music would prove to be large, inclusive and resilient enough to encompass not only jazz innovators such as Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler and the Art Ensemble of Chicago, but also a brilliant confluence of Asian music and instrumentation, and the freedom of collective improvisation.

One might even say that it is the music, rather than the body politic, which has fulfilled the promise of the democratic "American experiment" in its boundless capacity to absorb new cultural forms and sounds, and in that way to continually reinvent and revitalize the textures of American music.

In the 1970s, Jason Kao Hwang and I were members of the Writers Workshop of the Basement Workshop, a historic Asian-American arts center in New York's Chinatown. During that whirlwind time, a growing Asian- American movement drew much of its inspiration from the Black civil rights movement and confronted a multitude of issues, including opposition to the war in Southeast Asia, demands for university ethnic studies programs, decent housing and social services in Asian communities, and combating pernicious media stereotypes. As part of a widening consciousness and collective exploration of identity, many Asian-Americans also sought to reveal and express their newly emerging selves through art.

As the writer Bharati Mukherjee has said, one can hear "America singing in the seams of the dominant culture." And within those seams, musicians such as Russel Baba, Gerald Oshita, Jon Jang, Fred Houn, Miya Masaoka, Francis Wong, and Mark Izu sing themselves, creating technically and emotionally complex, intense, and richly evocative work.

The Far East Side Band--composer/violinist Jason Kao Hwang, kayagum and ajang player Sang-Won Park, and percussionist Yukio Tsuji--emerges from this context, this continuum, while opening the "envelope" of the music out further. Leader Jason Kao Hwang views the band as "an extension of the Asian-American community," and credits poets Lawson Inada, Mei Mei Bersenbrugge, Fay Chiang, and myself, and choreographers Theodora Yoshikami and Sin Cha Hong as inspirations and collaborators in his development.

His creative process is inseparable from his unique experience as an artist of color in America. "This music must exist beyond conventional categories to be true to my experiences as an Asian-American. You couldn't accurately bag this music as jazz, classical, or blues."

Among his significant musical influences he cites, among others, Borah Bergman, Reggie Workman, J.A. Deane, Henry Threadgill, David Simons, Butch Morris, Ken McIntyre, and Will Connell Jr., with whom he has worked extensively.

Hwang values improvisation as the most personal form of expression, an avenue to the unconscious, which frees each performer to become fully engaged in the moment.

"As a composer, I'm shaping the energy through the improvisational structure, recognizing the individual voices and harnessing their extemporaneous language into a dynamic, emotional flow" he says. "Consider the composition a stage with specific lighting and props. The improviser strides onto that stage, feeling that evocative set, aware of the overall play, then speaking boldly with nuances and gestures to convey the text."

Hwang's first tour and trip to Asia with choreographer/vocalist Sin Cha Hong sparked the formation of the band. Hwang and Tsuji worked in clubs in New York during the early 1980s and later performed and co-arranged the music for the original production of David Henry Hwang's Tony Award-winning play, *M. Butterfly*. "Yukio was one of the first people I met who was using Asian instruments for a deeply personal expression," he says. "And Sang-Won has an original sense of lyricism, which inspired me when he performed in my score for the PBS documentary, *Homes Apart: Korea*, by J. T. Takagi and Chris Choy."

While Hwang is quick to note that The Far East Side Band is neither a traditional music ensemble nor a free jazz group, in so many ways their music pays homage to the respective heritage of each band member. In reverberating soundscapes like "Caverns" or in "Still Water, Movement, Memories and Ice"--a sort of program music for the quiet drama of seasonal change--the band extends the Asian artistic tradition of reverent observances of nature.

"Caverns" opens with an (un)earthly duo of Hwang's electric violin and Tsuji's shakuhachi, the Japanese bamboo flute. Accompanying himself on the stringed ajang, which he both plucks and bows, Park's haunting, passionate vocal is in the style of p'ansori, Korean folk opera. In Park's vocal and Tsuji's galloping taiko drum rhythms on "Caverns," there is an ancient ritual quality to the piece.

Tsuji concocts a highly personal array of percussive colors on his battery of instruments, which include homemade taiko drums, Native American shakers, and Chinese and Turkish cymbals. "All the instruments I make or alter have my spirit in it. When I play with other people, I feel their colors and find the way to fit in with them," says Tsuji.

While not formally trained in traditional music, he says, "I have the style and feelings to express music in my blood, since I listened to Noh, Kabuki, and biwa music in Tokyo on radio and TV." Raised in Seoul, Park states that his background in traditional music is "a very deep source."

Hwang's playing often takes on the emotive characteristics of the human voice. In "Caverns," his electric violin emits a wild, careening cry, while Park's seven-stringed ajang ranges from dark, thrumming tones to harsh, jagged shards of sound.

Park observes that his contact with Western musicians has taught him to value the concept of sound. Whereas most Korean musicians only want to "play beautifully," he says, "I don't only want to play pretty, but also all those human feelings which are more dramatic." Korean folk music is expressive of a broad spectrum of feeling. "People's lives are poor, so their music is very gutsy, with much sorrow."

"Palmistry" has the airy, spacious atmosphere of an otherworldly aviary: the hum of air hoses whipped through the air; Hwang's vocalized notes; bird whistles; the fluctuating tones Tsuji

produces by bowing the waterphon, a water-filled metallic sculpture; and the resonant tones of the Japanese temple bowl.

Park produces a rich sound on the kayagum, which is similar to the Chinese zheng and a predecessor of the Japanese koto--a twelve-stringed zither-like instrument with twelve moveable bridges. On a modified autoharp, Tsuji replicates koto-like tones, while his percussive effects are reminiscent of Native American drumming.

On "Still Water, Movement, Memories and Ice," Hwang's pizzicato seems to replicate the discrete sounds of winter stillness--dripping water, ice breaking. "My pizzicato is influenced by the Chinese pipa in the opening," he says.

In tandem with Hwang, Tsuji's shakuhachi states the melancholy melody, while Park's kayagum augments with deep tones and colors. Hwang's fluid solo evokes Chinese folk songs, but with improvisatory fillips and shadings as well. As the piece begins, so does it end--with Tsuji and Hwang's duo, and sounds of winter silence.

The music on this compact disc--its mystery and beauty--is nourished by at least two cultural streams: the forms and rituals of Asian music as well as the improvisatory freedom of jazz.

Hwang stresses the connection between music and language. He believes the inflection and structure of phonemes in language correspond directly to the music of that culture. As an American-born Chinese who speaks little Chinese, he enjoys exploring a musical language that is the essence of his cultural survival. The Far East Side Band is an expression of this American experience. In the words of poet Adrienne Rich, music may well be that evanescent "dream of a common language."

Throughout this recording, the duo and ensemble work is exceptionally empathic; one feels privileged to eavesdrop on an acutely sensitive and inspired musical conversation.

—Richard Oyama

Richard Oyama *was the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts writer-in-residence grant. He is an adjunct professor of Ethnic Studies and English at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, California. His work has appeared in Downbeat, Ear, Dissident Song, Breaking Silence, Ayumi, and other literary and music publications.*

Over the past 10 years composer/violinist **Jason Kao Hwang** has led ensembles - Commitment, Glass Shadows, Skysing, Unfolding Stone, and now The Far East Side Band, to perform his compositions both here and abroad. He has also scored music for numerous PBS documentaries, including *A Question of Color* and *All Men Are Created Equal?* Mr. Hwang's poetry has been published in *Chinese American Poetry: An Anthology* (University of Washington Press) and *American Born and Foreign* (Sunbury Press). His underground film *Afterbirth* has been presented by the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum and numerous festivals. As violinist, Mr. Hwang has recorded with Henry Threadgill, Sola Liu, Reggie Workman, Jerome Cooper, Butch Morris, "X-Communication", William Parker and Billy Bang. He has performed with Ushio Torikai, Jeff Schanzer, Michelle Kinney, Diedre Murray, and many others. Mr. Hwang was also an original cast

member of *M Butterfly*, performing music he co-arranged for this Tony Award winning drama.

Sang-Won Park (kayagum, ajang, voice), a native of Seoul, Korea, began his studies of classical Korean music as a child at the National Conservatory and later at Seoul University where he earned his B.A. and M.A. in musicology. He was a member of the Traditional Music Orchestra of Seoul and a researcher at the Academy of Korean Studies. Mr. Park made his Western debut at Carnegie Recital Hall in 1979. He then toured Canada, the United States, Scandinavia, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, England, and Switzerland. Les Amis De L'Orient and Sono Disc in Paris produced his album *Le Kayagum de Park Sang-Won*. Mr. Park has collaborated with many musicians from the avant-garde. He recorded on Laurie Anderson's *Mr. Heartbreak* and appears in her film *Home of the Brave*. He has also worked with Nam-Jun Paik, Bill Laswell, Joseph Celli, Charles K. Noyes, and Henry Kaiser. Mr. Park's CD on Waterlilly Acoustic will be released in the near future.

Yukio Tsuji (percussion, shakuhachi, voice), was born in Japan, and arrived in New York in 1979. He has composed and performed with numerous theater, film, and dance companies. The dance companies include Kei Takei's Moving Earth, the Yuki Shiroma Company, the Yamaguchi Dance Company, and Baba Dancers. His numerous La MaMa theater productions, collaborating with percussionist Genji Ito, include work by Elizabeth Swados. Mr. Tsuji created music for *Dreams of Kitamura*, a play by Phillip Kan Gotananda, and was collaborating composer with Lucia Hwong for the film scores *Year of the Dragon* and *House of Sleeping Beauties*. He was an original cast member of *M Butterfly*, performing music he co-arranged for this Tony Award winning play, and composed/performed music for Estelle Parson's *Macbeth* on Broadway. Mr. Tsuji recently performed in the World Percussion Festival in Japan and received his third Meet the Composer grant to create music for choreographer Maureen Fleming's *Sphere*.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Jason Kao Hwang:

Commitment. With Will Connell Jr., Takeshi Zen Matsuura, and William Parker. Flying Panda Records C1001.

Unfolding Stone. With Mark Dresser, Geoffrey Gordon, Wilson Moorman III, J. D. Parran, Ned Rothenberg. Sound Aspects SAS CD 041.

Sang-Won Park:

Le Kayagum de Park Sang-Won. Sono Disc ESP 165528.

Invite the Spirit. With Henry Kaiser, Charles K. Noyes. Celluloid DELL 5008/5009.

Yukio Tsuji:

Blues in the East. Sola Liu, leader. Axiom Records 314-524-003-2.

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CAVERNS 80458-2

THE FAR EAST SIDE BAND

Jason Kao Hwang * Sang-Won Park * Yukio Tsuji

- 1 Caverns (11:34)
- 2 Palmistry (12:28)
- 3 Early Hour Vision (10:21)
- 4 Still Water, Movement, Memories and Ice (12:07)

All compositions by Jason Kao Hwang, Flying Panda Music, BMI, 1994.

THE FAR EAST SIDE BAND:

Jason Kao Hwang *five-string electric violin, electronic processing, bird whistles*

Sang-Won Park *kayagum, ajang, voice*

Yukio Tsuji *percussion (taiko drums, horn rattle, Japanese temple bowl, modified zither, deer hooves shaker, Chinese and Turkish cymbals, air hoses, rain stick), shakubachi, voice*

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