

Sound of Silence

BY KYLE GANN

Keyboardist Anthony Coleman and percussionist James Pugliese are back from a European tour of the former's music, and on October 28 at the Brecht Forum they played samples from it with Don Byron on clarinet and Marc Ribot on guitar. After a murky synthesizer and trap set piece that sounded a little like improvised Xenakis, Coleman related that, at one European gig, the piece had been greeted with "a respectful silence." Pugliese had listened to the crickets a moment, then turned to him and whispered, "I guess we're a club band."

I guess. But I don't think it's that simple. The only way to infer the existence of the jazz/classical line these days is to observe that the people who think it's been removed keep tripping over it. Coleman's first piece, his Symphony No. 0 (numbered in Brucknerian tradition?) was a Coleman/Pugliese duet. Sampled and percussed noises chugged along in quick beats, changing timbres like a train running on tracks made of steel, then wood, iron, fiberglass, chocolate. The changes were subtle; Coleman's experimental mode has two sides, the layered polymusics of Ives and the noise textures of Xenakis, and this was Xenakis mode. To appreciate it you had to listen closely, and it helped to be accustomed to avant-garde concert music. So what made this a club piece? The sloppy performance?

No one seems more trapped by the jazz/classical identity crisis than Coleman. (I'm resisting calling him a Symbol of Downtown Itself.) I can't pretend to say where that line is, but I can tell when somebody's on one side of it and thinks he's on the other. Jazz is elastic. Stretch it, it snaps back. Sloppiness (or rather, a carefully drawn *illusion* of casualness) gives jazz style, an air of suggesting rather than dictating. But to get away with sloppiness you need a flexible center. You

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can twist around a solid tune like "Ruby My Dear," add notes, subtract them, move the beat around, it's still the same thing. Stretch the ideas from Xenakis's *Evryali*, or Ives's *Putnam's Camp*, they don't bend: they shatter. Concert-music ideas are delicate. You fiddle with one, it starts to become something else, and you have to follow it.

Some tunes can be pushed in either direction, but the best talent I've seen Coleman display so far has been for exquisite classical ideas. Take his brilliant polka for Guy Klucevsek, with its perfectly bizarre skewed beat: a loose approach would turn it to rhythmic soup. In this concert, the second improv was one of Coleman's Ives tricks, a moody piano solo drowned out (admittedly, he had an equipment glitch) by layers of repeated figures. I think the idea was great, but I couldn't tell. Too linear for Cagean anarchy, too uncontrolled for Ivesian polyphony, it turned to mud. *Lullaby Sequence* made the point in heartbreaking terms. At first all four players shot out fragments of calliope music, unresolved cadences, tonic and dominant arpeggios, like a merry-go-round heard in a dream. "Oooh, this is good," I thought, settling into it; but by the time the piece was a third over, its wad was shot. Lacking plan or self-restraint, Coleman and players quickly slid into maximum density, and for the remainder of the piece there was nothing to do but get louder.

The root of the dilemma came into focus in Coleman's piano solo. He seemed to aim at being the type of improviser



Coleman: Symbol of downtown?

Anthony Davis is; in actuality his ideas are more interesting, while his technique (in every sense, including that of loading an ensemble onto his train of thought) isn't as good. Davis, Geri Allen, "Blue" Gene Tyranny, and even (on a less intense level) Keith Jarrett succeed at what Coleman tried to do largely because they have spectacular digits; their fingers never land quite where you expect, yet they give the impression of landing just where they intended. Coleman's slaps at the keyboard failed to convey that he was aiming for any particular spot, and brought to mind Harold Truscott's complaint about the finale of the "Moonlight" Sonata: it isn't really fast, but it tries to *sound* fast. If Coleman wants to solo, he's gonna have to practice.

Byron and Ribot weren't well used, and they didn't look as though they felt well used. Neither was allowed a single grateful solo, and where they did play, they had little to do besides gum up the texture with repeated licks. Wanting to be a club jazer, Coleman seems determined to let his players follow their instincts; his genius, though, is for crazily individual ideas, for tuning in to wavelengths so weird no regular session man could follow them. My hunch is that he either needs to dilute that genius into a mundane vision his players can contribute to, or else give up the free-and-easy life and write notes on paper. His players have chops, but they don't have ESP.

I make this diagnosis as a Coleman fan. He's knocked my socks off three times and intrigued me several others. But I have to come up with some explanation for why every number in this set contained a good idea and not one drove it home. He's probably talented enough to go in either direction, but he can't go both directions with the same gesture. No other downtown figure seems so unanimously conceded by the cognoscenti to be brilliant, brainy, idiosyncratic, out in left field. I don't miss a Coleman gig if I can help it, because I want to be able to report to you "I was there the night Anthony Coleman zoomed into outer space." But sometimes he makes the wait seem long. For this gig, *respectful* silence would have been a well-tuned response. ■

Stoli Jazz

WEDNESDAY 11/15

Musica Elettronica Viva with Garrett List, Steve Lacy, Alvin Curran, Richard Teitelbaum, Frederic Rzewski, Knitting Factory, 47 E Houston, 219-3055.

Nestor Torres, Savoy Grille, 131 E 54th, 593-8800, thru Nov 18.

Leslie Pintchik & Scott Hardy, Judge's Chamber, Sheraton Park Av, 45 Park Av at 37th, 685-7676, thru Nov 25.

Pieces of a Dream, Blue Note, 131 W 3rd, 475-8592, thru Nov 19.

David "Fathead" Newman Quintet, Village Vanguard, 178 7th Av S, AL 5-4037, thru Nov 19.

Zusaan Kali Fasteau, Jefferson Market Lbr, 6th Av at 10th.

Stanley Turrentine, Sweet Basil, 88 7th Av S, 242-1785, thru Nov 19.

Roger Kellaway & Gene Bertoncini, Zinno, 126 W 13th, 924-5182, thru Nov 18.

Bill Mays & Red Mitchell, Bradley's, 70 University Pl, 228-6440, thru Nov 18.

THURSDAY 11/16

Charli Persip & Superband, Visiones, 125 MacDougal, 673-5576.

Skollie with Anton Fig, Keith Lantin, Blondie Chaplin, Zanzibar & Grill, 550 3rd Av, btw 36th & 37th, 779-0606.

FRIDAY 11/17

Roy Gerson Sextet with Jim Masters, Zanzibar & Grill, Nov 24 also.

Dennis Moorman Duo, Greene Street, 105 Greene, 925-2415, Nov 18 also.

Tuck & Patti, Janis Siegel & Fred Hersch, Town Hall, 123 W 43rd, 840-2824.

Rootless Cosmopolitans & Graham Haynes, Knitting Factory.

Geri Allen, Club Foot Orchestra, Gary Lucas, playing live music to silent films, American Museum of the Moving Image, 35th Av at 36th St, Astoria, 718-784-0077, Nov 18 also, simulcast on WNYC TV 31 and FM 94 Nov 18.

Dem um Remao, Sharky's, 90 River St, Hoboken, 201-659-1833, Nov 18 also.

Kenny Werner Quintet, Visiones, thru Nov 18.

SATURDAY 11/18

World Saxophone Quartet, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Opera House, 30 Lafayette Av, Bklyn, 718-636-4100.

Bobby Previte, Ned Rothenberg & Paul Drescher, Ordinaires, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Carey Playhouse.

Lodi Carr, Village Gate, Bleecker at Thompson, 475-5120, every Sat-Sun.

SUNDAY 11/19

The Life of Billie Holiday, radio show on WBAI, FM 99.5, every Sun thru Nov.

Machine Gun with Sonny Sharrock, Knitting Factory.

Boborough with Gary Mazzaroppi & Ed Caccavale, Zanzibar & Grill, Nov 26 also.

Wayne Avers & Adverse Effect, Indigo Blues, 221 W 46th, 221-0033.

Warren Chiasson & Chuck Wayne, Zinno, Nov 26 also.

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