

TONY MALABY (b. 1964)

PALOMA RECIO

Tony Malaby, tenor saxophone; Ben Monder, electric guitar; Eivind Opsvik, bass; Nasheet Waits, drums

80688-2

1. *Obambo* 5:04
2. *Lucedes* 4:36
3. *Alechinsky* 10:06
4. *Hidden* 4:14
5. *Boludos* 2:51
6. *Puppets* 2:19
7. *Sonoita* 5:46
8. *Loud Dove* 12:07
9. *Third Mystery* 7:38
10. *Musica Callada* 3:07

TT: 57:58

These are strange times to be making music. Despite the recent change in political currents and a re-examination of national identity, the bottom-line question persists, “Is anything really going to be different?” In this context creative musicians go about the business of making a life and making music. The questions to be reckoned with rise to the surface as always, initiating valiant attempts to squeeze out some creative response to the inexorable truth; answers come with great difficulty and spawn new questions. It is a cycle of thought that deposits one in a temporarily liberating space with a license to go for it . . . one more time.

Tony Malaby has been going for it on a regular basis since relocating to the New York area in 1995. Among the many projects that he has initiated, this quartet is of particular interest. My perspective on his music is unique: I have observed Tony’s compositional development over the past decade and had the chance to produce two of his recordings, including this one. Over that period of time we have had occasional discussions of formative processes and approaches to composition and improvisation.

This recording features the quartet Paloma Recio (Loud Dove) with Ben Monder, Eivind Opsvik, and Nasheet Waits. The “sound” of this band was cultivated over a two-year period. “We just played in town and never toured. I had many talks with Eivind and Ben about orchestrating the sound,” says Malaby. The group, directed by Tony, explored its choices by trying contrasting ranges, oppositional rhythms, and varied improvisational groupings. This work resulted in the evolution of a group vocabulary which, in turn, generated these compositions.

Contrary to popular anti-intellectual mythology, musicians actually discuss “process” constantly as a way of finding new paths of exploration. They are, in fact, a rather articulate subculture group and are constantly examining the dialectics of artistic creation. The nexus of composition and improvisation has been the subject of much conjecture in recent history, regardless of musical genre. This recording is one response to that conjecture in its broad ranging sonic expression and flowing improvisational nature.

Tony Malaby was born on January 12, 1964, a first generation Mexican-American. As with many working-class progeny, Malaby needed mentors outside the family to help develop his talent. Even with the modest support of family members, a developing musician requires encouragement from other artists or teachers involved in their discipline. Many musicians with whom I have spoken over the years were supported in their endeavors by their parents up to the point where it was being considered a possible profession. At that point the weather would often change, for the worse.

It was like that for Tony Malaby. “I was told that this would not fly . . . *I made this happen*. They (his parents) were supportive but worried about survival. I got lucky . . . my middle-school music teacher, Jim Nordgren, saw something right out of the gate. He saw and heard it and hooked me up with a scholarship. He also took me to see Tower of Power, Earth, Wind & Fire, and various jazz concerts. I got lessons from a jobbing cat (Jim Glasgow), a guy who played clarinet in the Tucson Symphony and saxophone with Mel Tormé, Johnny Mathis (and anybody else who came through town). He had me study saxophone method books, taught me tunes by ear, and gave me ear training exercises, scales and all the rudimentary stuff. My high-school band director, Lou Rodriguez, hooked me up with a scholarship in high school and also with my next teacher. In Tucson I was playing in saxophone quartets, Mexican bands, Latin bands . . . I started gigging when I was fifteen years old. In high school I was exposed to the AACM. There was a dude named Sonny who was a graphic artist with a storefront; he was a St. Louis guy who turned me on to AACM artists. I saw Oliver Lake at the YMCA in Tucson, Douglas Ewart in a storefront gallery playing bamboo flutes. As a kid, I thought this was so out, but I was seeing people making art. I heard a guy playing one note and he was gone and just the vibration and energy . . . it was liberating. I saw the World Sax Quartet with Julius Hemphill. It wasn’t just the music but the carriage of the musicians. They were strong and confident but also sensitive and fearless. My band director brought Dexter Gordon to my high school to do a workshop. He was playing in town at the Doubletree Inn and he got them to do a clinic at our high school with (drummer) Eddie Gladden and (bassist) Rufus (Reid). I sat five feet away from him while he was playing *Body and Soul*. I heard it and I checked out”

One can easily imagine the powerful effect these experiences had on a young Malaby. Clearly, every musician has experienced some kind of transformational event where the imagined world of music presents itself in the flesh and confirms the power of its otherness. The realization of how powerful music can be from the receptor stance reaffirms its majesty from the output stance.

“Another important hookup was when Lou Rodriguez recommended me to the saxophone teacher at the University of Arizona, Elizabeth Ervin. Her thing was not technical at all but, rather, explored how to play a melody . . . Where is the line? . . . Where does it finish? . . . etc. She taught me to play dynamically and worked on sound and vibrato. I was really lucky to have met these people, especially considering the neighborhood I grew up in. Nobody around me got that. I was a freshman in high school working out of the French Saxophone method books that were used in the university. So, in the end, I feel really lucky. I am still in contact with many of these people.”

It is often said that music chooses musicians rather than the converse, as if cosmically ordained. Artists purportedly are driven by energies beyond their control and ride that energy to artistic completion. There is something to the idea of a drive and a force of desire, awe and fascination that leads one to the life but it is the result of a series of crucial choices. I contend that musicians actively choose the life often in the face of abject resistance from many quarters. For those who experience societal or familial opposition to their decision, the choice is especially empowering. There is a saying that “it is easier to ride a horse in the direction that it is going.” It seems that for many musicians, once they have committed to making music, people emerge from the ether to mentor them. The unlikely mentor shows up and recognizes that the lights are on, the curiosity has been activated and a talent can be nurtured. I have experienced these phenomena in my own life and heard similar accounts from numerous colleagues over the years. It is not only a question of finding a teacher, but rather, finding someone who acknowledges the legitimacy of one’s dream or calling. Ultimately, it is an affirmation of one’s reality.

In discussing this recording Tony shared some ideas about the music. In putting the pieces together he was trying to simplify the transmission of information to the musicians. He wished to elicit more input from the players by writing graphic scores rather than totally note-specific ones. As he phrases it, *Sonoita* has a “crooked and hanging” feeling, and that, “having a single line passing around and allowing the musicians to orchestrate it, creates the impression that you are in a water-color painting . . . things are dripping . . . things are smearing . . . colors blend and transition into and through one another . . . this happened on the first take. With additional takes it became more codified and lost the visual impression, so we stayed with the initial one.” For me, *Sonoita* is an evocative piece with a beautiful bass theme from which everything else generates. It comprises a thoughtful juxtaposition of themes and silences, as well as a telling example of thematic improvisation that develops in the latter stages of the piece.

The development of a usable compositional shorthand is vital for capturing the timeline of a musical idea. The time it takes to write note-specific information is glacial compared to the duration of the actual sounds, either in the outer world or the inner ear. In a sense, this shorthand becomes the graphical/informational notation of the resultant piece. In our talks, Malaby mentioned a self-generative process in the morphology of these pieces. “All the main themes were from recordings with William (Parker) and Nasheet—improvisations, things that I stumbled upon, intervallic things . . . and then I just developed those things into pieces.” The above could be interpreted as mining of the subconscious for ideas that occur in real time without forethought—naked, natural, and without editing. These are musical ideas that result from the social act of improvising with others. It seems a logical alternative to the archetype of the composer working in isolation. Musicians, because of the social nature of the art, get to see/hear the results of their solo imaginings in the short term. Unlike filmmakers and writers, for example, the half-life of the creative cycle for a composer/improviser, from idea to action, is relatively immediate. Additionally, improvising musicians can experiment with multiple strategies in a short period of time. In Malaby’s case this interactive process is an essential area that animates the overall compositional effort. *Alechinsky* is an example of one of the pieces built from a graphic score with the event-flow delineated by sonic elements left to the discretion of the improvisers (for example, hammered chords by Monder and the detuned bass by Opsvik). Notice how Waits keeps the forward flow of the piece modulating, with his appropriately active drum-set orchestration.

In this ensemble Malaby is working with very highly developed musicians who are known for their rhythmic acuity. In the context of open playing their rhythmic sureness lends clarity to the temporal underpinnings of non-articulated time playing. The rhythmic flow of the music springs from the composite gestural expressions of the individuals. In *Obambo* one cannot help but notice the introductory lines in the guitar and bass. It comprises an iso-rhythm reminiscent of the rub of triple and quartal rhythms in West African music. This subtle thematic element inhabits the entire performance, including the open-form improvising that occurs. The piece explores a group of rhythmic cells that phase against one another while the

saxophone states lyrically encoded messages on top. Tony mentioned to me that this session “highlights my strengths with lyricism, it is not as rhythmically rigorous in the compositional area.” Not to be contrary, but he achieves rhythmic complexity by allowing the musicians to utilize their collective talents in interpreting the written music and verbal directions. Everyone understands the language in a detailed way; consequently, less detail is needed in communicating the ideas endemic to the piece. This is really the nexus of organized sound and improvisation. Lyricism is exemplified in the beautiful piece *Lucedes*. Opsvik phrases the melody poetically with a sumptuous pizzicato sound. He exhibits a thick, harmonically rich tone teeming with intention. This piece personifies the lyricism and poetry that Malaby maintains is an important part of his self-expression. The band is catlike in its ability to delicately negotiate prescribed harmonic structures with freely phrased metrics—a listening band.

Included in the program are three short improvisations, *Hidden*, *Boludos*, and *Puppets*. These pieces represent the wholly improvised aspect of the project. Each one is concise, logical, and to the point. It reflects on the amount of playing done by the band and the concurrence of ideas in their improvising. I especially like how *Puppets* begins with muted pizz in the bass against the tenor melody. The interaction of the two lines conjures up a highly active puppet master attempting to tame an animated puppet with a mind of its own.

During the decade of the 1980s, when DAT (Digital Audio Tape) came into common use, it allowed bands to record live sessions very quickly. This process minimized recording costs without sacrificing audio quality, provided enough care was taken in setting up the live-to-two-track mix. One of the positive collateral effects of this technological advance was that musicians could play for hours in the studio without concern for the cost of two-inch analogue tape and the inevitable 15 or 30-minute time limit on a reel. This meant that a band that was performing regularly could approximate the energy and abandon that often only showed up at a live gig. There was the option of playing long sets as well. The Paloma Recio session finished with a 23-minute performance of three linked pieces. *Loud Dove* is scored in a more exacting manner than many of the tracks. The structure and execution is very much dependent on a flow chart and, more important, the ingenuity of the players navigating some very interesting and variegated material. After the short first theme Opsvik moves into a stirring arco bass improv that foreshadows some of the material to come. Malaby plays a background made up of a twisted rubato version of the second theme, which follows shortly thereafter. The second theme jumps off into an energetic collective improvisation which moves into a trio with guitar lead. The bass line emerges organically and then we are off into yet another area, which sets up the unison melody from tenor and guitar. This idea develops into a tenor solo over the developing bass line. Relative to previous statements about process, this piece is an economical structuring of a wealth of melodic and harmonic material into a self-generating suite that morphs effortlessly from one zone to another. *Loud Dove*, in turn, moves organically into *Third Mystery* and then *Musica Callada* (by Federico Mompou), the only non-Malaby piece on the recording.

I asked Tony if he had ever felt intimidated by the weight of the “music tradition.” He responded that he has always considered past masters to be an inspiration and never felt a need to compare himself to them. In fact, he felt liberated by the freedom of choice exhibited by all creative musicians. Liberation of thought can be achieved by the admission that one has no answers for the profound questions of existence. In an instant, one’s existence transforms from absolute philosophical crisis to freedom and, consequently, a reason to explore and create. *Paloma Recio* is a beautifully realized document of Tony Malaby’s exploration and creativity.

—Mark Helias

Mark Helias is a bass player and composer living in New York City.

Originally from Tucson, Arizona, saxophonist/composer **Tony Malaby** has been permanently based in New York since 1995 and has been a member of many notable jazz groups, including Charlie Haden's Liberation Music Orchestra, Paul Motian's Electric Bebop Band, Mark Helias's Open Loose, Fred Hersch's Trio + 2 and Walt Whitman project, and bands led by Mario Pavone, Bobby Previte, Tom Varner, Mary Ehrlich, Angelica Sanchez, Mark Dresser, and Kenny Wheeler. Malaby leads several projects of his own including Apparitions, The Tony Malaby Cello Trio, Tamarindo, and Paloma Recio.

A musician in the New York area for 25 years, **Ben Monder** has performed with a variety of artists, including Jack McDuff, Marc Johnson, Lee Konitz, George Garzone, Tim Berne, and Kenny Wheeler. He is a regular member of the Maria Schneider Jazz Orchestra and the Paul Motian Octet, as well as many other projects. He has conducted clinics and workshops around the world, and served on the faculty of the New England Conservatory from 2002-2005. Monder continues to perform original music internationally with his own quartet, trio, and in a duo project with vocalist Theo Bleckmann. He has appeared on more than 100 CDs as a sideman, and has released four as a leader.

Born in 1973 in Oslo, Norway, bassist **Eivind Opsvik** started out playing the drums at a very early age. In his teens he gradually switched to bass while also spending a lot of time experimenting with recording on a 4-track tape recorder. He moved to New York City in 1998 to be a part of its rich music scene. His main focus is his own band, Overseas, his solo project, and Opsvik & Jennings but he is also currently a member of a number of other New York bands such as Tone Collector, Kris Davis Quartet, Two Miles a Day, David Binney's Out of Airplanes with Bill Frisell, Rocket Engine, and Ben Gerstein Collective.

Drummer **Nasheet Waits** is a New York native. His interest in playing the drums was encouraged by his father, the legendary percussionist Frederick Waits. Max Roach eventually hired him as a member of the famed percussion ensemble M'BOOM. Most recently Waits has been a member of Andrew Hill's various bands, Jason Moran's Bandwagon, Fred Hersch's trio, and Tarbaby, and is the leader of Nasheet Waits Equality. He has recorded and performed with a veritable who's who in jazz, including Hamiet Bluiett, Peter Brotzmann, Stanley Cowell, and Bunky Green.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

As leader:

Adobe. Tony Malaby, tenor & soprano saxophones; Drew Gress, bass; Paul Motian, drums. Sunnyside 1137.

Alive in Brooklyn Volume 1. Tony Malaby, tenor & soprano saxophones; Angelica Sanchez, Electric Wurlitzer piano; Tom Rainey, drums. Sarama Records.

Alive in Brooklyn Volume 2. Tony Malaby, tenor & soprano saxophones; Angelica Sanchez, Electric Wurlitzer piano; Tom Rainey, drums. Sarama Records.

Apparitions. Tony Malaby, tenor & soprano saxophones; Tom Rainey, drums; Michael Sarin, drums, percussion; Drew Gress, acoustic bass, Songlines 1545.

Sabino. Tony Malaby, tenor saxophone; Marc Ducret, guitar; Michael Formanek, bass; Tom Rainey, drums. Arabesque 153.

Tamarindo. Tony Malaby, tenor saxophone; William Parker, bass; Nasheet Waits, drums. Clean Feed 099.

Warblepeck. Tony Malaby, tenor saxophone; Fred Lonberg-Holm, cello; John Hollenbeck, drums. Songlines 1574.

All compositions except *Musica Callada* published by Chubasco Music/SESAC. *Music Callada* published by Salabert.

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Francis Goelet (1926-1998), Chairman

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