

NED ROTHENBERG
Power Lines

New World Records 80476

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 Drescher, 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.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Solo:

The Crucx: Selected Solo Wind Works (1989-92). Leo Records LR187.

Ned Rothenberg Double Band:

Overlays. Moers Music 020774.

Real & Imagined Time. Moers Music 03006.

Ned Rothenberg and Paul Dresher:

Opposites Attract. New World 80411-2.

New Winds (Ned Rothenberg & J. D. Parran, woodwinds, Robert Dick, flutes):

Digging It Harder from Afar. Victo CD 028.

Traction. Sound Aspects SAS 44.

The Cliff. Sound Aspects SAS 25.

Ned Rothenberg with Ton Klami (Masahiko Sato, piano, Midori Takada, percussion, Kang Tae Hwan, sax):

Parramggod. Nippon Crown CRCJ-9125.

Ned Rothenberg, Steve Lacy, Roy Nathanson and Eric Sleichem:

Antonyms. Sub Rosa SR74.

Sainkho/Ned Rothenberg:

Amulet: Selected Duo Recordings (1992-95). Leo Records CDLR 231.

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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

All music composed by Ned Rothenberg. Published by Thenro Music (ASCAP).

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NEW WORLD RECORDS
16 Penn Plaza #835
NEW YORK, NY 10001-1820
TEL 212.290-1680 FAX 212.290-1685
Website: www.newworldrecords.org
email: info@newworldrecords.org

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