

## THE JULIUS HEMPHILL SEXTET At Dr. King's Table

New World Records 80524

One needn't buy into the dubious premise that history repeats itself to recognize recurring patterns in the evolution of jazz. In the 1950s, in the aftermath of the bop revolution, musicians as diverse as Jimmy Giuffre, John Lewis, Charles Mingus, Gerry Mulligan, and Horace Silver individually set about the task of restoring to jazz certain compositional and ensemble devices of the 1920s and 1930s that the boppers had sacrificed in their rush to greater freedom for the improvising soloist. And while it went practically unnoticed, something remarkably similar occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in the wake of "free jazz." Initially regarded as a challenge to routinized hard bop, free jazz had by that time hardened into as rigid a genre, with the same implicit goal—greater equality between improvisers and their rhythm sections. Once this was largely achieved, the question became, What was left for jazz? A partial answer in the form of that era's many solo concerts and recordings was total independence from bass and drums. But this left unaddressed the larger question of what to do about the prolixity that had overtaken jazz in the name of both bop and free.

The answer, of course, although nobody but a critic blessed with the gift of hindsight might put it so, is that it was time for *composition* to reassert itself. A curiously unexamined paradox in the recent development of jazz is that the same dissatisfaction with the status quo that gave rise to free improvisation ultimately presented us with the seeming contradiction of works clearly identifiable as jazz that allowed for no improvisation at all. Among the musicians who exploited this tension between composition and improvisation, bringing the expanded rhythmic and harmonic possibilities of free jazz to richly textured premeditated settings—were Muhal Richard Abrams, Anthony Braxton, John Carter, Anthony Davis, Leroy Jenkins, Roscoe Mitchell, Bobby Previte, Henry Threadgill, and Edward Wilkerson, Jr. The most innovative of them might have been the late Julius Hemphill (1938-1995), a saxophonist whose posthumous reputation seems based on the signature blend he devised for the World Saxophone Quartet, although this overlooks the innovative contexts he developed for himself as a soloist from the very beginning of his career, starting with *Dogon A.D.* in 1972. It also overlooks Hemphill's achievements with the saxophone sextet to which he lent his name and devoted most of his energy after his departure from WSQ. In a way, Hemphill's position in jazz since the 1970s is analogous to that of Horace Silver's in the 1950s, though their music would appear to have little in common. When Silver left the Jazz Messengers Blakey's band retained its punch, but became more of a mainstream hard bop outfit like any other. It was Silver who, with his own group, continued to examine the relationship between bop and the music of the sanctified church. Likewise, not to overlook the excellence of WSQ's subsequent work with African percussionists and conventional rhythm sections, Hemphill was the one who went on to find even greater orchestral possibilities in the free-standing saxophone ensemble. In the bargain, he created as rich and varied a body of work as any in jazz since Duke Ellington's and Charles Mingus'.

"Julius often told me that he never had any interest in playing the handful of tunes that everybody plays," says Marty Ehrlich, implying by his tone that Hemphill was also uninterested in writing the same *kinds* of tunes. "Yet over the course of his life, he wrote at least one or two classic tunes in practically any style you can name. One example would be 'Spiritual Chairs,' the gospel tune on *Five Chord Stud.* Or [on this present album] 'What I Know Now,' an example of a classic ballad, in classic song form. Julius was writing his musical autobiography, but in some way, I believe he was also writing

a history of African-American music."

The amazing thing to Ehrlich—a longtime friend of Hemphill's as well as a charter member of both his big band and sextet—was Hemphill's ability to compose in virtually any genre without sounding even vaguely generic. The sixteen pieces given rousing interpretations on *At Dr. King's Table* are among those the prolific Hemphill never got around to recording himself. "Flair," "Fixation," "Jiji Tune," and "Another Feeling" are from *Wind Rhythms*, a suite written for the World Saxophone Quartet, which recorded only a fifth theme from the suite, called "Stick." "Holy Rockers," "Sojourner's Blues: Ain't I a Woman?" "The Children's Song," "Ascension," and "At Dr. King's Table" are from Hemphill's score for Bill T. Jones's *The Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin: The Promised Land*, other sections of which were performed by Hemphill on *Five Chord Stud* and *Fat Man and the Hard Blues*. The aforementioned "What I Know Now"—a gorgeous melody that cries out for lyrics—was written by Hemphill for his big band's performance at the Public Theater, in New York, 1981, and the moody-as-Mingus "A Bitter Glory," (arranged here by Andy Laster, who was in the sextet for its 1994 debut performance at the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis) was one of Hemphill's last works. The other pieces are of uncertain vintage, since Hemphill was not in the habit of dating his unpublished manuscripts.

"There isn't a whole lot of improvisation here," points out Ehrlich, who, since Hemphill's death, has become the sextet's music director. "But we did give these pieces our own shape, using improvisational strategies that I know from experience were ones that Julius might have used. For example, on 'Jiji Tune,' there's a riff that naturally lends itself to a solo being played over it, so I set that up as a tenor feature for Andrew White. In 'Holy Rockers,' after the slow introduction, the sextet extends the written material by playing short fills, then collectively extends the counterpoint in the rhythmic section that follows.

"'Void' has the form that we gave it, with two improvised sections, one a collective improvisation for three saxes and the other an alto solo over the vamp," continues Ehrlich. "There's no improvisation at all on 'Fixation' and 'Another Feeling,' both of which are examples of the kind of floating harmonic saxophone chorales that were unique to Julius. 'Bumpkin' is a baritone saxophone concerto and Julius really loved the bottom that Alex Harding gave the group. I know that Julius loved Earth, Wind and Fire's horn parts, and this piece reminds me of some of their things—a funky, peppery sort of thing with a lot of harmonic complexity in the voicings. We cut Sam Furnace loose at the end. In our performances with Bill T. Jones, we didn't improvise on 'Sojourner's Blues,' but here it provided a great opportunity for Eugene Ghee, who is a wonderful blues player, to demonstrate that facet of his ability. I do a long improvised introduction to 'What I Know Now.' It's possible that Julius would have moved further from the melody than I do, but it's such a beautifully crafted melody that I didn't feel it needed much embellishment."

According to Ehrlich, "Julius would sometimes orchestrate a piece that he had initially written for himself and a rhythm section, like 'Georgia Blue' or 'The Hard Blues.' But most of the pieces here he wrote directly for saxophone ensemble. I think one reason that Julius wrote so beautifully for saxophones was that he was one of those rare composers who could hear a full range of harmonies in his head. He thought of saxophones as dramatic personae. When I first met him, in the early 1970s, he didn't compose on piano. Later on he did, but only because it saved him time."

Hemphill's chosen milieu was one in which composition and improvisation overlap, in which a

composer was tacitly understood to be his own most faithful interpreter. Yet the act of putting pen to score-paper is itself a bid for perpetuity, as is recording. In Ehrlich's words, Hemphill's terminal illness "forced the issue" of whether his compositions could be brought to life without his full participation. Ehrlich refers to the sextet's last few performances with Hemphill, when Hemphill had enough stamina only to conduct and play brief unaccompanied alto introductions, as the band's "transitional period," during which "Julius pointed us in the direction that has allowed us to go performing the music he prepared for us and to introduce new compositions of his."

These last few performances of Hemphill's were emotional experiences for him, for his sextet (which had added a seventh member), and for those of us lucky enough to be in the audience, as I was for the band's concert in Philadelphia in the fall of 1994. "Julius was elated to hear us interpreting his music, and so were we, although our elation was mixed with deep sadness. Our guiding image as an ensemble has become the memory of him onstage with us smiling and literally dancing [sitting] in his chair as we played his music.

"You can't overlook what a powerful saxophone player Julius was," Ehrlich concludes. "It's like Duke Ellington said when Johnny Hodges died: 'My music is never going to sound the same.' We're not trying to replicate the sound of Julius's band with him in it, because that would be impossible." All the same, "his manuscripts had metronome markings and expressive markings, so we're not flying blind. We made decisions about his music based on the experience of playing extensively with him—in my case, more than a hundred nights over the three- or four-year period that we performed the music from his collaboration with Bill T. Jones. So I think we got very close to what Julius would have wanted."

Ehrlich and the others certainly capture the romping spirit of Hemphill's music, a central tenet of which (as with much of the most creative music of the last twenty years) was that interpretation can be as effective a vehicle for self-expression as improvisation. In doing such justice to Hemphill—in recognizing his mother wit along with his harmonic sophistication—his former band-members have also done themselves proud.

—Francis Davis

Francis Davis *is the author of* *In the Moment*, *Outcats*, *The History of the Blues*, *and* *Bebop and Nothingness*. *He is currently at work on a biography of John Coltrane and a history of jazz.*

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Andrew White appears courtesy of Andrew's Music.

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**THE JULIUS HEMPHILL SEXTET' 80524-2  
AT DR. KING'S TABLE**

- 1 Impulse (1:14)
- 2 Holy Rockers (7:04)  
soloists: The Sextet
- 3 Void (3:18)  
trio improvisation: Sam Furnace, Gene Ghee, Alex Harding; alto solo: Marty Ehrlich
- 4 Fixation (2:22)
- 5 Jiji Tune (3:33)  
tenor solo: Andrew White
- 6 What I Know Now (4:15)  
alto solo: Marty Ehrlich

- 7 Sojourner's Blues: "Ain't I A Woman?" (4:14)  
tenor solo: Gene Ghee
- 8 Another Feeling (1:50)
- 9 Bumpkin (4:13)  
baritone solo: Alex Harding; alto solo: Sam Furnace
- 10 A Bitter Glory (arranged by Andy Laster) (3:27)  
alto solo: Andy Laster
- 11 Flair (2:35)  
flutes, alto flute, bass clarinet: Marty Ehrlich
- 12 Ink (3:11)  
tenor solo: Andrew White
- 13 Choo Choo (3:56)  
soprano solo: Marty Ehrlich
- 14 At Dr. King's Table/Ascension (4:23)  
alto solo: Marty Ehrlich
- 15 The Children's Song (2:17)
- 16 The Children's Song: First Vision (3:54)  
flutes, clarinet, bass clarinet: Marty Ehrlich

Marty Ehrlich, alto sax, soprano sax, flute, alto flute, clarinet, bass clarinet

Sam Furnace, alto sax, soprano sax

Andy Laster, alto sax, flute

Gene Ghee, tenor sax

Andrew White, tenor sax

Alex Harding, baritone sax

Marty Ehrlich, Music Director

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