
Celestial happening

By Andrew Gilbert

Globe Correspondent / February 25, 2011

The Celestial Septet isn't so much an all-star ensemble as a brilliant constellation uniting the Rova Saxophone Quartet and the Nels Cline Singers, two singular West Coast bands dedicated to exploring the near and far reaches of the sonic universe.

The septet performs tonight at the ICA as part of a brief five-city tour marking the group's first foray since recording a stellar eponymous CD in 2008, released last year on New World Records.

The combination of the Singers, a volatile vocal-less trio with drummer Scott Amendola and bassist Trevor Dunn, and Rova, a rigorously inventive combo in its fourth decade of investigating what trombonist George Lewis calls "the hyphenated space between improvisation and composition," nudges both groups into a new orbit.

"Working with the Singers makes Rova play a little differently," says Cline, 55. "They've been playing together for so long, it can be a little daunting to sit and watch them do their machinations. They've got this detailed system of hand cues to signal each other and change directions. We add a whole bunch of new options."

While Cline is best known these days as Wilco's lead guitarist, he spent decades as a revered underground figure on the Southern California scene who zigzagged giddily across stylistic frontiers. An incisive, often lyrical improviser who has collaborated with jazz searchers like Charlie Haden, Vinny Golia, and Wadada Leo Smith, Cline is also in his element shredding with bassist Mike Watt (of Minutemen and FIREHOSE fame), or rocking out with former Jane's Addiction drummer Steve Perkins.

Those freewheeling days are long over however. Since joining Wilco in 2004, his ability to take on special projects has become extremely constrained.

"The rock 'n' roll world does so much booking close to the gig," says Cline, still sounding elated weeks after marrying multi-instrumentalist Yuka

Honda, best known as a founding member of Cibo Matto. "People are always asking me about things I can't commit to, so I just let people dangle. This tour almost didn't happen. My priority is doing Wilco, which means I have virtually no life outside of playing all the time. Though I guess I now have a personal life."

Working with Rova was close to his heart. He first joined forces with the quartet back in 1998, when guitarist Henry Kaiser and trumpeter Smith recruited Cline and Rova for "Yo Miles!" their first album exploring the mid-'70s fusion of Miles Davis. A few years later, Cline collaborated with an expanded version of Rova, Orkestrova, on "Electric Ascension," a plugged-in rendition of John Coltrane's seminal free jazz session (released on Atavistic in 2009).

Founded in 1977 by Jon Raskin (baritone and alto sax), Larry Ochs (tenor sax), Andrew Voigt (alto and soprano sax), and Bruce Ackley (soprano and tenor sax), Rova used to perform often in the Boston area on the way to concerts in Europe. Voigt's 1988 departure opened the door for altoist Steve Adams, a member of Boston-based Your Neighborhood Saxophone Quartet, which deepened Rova's ties to the region for a while, though tonight's concert is the group's first Massachusetts performance in more than a decade.

Grounded in the chance-taking aesthetic of free jazz and contemporary classical music, as well as an international array of popular and traditional musical forms, the visionary San Francisco-based ensemble has become a singular musical institution by commissioning and collaborating with an amazing array of musicians and composers.

While serving as a laboratory for their own compositional voices, the quartet has also engaged in extensive collaborations with some of the era's leading composers and improvisers, from Muhal Richard Abrams, Henry Threadgill, Jack DeJohnette, and John Carter to Terry Riley, Alvin Curran, Henry Kaiser, and Fred Frith.

Just about every musician on the "Celestial Septet" session contributed a composition. The album's centerpiece is

Ochs's epic, 25-minute "Whose to Know (For Albert Ayler)," an episodic rumination on the late, protean tenor sax searcher full of cries, drones, murmurs, and shouts. Amendola wrote the opening track, "Cesar Chávez" for a 2005 Scott Amendola Band album "Believe" (Cryptogramophone) featuring Cline, a piece he rearranged for the septet as a study in orchestral and electronic textures. Composed specifically for the septet, Cline's piece "The Buried Quilt" is another extended textural investigation, built upon Rova's ability to play as a unified section and Amendola's eerie clangs and clanks.

"It fits like a glove," Ochs says. "Rova has worked with a lot of composers, and some pieces really fit. In the end, working with the Singers was so easy. Some of the pieces are pretty complicated, even for us to keep track of where we need to be next, but nothing felt forced or overthought. It's always a privilege to be on stage with people who blow your mind."

Andrew Gilbert can be reached at jazzscribe@aol.com.

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