

## **FREE JAZZ/IMPROVISED MUSIC IN THE TWIN CITIES: A HISTORY**

### **Backdrop**

Producer Bryce Beverlin II wanted me to contribute a track to this CD, but, I told him that, for a number of reasons, I don't do compilations. (Of course, that isn't entirely true; FREEDOM OF THE CITY 2003 -- SMALL GROUPS [Emanem 4212] being a necessary exception.) Our compromise was my doing these liner notes. To be honest, contributing a track would have been a hell of a lot easier. But then, I've seldom chosen the path of least resistance.

### **The Nature of History**

Some decades ago a young musician -- at best a talented enthusiast, at worst a poser - - whose main claim to stylistic invention at the time was his habit of running his long hair along the keyboard as he played, and who, I believe, knew damn well that I wasn't particularly impressed by his pianism, published a history of free jazz/improvised music in Minneapolis/St. Paul, wherein I was relegated to a footnote. (This, of course, doesn't stop him from mentioning that he played with me, which, if memory serves, was a one-off.) And while the number of people who actually read that tome will likely be akin to the number who read this one, the point that history, like every man-made construct, is rife with error and untruth, having as much to do with hidden agendas as sloppy research, analysis and reporting, must be taken into consideration; which brings us to my official caveats. Then, as now, I don't have knowledge of everything that was/is occurring in the field. But as I was active in the early days, I think I have a fairly comprehensive perspective of the situation. (To be blunt, the level of research I'm doing beyond the vagaries of memory is in direct correlation to the compensation I'm receiving for my efforts.) And, while I absolutely have my agendas and opinions, it is not my intention to aggrandize or diminish the role specific locally-based people had/have in this music. (That I'll leave for personal conversations/correspondence, and perhaps -- god forbid! -- other writings [smile].)

### **A Larger Context For An Aspect of That Time**

As befits a "commission" (in theory anyway), allow me to begin by quoting, paraphrasing, and reworking the first section of the introduction to "Maintaining Essence", an unpublished essay I wrote at the behest of Bill Dixon in 2004:

"Every so often, the zeitgeist seems poised for a genuine paradigm shift; the sense of humanity being able to live up to its deeply buried potential, the air being ripe with the utterly palpable presentiment that anything is possible. (In separate exchanges with Anthony Braxton and Bill Dixon *the same week* in 2004, each asked me if I remembered that absolutely tangible feeling so endemic of the mid-to-late sixties/early seventies; the sense that '*we could change the world*'; which, with a visceral shiver down my backbone, I certainly did; and indeed do.) Oft times, these slightly ajar doors, rifts in the status quo, slits in the fabric of culture can most unequivocally be seen, or rather felt in

the arts as the result of some sort of an aesthetic breakthrough, which, upon more careful analysis, is actually nothing more or less than the inevitable extension of tradition. (The fact that breakthroughs are perceived as revolution rather than evolution [a more or less natural progression of events] has to do with the intertwined dynamic between an unconscious need and desire for meaningful change [fueled by the self-aggrandizement at the core of all human endeavor], and the inertia/artificial security inherent in the concept of a status quo.) And, as every political(/social) 'revolution' becomes the antithesis of its intent, i.e.; dictatorship begets dictatorship, or, more specifically, one ruling class displaces (or is absorbed by) another [we don't change the world, the world changes us], so every artistic 'revolution' is appropriated by the status quo, which, after all, has an insatiable appetite, and is able to utilize everything for its own ends; leading to the maintenance of mediocrity at best, and, at worst, something akin to evil."

### **From Whence This Music Sprang (More or Less)**

Predicated upon developments in the classical field (dodecophony, tone clusters, musique concrète, electronic music, aleatoric music, simultaneity/indeterminacy etc.) having to do in good part with the growing utilization/integration of what is generally considered dissonance, and, from there, "noise" or "sound" into the lexicon of music, free jazz (or, as it was then more commonly known, avant garde jazz) was fueled by Black Nationalism, and the growing constrictions/codifications of bebop (at one time itself the jazz avant garde). And while these specific catalysts were integral to jazz's evolution in America, the insistence for "freedom now" was, as evidenced by work emanating from many geographic locales, global in nature. (This is not surprising given that we humans are, in essence, fleeting cocktails of electricity and chemicals, who, suckling at the tit of the collective unconscious, are intrinsic conduits for the zeitgeist.)

### **Getting To Geographic Specificity; the Twin Cities**

And so, free jazz (and its eventual offshoot, improvised music [aka free music, free improvisation, spontaneous music, instant composing, etc.]) found its way to Minneapolis/St. Paul. Then, as now, there was a lot of activity; many groups, many people. My journey began with Blue Freedom in 1969, which morphed into Blue Freedom's New Art Transformation, and, ultimately, The Milo Fine Free Jazz Ensemble. Other groups (with key players noted) and individuals (some of whom were associated with these groups) in the pre 1975 "first wave" included Panorama Milky Way (Tony Moreno), the Whole Earth Rainbow Band (Steve Kimmel/Dean Granros), Reykjavik Gold (Scott Newell), Onem and Dog Pound (the Scher brothers), the Infinity Art Unit (Lane Ellwanger/Mark Maistrovich/Stuart Mathews), Max Swanson, Terry Tilley, Sid Farrar, Joe Smith, Rick Barbeau, Steve Gnitka, John O'Brien, Don Kaplan, Keith Miller, Curtis Wenzel, Anthony Cox, Pat Moriarity, Phil Hey, Carei Thomas, and Dick Paske. Though initially in the minority, there were, among this group, individuals who were, to one extent or another, derivative musicians, adopting other people's aesthetics to a much greater degree than developing their own. (The time-honored practice of immersing oneself in another's aesthetic is certainly a viable approach for one's

development, but only if one's own voice ultimately becomes manifest as a result.) Additionally, even as the intents and purposes of many of these musicians became more diffuse, adapting to various aspects of the arts and commercial marketplace, the late seventies and early eighties inevitably brought forth new faces, including Pam Scheiner, Jean Decker, John Devine, Bill Lang, Gary Sherman, Red Freeberg, Dick Studer, Ellen Lease, Todd Harper, and Alden Ikeda. Predictably, the increase in population not only brought forth a greater number of derivative players, and heartfelt, if ultimately superficial enthusiasts for whom free music was a rite of passage en route to more commercial/accessible realms, but, additionally, a growing contingent of highly skilled technicians, whose abilities too often served as a substitute for genuine creativity. Among these inevitable subsets were, of course, a growing number of politicians. (Put another way, even as, over time, facility and self-indulgence trumped resonance in the realization of the music, political skills increased exponentially. The art game was now open to improvisors, and those with such predilections quickly stepped up to the plate; or, better put, fought for, and obtained their spot at the funding trough. That stated, it should also be noted that resolute practitioners in all fields of artistic endeavor, including improvisors, were, and indeed are occasionally granted a deserved, if momentary and token position at the feed box.)

During the initial phase of activity, Ken Mason founded the avant-leaning Ascension Jazz Council (the direct antecedent to the more mainstream oriented Twin Cities Jazz Society), which during its lifespan of a few years, published a newsletter, mounted some concerts, and generally attempted to "get the word out" in search of that ever elusive "wider audience". If memory serves, the AJC collapsed due to a lack of active interest; that is to say, too many people wanting the organization to serve them and too few volunteers willing to serve. The same fate befell the subsequent Creative Music Alliance, which sought to create an umbrella consortium which, with a unified front, would lead to more exposure, understanding and work. (Given the viable potential of the CMA, it came as no surprise that the Minnesota Composers Forum -- precursor to the American Composers Forum --was poised to partner with, i.e.; absorb/co-opt it.) Loosely modeled after cooperatives like New York's Jazz Composers Guild (which collapsed under the weight of conflicting agendas), the CMA barely existed as it was almost immediately undermined by those self-same fissures of aesthetic differences, differing personal and political agendas, and, naturally, the fact that, once again, the tasks at hand far outnumbered the people willing to take them on.

Hustling for places to play, and concerted efforts for hierarchy positioning have remained more or less constant over the last forty-plus years, though, early on, larger institutions were much more amenable to presenting free jazz. For instance, I used to play at Walker Art Center once or twice a year. But this sort of thing is to be expected. During the early years, A&R reps of major record labels, always on the lookout for the next cash cow (or, as it turned out in the case of free jazz, tax write-off), signed avant grade jazz practitioners. That didn't last long, though, in years to come, there were similar signings with identical results. In essence, when something "new" pops up, no institution or company with dealings in the arts wants to be caught unaware, and thus unable to capitalize on a trend. But when this music, at its most implacable, failed to

appeal to neither the general public nor the arts consumer, well, it was time to cut losses and move on; even as practitioners were, as previously noted, adapting to this unavoidable development; to wit, dumb the music down, dress it up and market it ingeniously/disingenuously. The situation at the coffeehouse level was, in the heyday of the "radical" sixties/early seventies, hilariously absurd. Quoting from my liner notes to ANANKE (Emanem 5003): "Getting a gig at [left-leaning coffeehouses] was, however, curiously difficult, in no small part due to the fact that so-called social progressives, then, as well as now, were unable to see that vital flaws in the value system of the status quo stood at its core, i.e., the nature and application of sound, and thus weren't all that interested in presenting/supporting music which undermined, or at least, challenged fundamental cultural assumptions." (Steve Kimmel's Rainbow Gallery warrants a special mention however, as it was, during its existence for a few years in the late seventies, a haven for this type of music.) In the ensuing years, the situation at the "grass roots" level, has become less absurd, though no less difficult. Usually at the urging of some insistent musician, galleries, bars and small restaurants became more amenable to presenting improvised music, but, almost always on off-nights, and only if it is, however marginally, profitable, i.e.; a few warm bodies in the joint being better than none.

### **The Crux Of An Issue**

At this point, it's worth noting an observation made by Derek Bailey in a 2003 conversation. He contended that improvised music as a vital sub-genre had a shelf life of about 7 years. After that time -- and these are generally my extrapolations -- the freshness or something akin to purity diminished as strategies, schools, and hierarchies were established; derivative players came more to the fore; careerism (rather than creative necessity) became the overriding concern; and characteristic mannerisms found their way into the mainstream/commercial. But, of course, this wasn't an isolated phenomena having to do with improvised music. While the specific shelf life timespan varies, this is the pattern for each and every artistic "breakthrough". However, as free jazz predated improvised music (which, particularly as concerns the non-idiomatic variety, allegedly had less to do with jazz per se; though, for me, it's all of a piece), the overall time frame of relative purity for the two could be construed as a decade and a half or so. Regardless, one must still face the fact that, by the mid-seventies, the resonance of this *genre* as a potential for meaningful societal/cultural change was finished.

The strongest memory I have of a personal confrontation with this reality was a concert I attended in the early eighties. The Full Moon Jazz Collective consisted of Twin Cities' based musicians with whom I was, at the time, totally unfamiliar. They were good musicians, the "sound" and affect were appropriate, even convincing at times, but *something* was missing. This was free jazz one unequivocal step removed; a vain attempt to recapture the music's initial glories. To wit, the fact that there was, at this point, an established field was as disheartening as it was inevitable. But lest I only come across as the curmudgeon I oftentimes fancy myself to be, let me return to an abridged conclusion of the introduction to "Maintaining Essence":

"Despite this inevitable process of assimilation/dilution [of 'new' art forms into the status quo], there are nonetheless individuals committed to the essence of that shift [in the cultural fabric]; those who personify the struggle to become, in the most resonant sense of the word, human. Therefore it becomes clear that *the activity or genre is of far less import than the concerted efforts of the devoted [resolute] practitioner* [that is to say those whose efforts are primarily concerned with the work as its own means *and end*; other concerns being, at *best*, ancillary]. Furthermore, it is only on that plane, in the individual, that something like revolution is possible. The true revolutionary recognizes that one is one's own worst enemy; that the real revolution is internal, against oneself. From there emanates the potential for true change; it is the only fertile ground from which the seeds of meaningful change can possibly bear fruit."

And while this may border on idealism, it is, in any case, something to keep in mind, and even something to strive for, particularly given the state of so-called humanity and its ongoing impact on the world.

### **Oh Right, The CD At Hand**

Ultimately, this is Bryce's overview, or better yet, snapshot of this "scene" (from my perspective, a term with more unsavory than favorable connotations; the truth being that arts consumers dig scenes more than art). Early on in our exchanges about this project I posited the painfully obvious fact that if I, or anyone else had produced such a compilation, the resultant program would have been markedly different. Thus, part of the agreement I had with him concerning these liners notes was that I would not be dealing specifically with the music. But, a funny thing happened on the way from conception to inception. The original list of potential participants has given way to a line-up which is more broadly representative aesthetically, and, overall, much stronger musically; which leads me to a couple observations. Devoted practitioners are well-represented. (However, as befits an era where specialization in the arts -- and the academy for that matter -- has fallen into disfavor, most of them are also active in music outside the realm of free improvisation.) On the other hand, those imbued with varying degrees of blatant political acumen, and/or whose level of creative proficiency ranges from very skilled craftspeople, to convincing stylists, to those whose reach, at this point anyway, generally exceeds their grasp, are also clearly on display. But, for reasons stated at the outset, I'll decline from opining who, in my view, generally falls into which category, and to what degree. Besides, it's almost certain, particularly in this post-modern world, few will care; not only about what I think, but whether such assessments are even worth considering.

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