How do contemporary creative musicians view the many forces that threaten to draw and quarter them: as demands or options? Some voraciously dig into the jumble of long-term interests, usable baggage, and unfamiliar data hurled at them by the information age. But it's not a question of simply snatching at every swell sound that comes along; rather, it's necessary to find those approaches for which you feel a real affinity, to explore them in depth, at length, to make them your own.

Ned Rothenberg stands at a number of cultural, methodological, aesthetic, technological, and traditional crossroads. He came up through the same community of downtown New York musicians that produced Elliott Sharp, Wayne Horvitz, and John Zorn, though his muse has ultimately taken him down a somewhat different musical path—or paths: As an accomplished improviser, Rothenberg played free music in myriad settings throughout the Eighties with all the major and minor figures of that alternately vibrant and noxious period. He has consciously dedicated himself to the development of a personal vocabulary on alto saxophone and bass clarinet, utilizing a balanced combination of standard and extended techniques, that sets him within a venerable lineage that stretches from Coleman Hawkins through Anthony Braxton and Evan Parker forward into the current crop of lone reedmen and -women. As a soloist, Rothenberg qualifies as one of the most significant voices of his generation.

On the other hand, Rothenberg's earliest improvising adventures happened as part of an ensemble, with the electroacoustic trio Fall Mountain, and he has kept group work a prime interest, cultivating several of his own bands (Power Lines is the newest) and playing in a host of groups led by others. On other fronts, he has explored computer processing and sequencing with Paul Dresher, written oddly-metered pulse-oriented music for Double Band, and dipped deeply into rich woodwind sonorities in New Winds. And from yet another angle, he has spent time studying shakuhachi with the masters and playing in groups that mix traditional music and improvisation, including an intense duo with Tuvan singer Sainkho Namtchylak, a long partnership with hand-percussionist and global-music expert Glen Velez, and ongoing collaborations with various Japanese musicians.

So how do you place Ned Rothenberg? In what "scene" or "school" can you stick him? With what label can you tag him? Boston-raised citizen of the Big Apple; composer and improviser; group player and soloist; sideman and leader. Specializes in: jazz, classical, free, funk, international, and virtually any combination thereof. Hard to pigeonhole? And then some. And like many of his peers, Rothenberg approaches the challenge of working in divergent fields as an opportunity, not a burden; he treats the swirl of genres and styles, the clash of traditions and extensions as exciting grist for his music's mill. Experiences in each arena simultaneously strengthen and stretch his understanding of the others, setting in motion new projects, reinforcing existing trains of thought, providing a flow of new ideas and materials. All the same, he doesn't fly willy-nilly from one thing to another, but remains dedicated to digging deeply into a concept once he alights on it. Like a certain select corps of his contemporaries, Rothenberg is an omni-musician: a writer, interpreter, and improviser; a multicultural, stateless collaborator; and an eager-eared instigator.

Power Lines is at once a logical outgrowth of Rothenberg's recent work in other contexts and a radical break from his past. It brings to another level his current involvement in more thoroughly
composed music, the same activity that has produced two records by Double Band, "Overlays and Real
and Imagined Time." The metrical ingenuity of that group is evident in some of Power Lines' time
signatures, especially when Glen Velez assists on frame drum as he does on "Hidalgo" and "In the
Rotation." In both groups Rothenberg likes to superimpose longer, slow lines over shorter, chopped
rhythms.

But where Double Band stresses polymetrics and funky bass riffs, the primary emphasis in Power
Lines, as the name implies, is on the strength of melodic linearity and attendant harmonies. Here, for
some, will come the big break with the previous image of Rothenberg: anyone who thinks he's anti-
melodic or without a romantic bone, lend an ear to these integral, at times strikingly lush, scores.
With the textures of the string quartet imbedded in a sometimes-cool, sometimes-hot jazz group,
though, there are no syrupy "with strings" charts here. Around his tunes, Rothenberg constructs
stunning arrangements, making the most of the wide timbres available in the big group while never
turning them into mush--indeed, the group usually sounds deceptively small, testament to both
Rothenberg's ability as an orchestrator and the group's cohesiveness as an ensemble.

Even if the group were only as strong as its parts, there'd be no trouble with the quality components
of Power Lines. Violinist Mark Feldman is rapidly gaining the recognition he deserves as the best
improvising violinist in the States. With unimpeachable tone, inexhaustible inventiveness, and a
genuinely twisted spark of brilliance, Feldman calls his incredible first solo record, "Music for Violin
Alone" (Tzadik), "...my debut as a leader." Mark Dresser has been one of the premier bassists in New
York for many years, working as a member of the Anthony Braxton Quartet, playing with pianist
Marilyn Crispell and drummer Gerry Hemingway, and leading his own group, among other projects.
Only a couple of years ago, Dave Douglas was a little-known sideman; now he's the hottest property
putting lips to a mouthpiece, playing with his own Tiny Bell Trio, New & Used, and his Parallel
Worlds quintet. The latter, in fact, consists of much of the core of Power Lines--Douglas, Feldman,
superb cellist Erik Friedlander, and resourceful drummer Mike Sarin. Buttress this with Ruth
Siegler's simpatico viola, Josh Roseman's limber, strain-free trombone, Kenny Berger doubling on
baritone sax and bass clarinet, and the leader's two axes, and the killer squad is present and
accounted for.

"Bellhop Vontz" gives a good sense of Power Lines' modus operandi, from its introduction--
arranged to have a loose, fragmented feel--to the body of the tune, where strings sing the lovely
melody over the burble of 'bone and bass clarinet. Rothenberg uses interlocking parts and shifting
backdrops (listen to the neat weave of glissing string harmonics midway through "Crosshatch") as an
effective springboard for concentrated improvisations--no grandstanding extendo-jams here. Check
out the deft way he handles the opening theme to "In the Rotation," slightly shifting its color and
feel on the second pass, before the multi-sectional piece changes tempo the first of many times. The
gorgeous "Strange Sarabande" has the most chamber-like feel, its somewhat Russian-sounding initial
chords and romantic viola line slowly giving ground to gentle staccato pointillism and a brass
melody, back over to a freer cello and bass. Rothenberg's personal alto vocabulary is clearly audible
on "Hidalgo" and "Crosshatch." He has a soulful, at times surprisingly slick, tone, incredible facility
in circular breathing and playing cyclical note patterns, and the ability to call forth a large array of
sharp, fuzzy, soft, coarse, and strident sounds.

Power lines: cables that contain and direct unbridled energy, routing it into productive, approachable
outlets. Sure, they're insulated, but they're still dangerous, full of energy, carrying surging electric
currents. That energy is likewise skillfully controlled, hewn, directed, and tapped by the scores and
directives of omni-musician Ned Rothenberg.
—John Corbett

Author of Extended Play: Sounding Off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein (Duke University Press, 1994), JOHN CORBETT writes for a wide variety of magazines and newspapers, including Down Beat, The Chicago Tribune, Neue Zeitschrift für Musik, and Pulse! He teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and hosts weekly radio programs on WHPK and WNUR in Chicago.

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NED ROTHENBERG  80476-2
POWER LINES

1 Hidalgo (11:13)
2 Strange Sarabande (10:33)
3 Bellhop Vontz (9:22)
4 Crosshatch (12:15)
5 In the Rotation (21:26)

Mark Feldman, Violin
Ruth Siegler, Viola, Violin
Erik Friedlander, Cello
Mark Dresser, Acoustic Bass
Mike Sarin, Drums
Dave Douglas, Trumpet
Josh Roseman, Trombone
Kenny Berger, Baritone Saxophone, Bass Clarinet
Ned Rothenberg, Alto Saxophone, Bass Clarinet

Special Guest: Glen Velez, Frame Drums (on Hidalgo and In the Rotation),
including the Tar, Riq, Kanjira, Doira, and Bendir

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