Don’t You Avant Me, Baby?

FINDING A NICHE FOR JAZZ WITH AN EDGE

BY STEVE DOLLAR

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To be avant-garde, the film critic James Monaco has suggested, is to be anachronistic. Like cubism, *la nouvelle vague,* or Madonna's rococo bustier, it's something that came and went. It's the shock of the new that's now old news, and if the actual phrase is generic enough to apply to anything—from painting to fashion to music to design to martinis—then its status as one of the freest floating signifiers, as cultural lingo, divorced from specificity, also reduces it to a handy catch-all for "weird shit."

I'm sure that's not what William Parker had in mind last spring, as he led his big band, the Little Huey Creative Music Orchestra, through an afternoon rehearsal in a humid studio in the Lower East Side. The group, a cross section of black, white, and Asian musicians, included mature, middle-aged players and twenty-something firebrands—journeymen who work however they can to get by, and those so stubbornly devoted to their own concepts that no other work is possible. It's a scrappy bunch, making music full of knotty tangles and unresolved tensions and sudden power surges: the sound of the city, yes, but a sound that also redeems lyricism from seeming chaos, a sound in thrall to the delicate quality of sunlight coursing through a leaf.

Parker, at age forty-seven, is at once a journeyman and a stubborn conceptualist. After a long apprenticeship as part of the mid-1970s "loft jazz" scene in downtown Manhattan, the bassist toured and recorded for ten years as the anchor of pianist Cecil Taylor's 1980s outfits, steering the dreadlocked iconoclast away from self-indulgence and fueling his churning engine of idiosyncratic idioms, motifs, and structures. Since the late 1980s, though, Parker has paid increasing attention to advancing his own blossoming ideas, despite the chronic lack of commercial machinery—the means of production, Marx would say—necessary to record, produce, distribute, and promote them.

"Awright, awright," Parker announces, waving his hands to make a point as the music subsides. Behind him, his wife, choreographer Patricia Nicholson, and their twenty-two-year-old daughter Miriam, rehearse a dance

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piece to accompany the performance, earmarked for an upcoming festival in Verona, Italy. "Remember, this is 1998! You need to play this piece avant-garde."

"Oh, Dad!" Miriam Parker exclaims. "That's the 1960s!"

Ironically, if this were the 1960s, Parker might be represented by a mainstream jazz label. Taylor, who dramatically created a language for piano that left the once-revolutionary conventions of jazz's "bop" era behind, managed to record two of his defining ensemble works, "Unit Structures" and "Conquistador!" for Blue Note in the mid-1960s. The imprint, whose vast catalogue harbors titles from nearly every major artist of the era, also recorded such forward-looking talents as Andrew Hill, Ornette Coleman, Eric Dolphy, Sam Rivers, Don Cherry, and Larry Young—even though its métier was the spirited hard-bop of saxophonists like Joe Henderson and Jackie McLean and trumpeters like Lee Morgan and Freddie Hubbard. Meanwhile, the adventurous Impulse! label was touting "The New Wave of Jazz!," which, besides John Coltrane's pro-

lific output, included albums by Archie Shepp, Sun Ra, Charles Mingus, Albert Ayler, and Pharoah Sanders.

This, however, is 1998. And though major labels or prominent independents, such as Atlantic, Arista, and Columbia, have dabbled in avant-garde jazz over the decades, the dominant sources for the music have been European (Switzerland's hatHUT, Germany's FMP and ECM, Italy's Black Saint and Soul Note) or Japanese (DIW). The occasional exception is so extraordinary that it seems like a fluke. David S. Ware, an explosive tenor saxophonist who charts a direct lineage to Coltrane and Sonny Rollins, is among the most recent signings to Columbia Records. Ware's debut, *Go See the World,* is his thirteenth album in a singularly focused career and, fittingly enough, features a radically reimagined, sixteen-minute version of the Barbra Streisand signature, "The Way We Were." Even if you don't like Ware's music, which invests melody with the bruising tumult of an Olympian struggle, you have to concede that he's a visionary. That this lifetime jazz outsider now shares a label with Wynton Marsalis—the most widely publicized and acclaimed personage in jazz—seems a remarkable irony. That he was brought to the label by Branford Marsalis, Wynton's brother, is icing on the cake.

"I'm sure Tommy Mottola doesn't know this music," says Marsalis, who also records for Columbia and serves now as a consultant to its jazz department. "I feel fortunate that they know enough to know they have no interest in that aspect of the music, but know the music is important to the aesthetic of the record label."

Despite the critical prestige such signings encourage, they rarely become sustaining relationships. "Everyone is aware of the beast down in the valley," says Parker, who has been a member of Ware's quartet since 1989. "The most you can really expect is that your record will be at least minimally in every store. There's no reason for them to ever do what they do. I think the problem we have is there still aren't enough radio stations and record stores that carry this stuff. It's a stepchild. We have a long way to go, and I don't know if we'll ever catch up. People aren't aware of this music. It's not even in the loop right now."

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Even mainstream jazz is itself not in the loop, accounting for about three percent of annual recording sales. The wing of the music identified as "avant-garde," "outside," or "free"—phrases musicians tend to disparage yet seem to be stuck with—is even further marginalized. "People in the jazz business fighting over turf is like having ten niggers on a street corner killing each other over a chicken wing," says Matthew Shipp, pianist for the Ware Quartet who, in tandem with Parker and other like-minded musicians, has built an impressive solo career beyond the mainstream. "There's not much meat to go around."

Despite this, thirty years after Coltrane's death, the exploratory, transcendental spirit he advanced has three generations of exponents developing a critical mass

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of work. And if major label support is fickle and fleeting, an alternate network of small, independent labels has risen to the task. The labels build on dual role models: the do-it-yourself aesthetic of late 1970s and early 1980s punk rock and the audio verité of 1960s and 1970s "free jazz" outfits like ESP Disk. That connection was made explicit when underground rock icons like Henry Rollins (of the seminal California punk band Black Flag) and Thurston Moore (guitarist for the arty New York noise band Sonic Youth) began promoting unheard-of albums by little-known jazz musicians in whom they sensed a shared sensibility. Rollins, through his Infinite Zero and 2.13.61 labels, and Moore with Ecstatic Peace!, helped to introduce performers such as Shipp, saxophonist Charles Gayle, and others to the alternative nation. It was a start. By 1994, Steven Joerg, label manager for Homestead Records (whose catalogue included albums by Sonic Youth and Dinosaur Jr., 1980s post-punk acts that paved the way for Nirvana), was already in the fray. He began recording the Ware Quartet, Boston guitarist Joe Morris, and Parker's small-band ensemble In Order to Survive, as well as the high-energy drummer William Hooker, who frequently collaborated with rock musicians.

"I came across jazz in high school: Mingus, Coltrane, Rollins, Monk, and on into Dolphy, Sun Ra, etc., but I was in New York two years before I really became aware of the immense talents that exist here," says Joerg, who left Homestead in 1997 to launch his own Aum Fidelity label. "There was no coverage. This music was not being written about. I was looking through the racks of the hip record shops, and it just wasn't represented." That's no longer the case. Labels such as Aum Fidelity, strongly reflecting the personalities of their founders and sticking to an explicitly specific artistic vision, have begun to proliferate. Okka Disc in Chicago, Eremite in Northhampton, Mass., No More Records in Long Island, N.Y., Screwgun in Brooklyn, and Wobbly Rail in Chapel Hill, N.C., are the most prominent of these. Each boasts quickly distinguishable design elements; a roster built on core artists (hot-wired Chicago tenorist Ken Vandermark is Okka's point man, for instance, and Eremite was the first label in a decade to record fiery post-Ornette alto saxophonist Jemeel Moondoc); and, whenever possible, a keen interest in presenting ambitious statements by both pioneers of the avant-garde as well as their inheritors. It's how most important American music, and jazz especially, came to recorded prominence. Labels like Atlantic and Blue Note were once indie brainchildren too. Or, as Joerg remarks about ESP and its founder, "Some dude got flipped on the music and used the meager resources he had to record the sounds he felt needed to be heard."

It's worth noting here that such efforts aren't miraculously singular. The Knitting Factory, a multi-tiered Tribeca nightclub that has long been a hub of New York's downtown improv jazz and rock scene, has been pumping out CDs for years, but with erratic promotion and little sense of mission beyond advancing the vague "eclecticism" the venue represents. John Zorn, a galva-

nizing bandleader and composer who, by the early 1990s, had became downtown music's sole certifiable "star," started his own Tzadik label in 1996. He's released scores of titles in a profusion of genres—from Japanese hardcore thrash to post-Cagean contemporary music—in sophisticated packages designed by a longtime musical collaborator, Ikue Mori. Though jazz musicians, particularly those within Zorn's orbit, are accounted for, Tzadik is a reservoir for all kinds of late-twentieth century music.

Late. Twentieth century. Is that T.S. Eliot whispering a last call: "Hurry up please it's time"?

"Everyone's impatient," says Tad Hendrickson, jazz and world music editor for *CMJ,* the national trade journal for college radio, which is far more likely to spin the Little Huey Creative Music Orchestra's "Sunrise in the Tone World" than a mainstream jazz station. "But in terms of who it's reaching, it's a music whose time has finally come. The audience is sophisticated and interested in hearing music that's adventurous: they're willing to reach beyond the whole head-solo-head thing that pretty much defined bebop and has marked a lot of so-called improvised music ever since the 1940s. So Joshua Redman improvises his solos? Yip-de-fuckin-do. I'm positive about it. That's kind of my motivation: Punk rock didn't give a fuck about what Pink Floyd thought about punk rock, and now you have [Led Zeppelin founders Jimmy] Page and [Robert] Plant going to see [San Diego post-punk act] Rocket From the Crypt shows."

Pop culture is always tapping into subcurrents to refresh itself, sponging and assimilating, gleaning and co-opting. The revolutionaries, after trashing the academy, usually get jobs running the place. Unless you count the soft-focus instrumental music of Kenny G., however, jazz is not recognized as popular music and only registers as pop culture in the broadest sense. (Flip on the TV and you'll see that even Wynton Marsalis, self-appointed ambassador of the music, is confined to the upscale demographic of tedious talk-show host Charlie Rose and the Public Broadcasting Service.) The only artists who break

through to the wider marketplace tend to be vocalists—Cassandra Wilson, Diana Krall—who perform pop songs, vintage or otherwise, in a jazz (or jazzy) framework. Dead men move more units than even the most vital breathing talents: Miles Davis's 1959 landmark, *Kind of Blue,* still sells about 100,000 copies annually (and is continually being reissued).

Sounds dire, doesn't it? If mainstream jazz isn't on the map, how can the avant-garde wing even exist? "It's hard for people who listen to the Spice Girls to enjoy Evan Parker," says Bruno Johnson, whose Okka Disc has released work by the British saxophonist, a giant of the European free improvisation scene and as close to an anti-Kenny G. as exists. "If you can sell 3,000 copies of a disc, you've saturated the market."

There's a sense, though, that this is part of the music's appeal. During the late 1960s, Columbia Records espoused a power-to-the-people message in its advertising, using the slogan: "The Man Can't Bust Our Music!" Corny, yet, it holds true for avant-jazzers like Shipp, Parker, and many others who have carved a dual niche of resistance. Unwelcome in what Parker calls jazz's "big house," and too subcultural for a pop audience, these musicians are genuinely "termite artists," to borrow Manny Farber's resonant term, chewing through the walls around them, unable to worry if anyone's paying attention. If authenticity, "keepin' it real," is a powerful component in the cultures of hip-hop and underground rock, then nothing's realer than this. Like other forms, from experimental electronica to contemporary music, the sounds on Shipp's *The Multiplication Table* or Parker's *The Peach Orchard* are finding a new audience for music, an audience that doesn't think in categories, but relates more consciously to energy and intention and a desire to claim unique, personal experiences in the moment.

Unless you have access to a Way-Back Machine, there's no way to see John Coltrane play, or watch Picasso invent Cubism. The history of the avant-garde is one of innovation and absorption, but also reinvention. Every generation defines the term for itself.