

Jon Raskin/The Bass and the Bird Pond
New World Records 80574

The name, before we've heard a single note, seeds what we hear. What *The Bass & the Bird Pond* says, what we see, is that bass could be stringed axe, fish, deep register, deep, epiphanous catch, epiphanous mix thereby announced. Mix could be annunciative beast (Sun Ra: "be-ist"), bird be of the air, winged axe, water somehow the same. Pond could no way not be water-albeit-bird, a monstrous amalgam the name announces: band as hornheaded beast, keyed-breathing beast, doubly-horned, hornheaded beast at the edge of the earth. Bass pond, bird pond, wing, string, fin. A pooling of scripted and scriptless divagation, pond, so seeded, could be cloud. And so *The Bass & the Bird Pond* begins, in silence, the suggestive silence of words on paper, of mute, double-spoken *bass* (long *a*, short *a*). It begins a return to the multiple sounding the world is, a sounding we often feel we've strayed from or been orphaned by. Music such as this takes us back. It takes up at a point of multivoiced provision, a point mute, double-spoken *bass* is an instance of, tamer but of a piece.

The Bass & the Bird Pond, this recording's title piece, began at a pond at Mills College in Oakland, began with frogs outside the music building, singing. "The idea," Jon Raskin says, "came about after listening to the frogs singing by the pond near the music building at Mills College. I was thinking of the levels of perspective when using a pond as focal point of understanding the life cycle of large and small. The singing of the frogs to attract a mate and continue the species while on the human level the singing was inducing a meditative state." Music such as this invites the outside in. Interspecies outside space, no less real than emblematic but emblematic all the same, blazons post-bop improvisation with zoomorphic reach and rapprochement. "Outside" has long been a term applied to music in the vein initiated by Albert Ayler, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and others. Raskin gives it a turn we're reminded also applies. Eric Dolphy liked playing along with birds.

The recognition of life cycles large and small evokes parallels, peril as well. Tim Berne's piece *Bloodcount* can't help but recall Billy Strayhorn's composition of (roughly) the same name, its different spelling and its definitely different sound notwithstanding. Recalling as well, in so doing, the circumstances in which *Blood Count* was written—Strayhorn's completion of the piece while hospitalized, dying of cancer—it features a fittingly elegiac sparseness, spotlighting sometimes lone, sometimes twinned or entwined alto voicings, voicings whose Ornettish cry edges elegy with complaint. The first piece on the recording, it quickly shows us what the two horns together can do, asserting a vitalist prospect or proposition which relates by contrast to the sense of fatality and resignation carried by Strayhorn's tune. Berne's robust urgency is met by Raskin's more inward approach, a coiled confidentiality demurely let loose. Nods of agreement have a place in the piece, as do senses of launch and of braided lift, a chorusing recourse to the upper register, senses of goaded, reciprocal hoist.

The third piece on the recording, *Chapter 269, Death*, written by Raskin, is also in this vein, as its title would suggest, only more unrelievedly elegiac. Berne's alto is all the more edged with umbrage, abandonment, regret. Raskin's baritone, by turns commiserative and consoling, is the company misery loves one moment, serenely wise

counsel the next. The title is that of a poem in Lyn Hejinian's, *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*. Raskin says of the piece, "It is for a good friend who had recently lost his partner to AIDS. His friend had lived many years with AIDS and spent a lot of energy educating people on the many aspects of the epidemic. This music is for the people who love and care for the afflicted, who have friends and lovers die and survive, who remain to remember and feel the loss. The small objects and gestures are often the most poignant and can bring to the surface the feelings that shadow the self." It accordingly begins with small gestures, seeming merenesses of effort and exertion, gestural expenditures exacting squibs of sound. 2 Expended breath, breath audibly escaping as if to accentuate breathing, emphasize and foreground breathing, touches in raw and rasping fashion on themes of contingency, vulnerability, lack of guarantee. Pronounced exhalation makes this a piece in which breathing room abounds, as though, inversely, breath, never not in harm's way, were all the more to be exercised, occupied, resided in. No less a matter of time than of space, such roominess or abundance bestows a halting, near static measure, consistent with and possibly inspired by one of Hejinian's poem's most affecting lines: "Life has more pauses than required."

On the other hand, *The Third Path to No Where*, the second piece on the recording, while not without moments of stagger and relative stasis, is marked by nothing if not its forwarding pulse, the stepping propulsion introduced right off by Michael Formanek's very strideful, quickfingered bass. By the time the two altos, following the drums, come in, locked in unison statement, breath already salient to an almost humid extent, they sound like the proverbial head of steam. A steady, at times hurry-up, at times even hectoring set of dictates issued on cymbals, atop an equally insistent recurring bass throb, make for a performance filled with locomotive élan. But for all its blowing-session feel and expressivity, it still arises from the constructivist disposition we tend to associate Raskin with, given his many years with the Rova Saxophone Quartet. "*The Third Path to No Where* came from a larger work called *Critical Path*," he says. "The concept came from the construction industry, where a building project is organized by sixteen major categories. How they relate across time is called the critical path. I thought that it was an interesting organizing concept for improvisation and composition. *The Third Path to No Where* is one of the musical signposts that have been fleshed out. I was trying for a path that had changing topographies with musical outcroppings similar to how architectures can change the feeling of the physical and the emotional quite abruptly." The constructivist bent is relatedly present and even more readily evident in the title piece, the toy-soldier mechanicality of the Braxtonlike theme with which it begins and ends. A sorcerer's-apprentice mechanicality perhaps, for a strain of thought bearing on runaway translation headed nowhere, the beast in the machine and vice versa, runs through this music where animal cry and mechanical abidance frequently meet. —*Nathaniel Mackey*

Nathaniel Mackey is a poet, critic, and fiction writer whose most recent book, a volume of poetry, is *Whatsaid Serif* (City Lights Books, 1998).

Jon Raskin, baritone, alto, and soprano saxophones, was born in Ione, Oregon, in 1954 and was introduced to the saxophone by way of the clarinet by his father, an elementary music schoolteacher. Between his brothers, sister, and parents he developed a love of simultaneous music in a home that often resembled practice rooms at a music school. His

first teacher, Eddy Flenner, taught the basics as well as the love of the sound of a saxophone. (He also introduced him to the saxophone quartet that was performing versions of Shinto songs for a local Shrine in Portland, Oregon.)

Jazz came into his life by way of the high school jazz band, through records, and through hearing musicians like John Handy, Michael White, Keith Jarrett, and Charles Lloyd performing in small venues in Portland. The wonders of the recording medium opened his ears to musics as diverse as Varèse, Coltrane, Sun Ra, Zappa, B.B. King, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Ravi Shankar, and Jimi Hendrix, and the love of finding good music wherever it might be found. In the seventies, Raskin participated in new music ensembles directed by John Adams (San Francisco Conservatory of Music) and Dr. Barney Childs (University of Redlands), studied with Allaudin Mathieu and John Handy, and became active in the improvised music scene in San Francisco.

During this time he was the music director of the Tumbleweed Dance Company, a founding member of 3 The Blue Dolphin (an alternative music space in San Francisco) and The Farm (a cross-disciplinary cultural center and urban farm in San Francisco). Since 1978 the Rova Saxophone Quartet became the main vehicle for his musical exploration. Through Rova, Raskin has worked with John Zorn, Anthony Braxton, Terry Riley, Fred Frith, Alvin Curran, Sam Rivers, SF Taiko Dojo, and John Carter, and he has released more than twenty recordings and toured extensively in Europe, the U.S. and Japan. He has also worked with India Cooke, Phillip Gelb, Pauline Oliveros, Phillip Johnston, and Glenn Spearman. Raskin has received numerous grants and commissions for a variety of creative projects: an NEA composer grant for *Poison Hotel*, a theater production by *Soon 3* (1988); *Reader's Digest/Meet the Composer* (1991); a Wallace Gerbode Interdisciplinary Grant for the installation work *Occupancy* with Howard Martin; and a Berkeley Symphony commission (1995).

Tim Berne was born in Syracuse, New York, in 1954, and was subjected to a perfectly normal childhood. But he didn't decide to take up music until nearly twenty years later when he was attending Lewis and Clark College in Oregon, putting most of his energy into intramural basketball. At this point, while resting a sore ankle in his dormitory, Berne encountered a saxophonist who was selling his alto, and bought it on impulse.

Musically, Berne had always been interested in all types of music, but especially by the great Stax artists like Sam and Dave and Johnnie Taylor, as well as Motown artists like Martha and the Vandellas and Gladys Knight. This passion for the soulful quality in music has followed him throughout his career, a career that he could not possibly foresee at the time. "I hadn't listened to much jazz, but then I heard Julius Hemphill's album *Dogon A.D.*, and that completely turned me around. It captured everything I liked in music. It had this Stax/R&B sensibility and it had this other wildness. It was incredible. That's when I started playing."

Berne moved to New York in 1974, sought Hemphill out, and entered into a sort of apprenticeship with the elder musician. The "lessons" they had together lasted for hours and covered everything from composition to record promotion to recording to pasting up handbills to aspects of magic and spirituality and, sometimes, even playing the saxophone.

Berne began issuing his own albums on his own Empire label in 1979. Over the next five years he would record and distribute five albums under his own name that

included such musicians as Ed Schuller, Olu Dara, Paul Motian, John Carter, Glenn Ferris, and Bill Frisell. Following two recordings for the Italian Soul Note label, Berne recorded *Fulton Street Maul* and *Sanctified Dreams* for Columbia Records.

In 1988 Berne began a long relationship with the JMT label with the first of two recordings with the cooperative Miniature (with Joey Baron and Hank Roberts). Berne's JMT legacy climaxed with the historic Paris Concerts given by his quartet, bloodcount, released in three volumes (*Lowlife*, *Poisoned Minds*, and *Memory Select*). In 1996 Berne once again founded his own record label, Screwgun, and released a three-CD set of live recordings by bloodcount, *Unwound*. His string quartet, *dry ink, silence*, was premiered by the Kronos Quartet at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. A recording of *The Visible Man*, a piece commissioned in 1992 for the Rova Saxophone Quartet, has been issued on a disc called *The Works, Volume 2* on the Black Saint label.

Michael Formanek's singular approach to the acoustic bass has led to an impressive range of musical associations. During his twenty-four-year career, he has played and/or recorded with Tim Berne, Freddie Hubbard, Stan Getz, Marty Ehrlich, Chet Baker, Tony Williams, Gerry Mulligan, Fred Hersch, Dave Liebman, Uri Caine, Joe Henderson, Mark Isham, James Emery, the Mingus Big Band, Terumasa Hino, Cedar Walton, Attila Zoller, George Coleman, Jane Ira Bloom, Bob Moses, Gunther Schuller, Peter Erskine, Gary Thomas, and many others.

Composition also plays a significant role in Formanek's overall musical profile, and four albums of his original music, *Wide Open Spaces*, *Extended Animation*, *Low Profile* and *Nature Of The Beast* have been released on the Enja label. Formanek produced or co-produced all of these recordings, and among the featured musicians are Greg Osby, Tim Berne, Mark Feldman, Dave Douglas, Marvin "Smitty" Smith, Ku-umba Frank Lacy, Marty Ehrlich, Wayne Krantz, and Jim Black. Formanek is a consistent presence on the touring circuit in the U.S. and abroad. He has performed his own music regularly with a wide range of ensembles and is involved in ongoing projects that include Tim Berne's quartet, bloodcount, a recently formed cooperative trio with Peter Erskine and Marty Ehrlich called Relativity, and the Tim Berne/Michael Formanek duo. Current releases of particular interest include a solo bass recording, *Am I Bothering You?* on Screwgun, and a Tim Berne/Michael Formanek duo recording, *Ornery People*, on Little Brother Records. The debut CD of the Relativity trio has recently been released on Enja.

Elliot Humberto Kavee is extremely active as a drummer and cellist having performed and recorded with Omar Sosa, Francis Wong, Craig Hulet, Clubfoot Orchestra, Ben Goldberg Trio, Graham Connah's Sour Note Seven, San Francisco Mime Troup, Frame, Sheldon Brown Group, and many others. He currently is living in New York City and developing being a soloist playing original music on cello and drums simultaneously.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

between/waves. w/Philip Gelb, Pauline Oliveros, Dana Reason. Sparkling Beat Records sbr0006.

Bingo. Rova Saxophone Quartet. Victo VICTOcd056.

Eight(+3) Tristano Compositions 1989. Anthony Braxton. Hat Art 6052.

John Coltrane's Ascension. Black Saint 120180-2.

Ptow!!. Rova Saxophone Quartet. Victo VICTOcd040.
The Works Volume 2. Rova Saxophone Quartet. Black Saint 120186-2.
The Works Volume 3. Rova Saxophone Quartet. Black Saint 120196-2.
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SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Coolidge, Clark. *The Rova Improvisations*. Sun & Moon Classics 34, Sun & Moon Press, Los Angeles, CA.

Engineer: Dave Greenberg

Editing: Dave Greenberg, Jon Raskin

Mastering: Dave Greenberg

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JON RASKIN QUARTET 80574-2

THE BASS & THE BIRD POND

1 Bloodcount

(Tim Berne; publ. by Party Music/BMI) 21:51

2 The Third Path to No Where

(Jon Raskin; publ. by Temescal/ASCAP) 17:09

3 Chapter 269, Death

(Jon Raskin; publ. by Temescal/ASCAP) 8:57

4 The Bass & The Bird Pond

(Jon Raskin; publ. by Temescal/ASCAP) 20:31

Jon Raskin, soprano (*The Bass & The Bird Pond*), alto (*Bloodcount; The Third Path to No Where*), baritone saxophone (*The Bass & The Bird Pond; Baritone on Chapter 269: Death*)

Tim Berne, alto saxophone

Michael Formanek, bass

Elliot Kavee, drums, cello (*The Bass & The Bird Pond*)

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