



TRIBUTE TO BIRD AND MONK

Heiner Stadler, arr/dir; Thad Jones, Cecil Bridgewater (tpt); George Adams (t-sax/fl); George Lewis (tbn); Stanley Cowell (pn); Reggie Workman (db); Lenny White (dr); Warren Smith (kd) • LABOR 7074 (78:36)

There are, certainly, two ways of hearing this album: as being among the highest musical achievements of jazz in the 20th century, or of being a wayward aberration—as Wynton Marsalis and his gang have put it, a period when “jazz lost its way.” One might even consider a third way of listening to it, as an uncanny and unduplicatable moment in time featuring some very brilliant solos amid what strikes the ear as cacophony.

For those unaware of this album, it is a reissue of a two-LP set issued on a label named (I kid you not) Tomato Records in 1978. (The number was TOM-2-9002.) I don't recall ever having seen or heard the album at that time, probably in part because I was more involved with the music of the Toshiko Akiyoshi-Lew Tabackin Big Band, but apparently it got a five-star review in *Down Beat* and was for some time the talk of the jazz world. Everyone knew most of the players on this set, as they were among the jazz elite of the time, but very few knew who the prime mover, Heiner Stadler, was. Stadler (b.1942) was a bandleader, arranger, composer, and producer noted for being involved in the international avant-garde. He had moved from Germany to America in the mid '60s, thereafter leading groups on an intermittent basis that were influenced by the music of Ornette Coleman, late-period Coltrane, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Prior to this release, he also produced *Brains on Fire* (1973) and *Jazz Alchemy* (1976). It should also be noted that Stadler is the founder of Labor Records.

The listener will be instantly aware that Stadler has thoroughly recomposed these classic Parker and Monk tunes in a strongly dissonant, polytonal style, and moreover has written arrangements that are heavily layered, even within the limited textural range of a sextet. Stadler's rewritten scores use the basic threads of melody of each tune named here, but very quickly branch off into polyrhythmic, heavily layered extensions of them, with soloists apparently squawking at random and often at odds with one another. Careful listening, however, reveals the method to his apparent madness. They often build up to tremendous climaxes even in the middle, where free-form improvising takes over and, although the harmonies are spread over several keys at once, there is always a core note (one hesitates to call it a “tonic”) around which his composed maelstroms revolve. Curiously, Stadler's music sounds remarkably like the layered compositions of saxophonist David Murray, an original member of the World Saxophone Quartet and later leader of his own multilayered sextets and big band.

One thing that fascinates me was the willingness of veteran jazz musicians like Thad Jones and Stanley Cowell to open themselves up to this kind of near-cacophony, but one of the great things about these performances is that, for all the spread-out atonal harmonics used and all the off-the-wall improvising, these musicians were really listening to each other. The result is that there are no dead spots or rambling solos, as there were in Ornette Coleman's early-1960s experiment, *Free Jazz*. Everything is very tight. Even when the horns fall away and one is listening to a bass solo, there is a feeling of musical continuity and development. Even when everyone is playing double-time, free-form solos all at once, there is still a feeling of some coherence.

Perhaps the most accessible and least rewritten number is Parker's *Au Privave*, which is largely a showcase for trombonist George Lewis. Annotator Robert Palmer waxes ecstatic over Lewis's phenomenal technique, and in this number he is indeed in control, partly because the tempo is medium-up and not blistering. In much faster numbers like *Air Conditioning*, a few chinks in Lewis's technique show up; there are overblown and fluffed notes, and his technique is not as clean as that of the great J. J. Johnson. Nevertheless, Lewis's powers of invention are extraordinarily high, and his playing in *Au Privave* is indeed stunning.

The centerpiece of the album, in more ways than one, is the phenomenal 21-plus-minute exploration of Monk's *Straight, No Chaser*. The melody as such doesn't even appear until the second chorus, and like the preceding tracks, it seems as if Stadler has reharmonized every note in the melodic sequence. (Monk was still alive when this album came out, though quite ill. I wonder if he heard it and, if he did, what he thought of it.) In many ways, this is the “quietest” of the pieces on this set, mostly because Stadler keeps the textures relatively uncluttered through most of it, and the odd, quirky rhythm of Monk's melodic line acts as counterpoint to the relatively steady drumming of White, even when he briefly switches from a jazz beat to a rock beat. This added dimension of space works well to provide us with an eye in this musical hurricane, though at the very end double-time free form improvisation breaks out for a half chorus.

On the other hand, Monk's *Misterioso* is only intermittently mysterious-sounding, as the performance opens up on the loud side. Here extra percussionist Warren Smith, playing timpani and also a gong, really works out with drummer White. At one point, when pianist Cowell joins them, the effect puts one in mind of George Antheil's *Ballet Mécanique*. (Now there's an arcane reference for a jazz recording!) Perhaps curiously, Workman's bass solo includes that curious rising and falling jazz lick that Charles Mingus was also very fond of, and in fact used two or three times in his classic trio recording with Duke Ellington and Max Roach, *Money Jungle*. Even more shockingly, one of his choruses is played arco (with the bow) in an extremely high register (probably very close to the bridge) that I didn't even know a bass could reach. (Think of Emanuel Feuermann's high-register playing in his arrangement of Chopin's *Polonaise Brillante*.) Moreover, after this arco solo, Workman drops down to a more comfortable register and resumes his pizzicato plucking while Jones (muted) and Adams (open horn) play softly behind him, then Jones opens up with plunger growls while White plays polyrhythms behind Workman and the horns.

As with *Au Privave*, Parker's *Perhaps* almost seems like a lighthearted romp to ride the session out. Adams switches from tenor sax to flute for this one, and the light, airy sound of that instrument adds a piquant touch to the proceedings. Again, if one rereads the first paragraph of this review, one will get a fair assessment of this disc. Highly recommended for those with big enough ears to hear all that's going on

Lynn René Bayley