

What We Live Quintet For A Day

New World Records 80553

It is dangerous to talk about evolution in art; one person's idea of what's cutting edge is another's wasteland. Even the use of the term has the implicit danger of presenting what is new and different as ipso facto superior to what conforms to more traditional structures. But the music on this CD does represent an interesting development that bears discussion. This doesn't have to do with breaking new ground, but with the fact that musicians experienced in ground-breaking can at this point participate in a more measured approach to collective improvising. Of course what makes this development worthy of discussion is the fact that the music itself is so impressive. It unfolds with a measured sense of compositional drama quite different from the apocalyptic outpourings that improvisers tend to fall into when they just get together and blow, not that there's anything wrong with that. But I am reminded of how Eugene Chadbourne explained to me the desirability of using the new compositional approaches that people like Anthony Braxton, Wadada Leo Smith, or John Zorn were introducing in the seventies: "If you get five guys together and play free, it sounds pretty much the same every time. If the same five people play one of these compositions, each performance will sound different."

The five guys on this CD are improvising freely and it sounds different every time, in large part because of their experience with new compositional approaches, which often require improvisers to relate to each other and the flow of what's happening in different kinds of ways. Here they use the skills acquired in these situations to allow truly spontaneous free compositions to take place before our eyes and ears. Much of what happens this way is, as has been indicated, conservative compared to the more jarring sonorities of contemporary free improvising; it is closer in feeling to the free jazz of the fifties and sixties. I am reminded of some of Don Cherry's work with Gato or Sun Ra's Heliocentric period, but those recordings were definitely structured as to how and when the free playing would occur. In a way, this is comparable to the achievement of mainstream players of the time (Ruby Braff, Ike Quebec, Benny Green, to name divergent examples), whose preference for earlier styles led them to build convincing music on older foundations. The difference is that this contemporary "mainstream" approach is possible only for players who have long experience with the new music.

The Bay Area-based trio of Larry Ochs, Lisle Ellis, and Donald Robinson was formed in 1994 as What We Live, with the idea of performing compositions (mostly by Ellis) with the group expanded to a quartet by various guest artists. This experience fostered a desire on the part of the trio members to get to know each other better as improvisers, and that process has proved to be so fulfilling that they haven't felt the need to return to using compositions. They have however continued the original idea of adding different quartet members over the years, and Wadada Leo Smith and Dave Douglas have both participated. The opportunity to record with the two together arose when they both had Bay Area gigs at about the same time, which led to the unique session heard here. The title *Quintet for a Day* refers to the unaccustomed larger format.

In many ways Lisle Ellis seems to be the central reference point for the music's flow, whether the context is the trio or an expanded group. It is logical that the strongest early influence on Ellis's development was Cecil Taylor: His approach reflects the blues-based propulsion of the Taylor

school. In the seventies Lisle worked with many of the musicians most closely associated with the pianist, like Andrew Cyrille, Alan Silva, the late Jimmy Lyons, and others. He was later (1995) a member of Taylor's Unit. Ellis has also worked extensively with another significant pianist, Paul Plimley.

An important association shared by Ellis, Robinson, and Ochs is the great tenor Glenn Spearman, whose recent passing has deprived the Bay Area of one of its musical touchstones. All three were involved in various projects with Spearman. Donald Robinson first hooked up with Glenn in the early seventies, when he was based in Paris studying with Kenny Clarke and working with the likes of Braxton, Silva, and Oliver Lake, among others. After his relocation to Oakland in 1975, he and Spearman became almost constant musical companions. Robinson has also been the driving force of many a local funk band, which is an interesting contrast to his approach for this music, as though his sense of the basic groove is so ingrained that he can make you feel it while engaging in the subtlest commentaries. The extensive history Lisle and Donald share as a rhythm team is reflected in the highly developed rapport that is basic to the music here.

Larry Ochs is probably best known for his work with the Rova Saxophone Quartet, the long-standing paragon of Bay Area new-music groups. In recent years Larry has done some great work in a variety of other contexts as well, including What We Live and another improvisatory group, Invisible. Larry has dealt convincingly with the challenge posed to younger tenor men who want to find their own way along the path indicated by the stylistic legacy of Coltrane, Ayler, Sanders, and Shepp. What can be added to such spectacular testimonials? Larry evolved his own answers some time ago, and, as you'll hear, has found lots of other questions to address.

Since hitting the scene in the seventies, Wadada Leo Smith has contributed mightily as a trumpet master, leader, and composer. Smith's concepts in the latter capacity are absolutely original and almost frighteningly deep, as anyone who has ever tried playing his music can attest. We see in his work how the mind of the composer enters the realm of improvisation and how the improviser informs the composer.

Dave Douglas has made quite an impact in the past few years. A lot of us first heard him in the context of John Zorn's Masada, with whom he still works. His 1995 New World CD *In Our Lifetime* showed Dave using the challenging legacy of the late Booker Little as a springboard into his own creative realms. Each project since then has provided further evidence of his dedication and musicianship. The present situation allows us to see him in more of an outside context than some of his listeners may be used to.

There is a sixth element of the group chemistry here, and that is the space that everyone leaves open, without which the music couldn't take its ever-changing shape. Perhaps we should think of this sixth element as the leader/arranger of *Quintet for a Day*. The ability to read the leader's invisible charts is one way of defining what's special about this music, and when you hear the fantastic ideas indicated by these arrangements you'll be amazed by the beautiful interpretations.

—Duck Baker

Guitarist/composer Duck Baker has worked in many styles of American traditional music and jazz. He contributes to various guitar magazines as well as Coda, Jazz Times, and The East Bay Express.

Active for almost two decades as a performer, composer, conductor, curator, and director of ensembles and events, **Lisle Ellis** performed as a member of the Cecil Taylor Unit in 1995 and was the bassist in Glenn Spearman's groups Double Trio and G Force. A current focus for Ellis is his work with What We Live—the collaborative trio with saxophonist Larry Ochs and drummer Donald Robinson. Other recent projects have included work with India Cooke, Barry Guy, Marilyn Crispell, and the Rova Sax Quartet, among others. In Canada he was integral in the forming of several music alliance organizations—most notably Vancouver's New Orchestra Workshop in 1978 and the Association des Musiciens Improvisateurs de Montréal in 1991. In San Francisco, Ellis has become a member of the Bay Area improvised music scene, and in 1994, he organized The San Francisco Alternative Jazz Festival called October Revolution, named in honor of the October Revolution event directed by Bill Dixon in New York thirty years previously. In the early seventies he studied in New York at the Creative Music Studio with many of Creative Music's luminaries. The most influential of these musicians on his development was Cecil Taylor. Ellis has worked with those players most closely associated with the Taylor “family,” including the late Jimmy Lyons, Andrew Cyrille, Alan Silva, Raphe Malik, and Karen Borca. Ellis currently resides in San Francisco.

Since 1978, **Lawrence Ochs'** professional activities have been centered primarily around the Rova Saxophone Quartet, which has made more than twenty European tours and numerous concerts throughout the U.S. and Canada. Ochs has also been the executive director of the Rova nonprofit organization since 1985. In this capacity, his accomplishments include producing the PreEchoes series, involving Rova in collaborations with other artists such as The Ganelin Trio from the USSR, Anthony Braxton, John Zorn, Terry Riley, Fred Frith, Henry Kaiser, Lawrence D. “Butch” Morris, Alvin Curran, Chris Brown, and San Francisco Taiko Dojo. In 1986, Ochs formed the group Room, a quartet of saxophone, piano, computer electronics, and percussion. In 1991, he helped form the Glenn Spearman Double Trio, a free jazz sextet that recorded for Black Saint and Tzadik until the leader's death in 1998. In 1993, Ochs created a nine-piece ensemble to perform a specially commissioned work for the Festival Antwerpen '93, and he organized the sax octet Figure 8 to perform his music at festivals in Austria and Germany. In 1995 he was a guest soloist with George Lewis's Creative Music Orchestra, and he recorded with Mr. Lewis as part of India Cooke's quintet, Red Handed. Ochs's two newest groups are Maybe Monday (with Fred Frith and the kotoist Miya Masaoka) and Invisible (with John Schott, Trevor Dunn, and Scott Amendola). In 1997 Ochs recorded with the John Lindberg Ensemble.

Donald Robinson (drums) has been a stalwart of the San Francisco Bay avant-garde jazz scene, playing and recording with many of the area's improvisational players, from saxophonists John Tchicai and Marco Eneidi to koto player Miya Masaoka and pianist Matthew Goodheart, and with prominent visitors like Cecil Taylor, Wadada Leo Smith, George Lewis, trumpeter Raphe Malik and Canadian pianist Paul Plimley. Much of this work has featured the combination of Robinson and Ellis as rhythm section. His longest musical association, dating from the 1970s, has been with tenor saxophonist Glenn Spearman. Born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1953, Robinson first studied classical percussion at the New England Conservatory of Music. During the early 1970s he served his musical apprenticeship in the jazz world of Paris, studying with Kenny Clarke and playing with Alan Silva, Anthony Braxton, Oliver Lake, and Bobby Few, among many others. He first played with Glenn Spearman as a duet partner during this period in Paris, an association that continued through various configurations and

many recordings up until the saxophonist's death this October.

Born in Montclair, New Jersey, trumpeter **Dave Douglas** began playing improvised music during a high school year abroad in Barcelona, Spain. He went on to study composition and performance in Boston for two years at the Berklee College of Music and the New England Conservatory. Moving to New York in 1984, he completed his B.A. degree at New York University's Gallatin Division while also performing on the streets of New York with other young musicians. His education continued on the bandstand with Horace Silver's ensemble, touring internationally for three months in 1987. He writes primarily for his own ensembles: the Tiny Bell Trio, the Dave Douglas String Group, a jazz Quartet and Sextet, and the electric octet Sanctuary, as well as more recent projects exploring the meeting points of improvisation and Indian music, musique concrète, and orchestral music. Douglas is a member of John Zorn's Masada and Myra Melford's The Same River Twice, and has recorded with Don Byron, Fred Hersch, Anthony Braxton, Han Bennink, Tim Berne, Uri Caine, Cibo Matto, Sean Lennon, Mark Dresser, Suzanne Vega, Ed Thigpen, and Vincent Herring. Douglas has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, Meet the Composer, the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, and Arts International. Douglas's ensembles have performed at jazz and new-music festivals in the U.S., Canada, Britain, Germany, Austria, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Switzerland, Finland, Estonia, and Japan. Several international festivals have also presented multi-day overviews of his music.

A trumpeter, multi-instrumentalist, composer, and improviser, **Wadada Leo Smith** has been active in the contemporary world music tradition for more than thirty years. Smith's early musical training began in high school concert and marching bands in Leland, Mississippi, where he was born. At the age of thirteen he immersed himself in the traditions of improvised music and the Delta blues. His formal musical education, begun with his stepfather, Alex Wallace, continued through the U.S. Military Band program, the Sherwood School of Music, and Wesleyan University. As a world improviser-composer, Mr. Smith has studied a variety of music cultures (African, Japanese, Indonesian, European, and American) and has developed a Jazz and World music theory, with a notation system for creative improvisers he calls "Ankhrasmation." He has taught at the University of New Haven, the Creative Music Studio in Woodstock, N.Y., and Bard College. He is currently the Dizzy Gillespie Chair at the California Institute of the Arts (1998). Mr. Smith's awards include the Meet the Composer/Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Commissioning Program, Asian Cultural Council Grantee to Japan, the New York Foundation on the Arts Fellowship in Music, and National Endowment for the Arts Music Grants. He has composed music for solo, ensemble, classical, and creative orchestra, and stage works. Mr. Smith's N'Da-Kulture ensemble has performed most of his music since 1970. His compositions have also been performed by Ursula Oppens, Marilyn Crispell, David Rosenboom, Vickie Ray, the AACM Orchestra, the Kronos Quartet, the Da Capo Chamber Players, the New Century Players, the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, the Contemporary Chamber Players (University of Chicago), the S.E.M. Ensemble, and the California E.A.R. Unit.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Never Was. What We Live. Black Saint 120169-2.

What We Live. What We Live. DIW DIW-909.

Lisle Ellis, Lawrence Ochs, and Donald Robinson

John Coltrane's Ascension. Rova Saxophone Quartet. Black Saint 120180-2.

The Fields. Glenn Spearman Double Trio. Black Saint 120197-2.

Dave Douglas

Five. Soul Note 121276-2.

In Our Lifetime. New World 80471-2.

Parallel Worlds. Soul Note 121226-2.

Sanctuary. Avant 066.

Stargazer. Arabesque AJ0132.

The Tiny Bell Trio. Songlines 1504-2.

Lisle Ellis

Children in Peril. Music & Arts 1016.

Elevations. Victo 27.

Kaleidoscope (Ornette Coleman Songbook). Paul Plimley and Lisle Ellis. hat ART CD 6117.

Larry Ochs

Pipe Dreams. Figure 8. Black Saint 120167-2.

The Secret Magritte. Larry Ochs. Black Saint 120177-2.

Works, Volume 1. Rova Saxophone Quartet. Black Saint 120176-2.

This Time We Are Both. Rova Saxophone Quartet. New Albion NA 041.

Bingo. Rova Saxophone Quartet. Victo 56.

Donald Robinson

Red Handed. India Cooke. Music & Arts 951.

G-Force. G-Force. Red Toucan 9308,

Density of the Lovestruck Demons. Paul Plimley. Music and Arts 906.

Wadada Leo Smith

Condor, Autumn Wind. with Harumi Makino Smith. Wobbly Rail 1.

Divine Love. ECM 1143.

Golden Heart Remembrance. N'Da Kuulture. Chap Chap 002.

Kulture Jaxx. ECM 1507.

Procession of the Great Ancestry. Chief 6.

Tao-Njia. Tzadik 7017.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Smith, Wadada Leo. *Notes (8 pieces) Source a New World Music: Creative Music*. Kiom Press, 1973.

Producer: Larry Ochs

Engineer: Ben Leinbach

Mixing and mastering engineer: Myles Boisen

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All compositions © Ochs, Ellis, Robinson, Douglas, Smith (Trobar/ASCAP)

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WHAT WE LIVE 80553-2

Quintet For A Day

- 1 A Brush With the Groove (4:56)
- 2 Here Today (9:49)
- 3 The Turquoise Lament (first synopsis) (1:53)
- 4 Yours and Mine (14:51)
- 5 The Undersized Shadow (synopsis three) (3:49)
- 6 The Big Hunt (fourth synopsis) (2:30)
- 7 The Blackbird (synopsis two) (2:24)
- 8 Gone Tomorrow (14:59)
- 9 Coda (1:58)

All compositions Ochs, Ellis, Robinson, Douglas, Smith

LISLE ELLIS, bass

LAWRENCE OCHS, tenor and soprano saxophones

DONALD ROBINSON, drums

With special guests (on all tracks):

DAVE DOUGLAS, trumpet (left channel)

WADADA LEO SMITH, trumpet (right channel)

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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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