

ANDY LASTER'S LESSNESS
WINDOW SILVER BRIGHT
80589-2

Narrative was central to jazz even before Lester Young uttered his oft-repeated line that every solo should tell a little story. It's been generally overlooked that such Youngian tales were told within the context of a larger framing tale—a band arrangement—making them stories within stories. Count Basie's "Jumpin' at the Woodside" is the framing story for a succession of interior stories, just as the fleeing of young Florentines from the plague of 1348 is the framing story of Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

Regardless, Young established the axiom when the plot of the story was more important than its descriptive passages. Stories had a beginning, middle, and end if they were any good. Sure, there was an onus on the storyteller to provide delicious details and tangy twists; but no flourish compensated for the lack of a moral or a punch line. Bottom line: you had a story or you didn't; and if you didn't, don't bother picking up your pen or your horn.

But that was several paradigm shifts ago. Now, stories are not told as much as universes are created. Literature is no longer about putting a *Weltanschauung*, a view of the cosmos, on the table, but just a *Welt*. Something of the same has happened in jazz, with composers having largely appropriated the narrative chores. Too often, however, composers and novelists are primarily focused on winding up their universes and letting them go. If the universe simply circles about or runs smack into a wall, so it is: A universe must not mean, but be.

Therein lies the rub of the narrative act severed from the conveyance of a larger message. It chafes the part of the brain that makes art heroic, romantic, or mantic—essential myth-making functions. Granted, the creation of new universes is predicated on the obsolescence of the old; but the efficacy and durability of the new is largely dependent on a primordial bonding agent: magic. Without it, music cannot morph into a chevron, a caress, or the dream of the ancestors; consciousness cannot be awakened or expanded.

Yet, magic has to operate through the quotidian to avoid being merely fantastic. Accordingly, a baseball bat is a better talisman than a jewel-encrusted relic and a blues is a more potent summoning than a game-theory-derived matrix of pitches. It is through the ordinary that the extraordinary is most vividly revealed. Subsequently, adhering to the conventions of good storytelling is the surest way a new universe doesn't vaporize when the book is closed, or the CD has ended. Perhaps Prez was jazz's first magic realist.

When it comes to style and subject matter, Lester Young and Andy Laster are storytellers from different universes, creating vastly different universes in response. Yet they both follow a crucial narrative rule: Don't explain. In a straight-up universe shaped by economic depression, world war, and racism, Young employed what Zen Buddhists call *upaya*, direct pointing—this is love; this, pain; this, injustice—an arguably easier technique for a soloist than a composer. It was an approach consonant with the simple story lines of Young's favored ballads: Love has gone; love is still gone, etc. By comparison, Laster's universe is complexity-theory incarnate, creating a

seemingly contradictory demand on universe-making: It must be cynical and mythological. Indirect, if not baroque, pointing is indicated.

Starting at the end of *Window Silver Bright*, then, is a fitting way to talk about Laster's bead on indirect pointing. "Trit and Ina" is emblematic of the layers of storytelling entailed in present-day jazz universe-making. It recasts the "Tristan chord" that opens *Tristan und Isolde*, the Richard Wagner opera that recast the medieval Celtic myth of mystic sex and doomed love, which music historians believe to be a recasting of Wagner's own torrid love affair. The Tristan chord (a half-diminished seventh chord) created a crisis in Romantic harmony as it breached conventions of harmonic resolution with its chromatic implications. It is also loaded with minor thirds, perhaps the bluest of all intervals. Four notes with more dramatic tension would be all but impossible to find.

For listeners unfamiliar with the Tristan chord and its reverberating history, the piece stands on its own within the context of present-day jazz. Yet those who know the source material's thoroughly modern statement that it can go anywhere, harmonically, will savor how Laster and Lessness swerve through several contrasting scored and freely improvised passages. The Tristan chord ceases to be the directly pointing leitmotif of Wagner's opera, nor is it a conforming framing device like the riffs of "Jumpin' at the Woodside." Instead, the Tristan chord is repeatedly metamorphosed.

As a key element in Laster's narrative style, metamorphosis operates on several levels on "Halcyon Days." Commonly used to describe a period of peaceful quiet, the phrase is rooted in an easily condensed myth: A king drowns at sea, which prompts the god Morpheus, in the form of the dead man, to console Alcyon, the grieving queen, which sets in motion the corpse washing ashore at her feet and their final transformation into kingfishers (Halcyon), whose subsequent nesting on the waters produced the calm now meant by the phrase. What is disarming about such myths is their pace, as one fantastic event after another is given little more than a matter-of-fact mention.

This offhanded narrative style is manifested in "Halcyon Days" as easy shifts in rhythmic feel, which work hand in glove with the unfolding of the thematic materials. The melodic arc and harmonic undertow of the initial ensemble suggest a silent-screen siren in Hellenic garb placing forearm to forehead in the stilted gesture of yearning. To avoid campy melodrama, Laster introduces a sultry Latin rhythm to underpin the suave trumpet statement, slipping in a few bars with a sophisticated late-fifties jazz waltz feel at the end of the chorus. This rhythmic contrast transforms the thematic materials into a lithe blowing vehicle. It is a simple method, but in using it, Laster gives wings to both the materials and the soloists.

Whereas the sources for "Trit And Ina" and "Halcyon Days" are straightforward, the inspiration for "Mito" is decidedly more arcane. A reorchestrated version of a movement from a work for violin, cello, clarinet, and piano, "Mito" is through-notated, except for the baritone saxophone improvisation preceding the miniature cello concerto. The clue to the piece's inspiration lies not in a motif or the treatment of materials, but in its structure, its division into parts. Mathematical relationships are employed for this purpose frequently enough that some composers keep Fibonacci next to Slonimsky in their libraries.

Instead, Laster's model for determining the duration of the episodes was one of the most cryptic paintings of the Italian Renaissance, Piero Della Francesca's "The Flagellation." The painting mixes religious allegory and contemporary political commentary in an arresting composition, one loaded with symmetrical relationships. These relationships are the underpinnings of Piero's masterly use of a single vanishing point and Quattrocento linear perspective, without which the painting would have been flat and static. Laster appropriated the unit of measure with which Piero established these relationships, using it not only to structure the episodes of *Mito*, but also as a tool to explore the painting's many mysterious images.

However, the success of the piece lies in the geometric rigors and vivid, if inexplicable imagery of its own universe, not Piero's. Laster does not draw the listener deep into the universe of "Mito" to prove Theorem 10 of Euclid's *Optics*, but to elicit an emotional response; the background in Piero supports that response much in the way inaudible harmonics support audible tones. Laster achieved comparable results with *Interpretations of Lessness*, where Samuel Beckett's pick-a-sentence-from-a-hat method of construction yielded music that gracefully veered between humor and sadness.

Of the various methods of indirect pointing Laster employs on *Window Silver Bright*, the Piero-inspired formula is the most obscurant. Although Laster's storytelling is comparatively straightforward throughout the remainder of the program—after pieces like "Mito" and "Trit and Ina," it is a bit like rereading stories from *Dubliners* after an immersion in the layered wordplay of *Finnegans Wake*—most of the compositions still contain complex elements. Such is the case with "Norseman," which depicts a boisterous Friday night in a Dublin pub using an unlikely device, a twelve-tone technique associated with George Perle, who devised tone rows more for their harmonic potential than for their linearity. Similarly, the aptly titled "Rip-rush" contains a simmering groove whose meter is repeatedly modulated, triggered by a hocketed line played by cello, vibes, and baritone saxophone.

The formal considerations of Laster's compositions do not dilute the juice, the spark, or the whatever that makes them come alive. In a roundabout way, this confirms their vitality as stories. But they are not exactly garden-variety stories within a larger framing story, an album called *Window Silver Bright*. They are closer to what Tzvetan Todorov called "embedded stories," which parallel a syntactic form of subordination linguists call "embedding." Instead of the narrative returning to the same framing story—say, that of Boccaccio's cosmopolitan Florentines—at the completion of each of the interior tales, the end of each story opens a subordinate clause that contains the next.

Subsequently, the ninth story is embedded in the eighth, the eighth in the seventh, and so on, back to the first. Consequently, the central concept of each composition is assimilated into a successively more extensive context, which displaces it from central to relative importance. A phenomenologist would read this process as a sequence of different vantage points and perceptions, a record of an evolving state of consciousness and identity. The twin compositions, "In Teum" and "The Rooascend," are intriguing in this regard. The titles refer to "ficciones" written by a prior Andy Laster, who conjured the Rooascend, whose rituals were performed in Teum. Additionally, the two-part suite is dotted with source materials like bird songs and the

blues, which are all but universal rites of passage for young composers. It is an echo of an earlier self.

Regardless of how embedded a story may be, Todorov would argue that whatever else it might be about, it is ultimately about its own telling. It is at the point of telling, however, that Laster's stories cease to be exclusively his, inasmuch as five musicians tell them. Jorge Luis Borges asserts that we tell stories and listen to them because we live stories and live in them. Bryan Carrott, Erik Friedlander, Michael Sarin, and Cuong Vu tell and therefore live in Laster's stories. Despite their respective roaming of the garden of forking paths commonly, if somewhat inaccurately, known as the Downtown Scene, the five musicians have repeatedly intersected in various ensembles: Laster in Friedlander's *Topaz*; Friedlander, Sarin and Vu in the latest edition of Myra Melford's *The Same River Twice*; and so on. Combined with their exact fit into Laster's specs for an ensemble with a lower-pitched front line and a multifaceted percussion section, their fluency and flexibility as soloists give them a level of co-authorship that differs substantially from Prez's on "Jumpin' at the Woodside."

Ultimately, that difference stems from the contrast between Laster's compositional agenda and Basie's. Whereas Basie wanted his listeners to open their pores on the dance floor, Laster wants his to open their imaginations in a labyrinth. Certainly, the labyrinth that is *Window Silver Bright* has a correlation with the labyrinth Laster has traversed since moving to New York in 1985 (after studies at the Cornish Institute with Gary Peacock and Julian Priester), one whose numerous, seemingly independent trails repeatedly crisscross each other. Laster spent the late eighties and early nineties in the employ of Lyle Lovett; the relative security it afforded him in developing projects is reflected in his first recordings as a leader for Sound Aspects, his work in such co-op bands as *New & Used*, and sideman stints in underheralded ensembles like *Orange Then Blue* and Phil Haynes's *4 Horns & What?*. The strength of these projects was crucial to the mid-nineties solidification of *Hydra* (with Herb Robertson, Drew Gress, and Tom Rainey) and Laster's membership in the Julius Hemphill Sextet, as well as the late-nineties emergence of *Lessness* and Laster's reunion with OTB's George Schuller and Matt Darriau in the Darriau-led, Silver Era-inspired *Ballin' The Jack*.

Subsequently, it takes a counter-intuitive rigor not to immediately place *Window Silver Bright* within this labyrinth. Even a story within a story within a story, ad infinitum, requires a temporary autonomy to be fully savored. Demanding story consumers know this; even King Shahryar required only one a night from Scheherazade, and then he slept on it. The only alternative to savoring *Window Silver Bright* is to place it in context, which is a step removed from filing it. To savor something is an inherently digressive act, like stopping in mid-sentence to admire a circling hawk, or praise the virtues of pickled squid. Savoring lets the mind and senses wander associatively. Homonyms like "beach" and "beech" yield images of waders in the trees. Images merge, the water drops leading from the shower becoming the footprints of a drowned king. It is how the universe of the story fuses with the universe of the audience. Andy Laster is on to this.

—Bill Shoemaker

Andy Laster—composer, saxophonist, clarinetist—is a native of Long Island, New York. He studied creative writing at the University of Michigan and music at the Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle. He returned to New York City in the mid-1980s and began recording his compositions for the Sound Aspects label. In the 1990s Laster co-founded the collective New & Used with Dave Douglas, Tom Rainey, Mark Feldman, and Kermit Driscoll. He also formed Hydra, which has released three CDs. In 1997, he conceived of the Lessness ensemble, which was based loosely on a text by Samuel Beckett. The premiere CD was chosen as one of *Billboard* magazine's Top Ten Jazz Releases of that year. Laster has also performed with and/or arranged for such diverse artists as the Julius Hemphill Sextet, Lyle Lovett, Mark Helias, Erik Friedlander's Topaz, Mick Rossi, David Taylor, Bobby Previte, Satoko Fujii, Elliott Sharp, Matt Darriau's Ballin' the Jack, and George Schuller's Orange Then Blue. Laster began writing chamber music in the late 1990s and his works have been performed at Cornelia Street Café's Contemporary Classical series. He completed a commission from Augustana College in 2001. He has received numerous Meet The Composer grants, and has attended residencies at the Djerassi Resident Artists Program and the Blue Mountain Center.

Bryan Carrott (vibraphone, marimba) has been a mainstay of drummer/composer Ralph Peterson's Fo'tet and saxophonist David "Fathead" Newman's quartet and quintet for the past ten years. Bryan began playing in the bands of alto saxophonist/flautist James Spaulding, trombonist Benny Powell, and bassist Mickey Bass, while earning his B.A. degree in jazz studies and performance at William Paterson College in New Jersey. Since then Bryan has also worked and toured locally and internationally with the Butch Morris Ensemble, Muhal Richard Abrams, John Lurie and the Lounge Lizards, The Jazz Passengers, Charlie Hunter, Henry Threadgill, Dave Douglas, Bob Moses, Herbie Mann, Branford Marsalis, Frank Kuumba Lacey, Craig Harris, Cassandra Wilson, Roy Campbell, and The Spirit of Life Ensemble. Carrott has been cited for several years in *Down Beat* magazine's International Critics Poll in the vibes category for talent deserving wider recognition, and has performed on forty-five recordings to date. Bryan was also a mallet/percussionist for *The Lion King* on Broadway and has been featured on several movie and TV soundtracks. In between performing and recording, Bryan teaches piano classes in Queens Village, New York, and leads praise/worship music throughout New York City and Long Island.

Cuong Vu has been garnering rave reviews as one of the leaders of a new generation of innovative musicians. Since moving to New York in 1994, Cuong has been active, leading his groups JackHouse, Scratcher, Vu-tet, and the Cuong Vu Trio. Cuong began playing the trumpet at the age of 11, five years after emigrating to Seattle from Vietnam. He was awarded a full scholarship to the New England Conservatory of Music, where he received his Bachelor of Music in jazz studies with a distinction in performance. While at NEC, Cuong was greatly influenced by the saxophonist Joe Maneri, who led him to search for his own sound that not only emphasized originality but also pushed the established sonority and role of the trumpet into areas that Cuong hadn't yet explored. In addition to Maneri, Cuong was influenced by the contemporary classical music he encountered at NEC, from which he found new forms and textures to apply to his playing and writing. He has performed and/or recorded with David Bowie, Laurie Anderson, Mitchell Froom, Cibo Matto, Chris Speed, Dave Douglas, Gerry Hemingway, Myra Melford, Dougie Bowne, Laurent Brondel, and Holly Palmer. A recipient of

numerous awards, Cuong was recently awarded the Colbert Award for Excellence: The Downtown Arts Project Emerging Artist Award.

Erik Friedlander is a New York City-based cellist and composer. He has released five CDs as a leader, the most recent of which is *Grains of Paradise*, in which Friedlander leads a band of cello, ten violins, bass, and percussion.

Michael Sarin is originally from Seattle, where he began his formal music education with the drummer Dave Coleman Sr. He continued his education at the University of Washington, studying with the percussionist Tom Collier, and later with the drummer Jerry Granelli at the Cornish Institute of the Arts. Since moving to New York City he has performed, toured, and recorded with musicians Ray Anderson, Tim Berne, Thomas Chapin, Mark Dresser, Marty Ehrlich, Mark Helias, Lee Konitz, David Krakauer, Bobby Previte, Ned Rothenberg, and John Zorn. He is currently touring and recording with Ben Allison's Medicine Wheel, Anthony Coleman's Sephardic Tinge, Dave Douglas' Witness, Myra Melford's The Tent, and Brad Shepik.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Andy Laster

Hippo Stomp. Sound Aspects 020.

Twirler. Sound Aspects 035.

with Hydra

Soft Shell. Knitting Factory KFW 281.

Polyogue. Songlines SGL 1507-2.

Hydra. Sound Aspects 051.

with Lessness

Interpretations of Lessness. Songlines SGL 1515-2.

with New & Used

Souvenir. Knitting Factory KFW 125.

Consensus. Knitting Factory KFW 163.

with Orange Then Blue

Hold the Elevator. GM Recordings GM 3040.

with Ballin' the Jack

The Big Head. Knitting Factory KFW 289.

Bryan Carrott

with Ralph Peterson Fo'tet

Back to Stay. Sirocco Jazz Limited 1006.

The Fo'tet Plays Monk. Evidence 22174.

with Muhal Richard Abrams

One Line, Two Views. New World 80469-2.

with David “Fathead” Newman

Davey Blue. High Note 7086.

with Leon Lee Dorsey

Song of Songs. Umoja Productions 9902.

with Henry Threadgill & Make a Move

Everybody’s Mouth’s a Book. Pi Recordings 02.

Cuong Vu

Come Play With Me. Knitting Factory KFW 298.

Pure. Knitting Factory KFW 266.

Bound. Omnitone 12002.

with Saft/Vu

Ragged Jack. Avant 68.

Erik Friedlander

Grains of Paradise. Tzadik 7154.

SKIN. SIAM Records SMD 50008.

Topaz. SIAM Records SMD 50003.

Chimera. Avant 57.

The Watchman. Tzadik 7107.

Michael Sarin

as co-leader

What Comes Before. Michael Sarin, John Schott, Ben Goldberg. Tzadik 7120.

as a sideman

Witness. Dave Douglas. BMG/Bluebird 09026-63763-2.

The Well. Brad Shepik. Songlines SGL1531-2.

Above Blue. Myra Melford. Arabesque AJ 0142.

Morenica. Anthony Coleman (Sephardic Tinge). Tzadik 7128.

Sky Piece. Thomas Chapin. Knitting Factory KFR 208.

Five. Dave Douglas. Soul Note 121276-2.

Power Lines. Ned Rothenberg. New World 80476-2.

PRODUCTION CREDITS:

Producer: Marty Ehrlich

Engineer: Malcolm Pollack

Assistant engineer: Keith Shortreed

Mixing: Malcolm Pollack

Assistant engineer: Kaori Kinoshita

Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions, NYC
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Bryan Carrott plays Ross vibraphones and marimbas.

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For further information, go to andylaster.com.

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ANDY LASTER'S LESSNESS

WINDOW SILVER BRIGHT

80589-2

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|-------------------------|------|
| 1. <i>Jellyfish</i> | 6:05 |
| 2. <i>In Teum</i> | 8:45 |
| 3. <i>The Rooascend</i> | 5:31 |
| 4. <i>Mito</i> | 5:24 |
| 5. <i>Rip-rush</i> | 5:47 |
| 6. <i>Black Pond</i> | 5:29 |
| 7. <i>Norseman</i> | 9:31 |
| 8. <i>Halcyon Days</i> | 5:40 |
| 9. <i>Trit and Ina</i> | 6:48 |

Andy Laster, baritone saxophone
Bryan Carrott, vibraphone and marimba
Cuong Vu, trumpet
Erik Friedlander, cello
Michael Sarin, drums and temple blocks

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