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Homages, paraphrases, and glorious messes from Ornette, Sonny, and Mingus

by Francis Davis

October 31st, 2006 11:01 AM



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arts
screens
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Not just the initial release on his new vanity label of the same name, Ornette Coleman's *Sound Grammar* is his first recording for anyone in nine years, excluding a 2001 cameo on Joe Henry's *Scar*. Infrequency alone makes any Coleman album an event, but this is extra notable for finally documenting his quartet with drummer Denardo Coleman and dual bassists Greg Cohen (plucked) and Tony Falanga (bowed)—his most simpatico acoustic unit since the one he brought east from California almost 50 years ago, sparking debate about the shape of jazz to come. Cohen's time is telepathic, and he's as quick to catch on as Charlie Haden was whenever Ornette accelerates. Falanga is more Don Cherry than David Izenzon, both countervoice and echo. And Ornette's much maligned middle-aged son, though no Higgins or Blackwell, is hardly still the prepubescent basher he was on 1967's *The Empty Foxhole*—he's so tuned into his father's way of thinking his interjections take the form of complete phrases rather than accents. And Ornette being Ornette, the piece from this 2005 German concert that pierces deepest is a fitful, swelling dirge.



Ornette Coleman, the sleeping amateur poet's eternal muse
photo: Jimmy Katz

Ornette Coleman

Sound Grammar
Sound Grammar

Sonny Rollins

Sonny, Please
Doxy

Charles Mingus

Music Written for Monterey, 1965
Not Heard . . . Played in Its Entirety, at UCLA
Mingus Music/Sunnyside

Those dirges of his have a way of grooving themselves into your subconscious. As an undergraduate and still aspiring poet, I once woke in the middle of the night with a few lines I figured must be from Eliot (whom I'd fallen asleep reading), though I jotted them down anyway. Only after listening to Coleman's *Town Hall, 1962* for the first time in years several months later did I realize they were all mine—sort of. I'd dreamed blank verse to Coleman's alto on "Sadness."

Sound Grammar's requisite dirge, "Sleep Talking," begins with Falanga quoting the bassoon introduction to Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*—when Coleman enters, those six notes turn out to be the theme, not merely a passing allusion. He shakes them into a country blues over the course of a wounding extended improvisation that never strays far from them, and even a wistful melodic resolution different from anything Stravinsky had in mind proceeds logically from that primordial theme. I doubt I'll ever listen to *The Rite of Spring* again without thinking of "Sleep Talking."

Coleman paraphrasing Stravinsky shouldn't be a surprise, given that he once reorchestrated the *Firebird* suite for Alice Coltrane, and so many of the rhyming pet phrases we've grown used to over the years (his solo on the delightful "Matador" is a veritable storehouse) sound like Mozart or

Beethoven transfigured into field hollers. Because he's made it a habit never to record anything more than once, what might surprise anyone who's missed his recent concerts, where he's encored with "Lonely Woman," is *Sound Grammar's* redos of "Song X," from his 1985 collaboration with Pat Metheny, and "Turnaround," a sprung-rhythm, 11-bar blues (count 'em if you don't believe me) that goes all the way back to 1958's *Tomorrow Is the Question*. (I can't swear, but I have a hunch both "Jordan" and "Call to Duty"—fast, riffy things featuring short bursts of trumpet toward the end—are vintage Coleman tunes from his Atlantic years he's given new titles.) Once the compressed scale that serves as its theme has been thoroughly exhausted, "Song X" is all texture, with Coleman's violin stitching between the two basses. On "Turnaround," he quotes "If I Loved You" at some length, and then "Beautiful Dreamer," which, even given the unlikelihood of these particular melodies, wouldn't be news if this were anybody but Ornette Coleman. Jazz musicians quote all the time, reaching for something easily beneath their fingers while waiting for a thought to strike or the next chord change to roll around. But not Ornette—those quotes from *Carousel* and Stephen Foster *are* ideas, elaborated on in such detail they become as integral to his improvisation as his own twisting blues lines.

Ornette isn't the only deity recently going the DIY route. I'm speaking literally when I say Sonny Rollins sounds better than he has in years on *Sonny, Please*, the first release on Doxy, his own label (available online and at his concerts since late summer, and due in stores courtesy of Universal in January). Though both the program and the instrumentation are similar to those on his last several studio Milestones, his tenor isn't squeezed the way it was on them (and frequently is in concert). We hear Rollins's tenor top to bottom, in a way we haven't since those 1960s Impulses and RCA Victors.

It matters because Sonny is in championship form, both swaggering and capricious. When was the last time you heard a saxophonist and drummer trade fours on a ballad? On "Somewhere I'll Find You," he and Steve Jordan don't exactly trade—by the end, Rollins is playing through the drum breaks, with Jordan not giving up any ground. And no Rollins album would be complete without a drawing-room heirloom; here it's "Serenade," a fin de siècle Italian light classic hauled into pop by Nelson Eddy in the 1939 MGM musical *Let Freedom Ring*. It's all Rollins from beginning to end, his delerious inventions cushioned by trombone, guitar, and electric bass—in many ways, this is his organ album, even though none is present. Even the obligatory calypso is a surprise, floating rather than percussive. Coleman's *Sound Grammar* might be the front-runner for jazz album of the year, but *Sonny, Please* goes on the short list.

Musicians marketing their own product is nothing new, of course. Still miffed at being allotted only 20 minutes at the 1965 Monterey Jazz Festival, Charles Mingus must have felt the title was self-explanatory when he released *Music Written for Monterey, 1965 Not Heard . . . Played in Its Entirety, at UCLA*—featuring a brass-heavy octet with tuba, French horn, and three trumpets—as a limited-edition, mail-order-only double LP the following year. Its first and only pressing was 200 copies. Reissued on East Coasting in 1984 (which is how anybody ever heard it), it's at long last available on CD. It opens with "Meditation on Inner Peace," after which Mingus redoes his bass intro for an intended splice he never got around to making. Following two aborted attempts at "Once Upon a Time, There Was a Holding Company Called Old America" (renamed "The Shoes of the Fisherman's Wife" on *Let My Children Hear Music* six years later), he sends half the band off to rehearse and bullies the four he keeps through a medley of bebop anthems that skirts the borders of free jazz. Later on, along with a revisionist "Muskrat Ramble" and Mingus asking the student promoter to meet him backstage so he can get paid, we hear the full band do "Once Upon a Time" in its entirety, plus a few other bold, if hesitantly performed, originals—the most stunning a tempestuous series

of variations on "Body and Soul" featuring Hobart Dotson, a shadowy high-note specialist with chops and imagination comparable to Gillespie's.

It's a mess, but the sort of big mess only genius can get itself into. Demonstrating better than anything else in his discography the risks Mingus took in treating improvisation like composition, it illuminates a lost chapter in his life—he followed it with six years of silence while he worked on his autobiography and wrestled with bipolar disorder. Think of it as a dress (or undress) rehearsal for *Let My Children Hear Music*, his crowning achievement of the '70s, and it becomes nothing short of essential. Besides, except for Sun Ra's *Jazz in Silhouette*, where else are you going to hear Hobart Dotson solo?

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