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January 2001

U.K. £2.95

Andrew Hill's **GOLDEN TIMES**



Storm

SURGE

The Rise and Fall

Of Weather Report,

The Best Jazz Band
of the Past 30 Years

In 1977, Weather Report hit paydirt with the album *Heavy Weather*. The album enjoyed commercial success, courtesy of the fluke hit "Birdland," critical hosannas, and for some, a general sense that this might be, as Joe Zawinul often said, "The greatest fucking band in the world."

In 2000, *Heavy Weather* still sounds like a milestone in the cultural unconscious of jazz history. By some accounts, the album is the crowning achievement of the band's recorded output, and therefore, by extension, a towering landmark of "fusion."

From this historical juncture, it's reasonable to say that Weather Report is the finest jazz group of the last 30 years. They managed, better than anyone else did, a delicate balance of elements: improvisation and structure, electric and acoustic textures, melodic and atmospheric qualities. Unlike the retro bent of the post-Marsalis era, they had clear historical roots, but also a selective hook-up with extra-jazz music of the day. Though lumped in with the "fusion" scene, they weren't really part of a movement, but were a movement unto themselves.

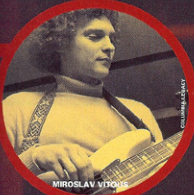
The legacy of this group follows an upward arc as time marches on and the scene brings forth little music to compare with its high standards. They have a new relevance to a jazz scene that has embraced the key words "jam" and "groove," the basic improvisatory tenets of which Weather Report defined on its own terms, a double CD of unreleased live material from various Weather Report groupings is expected for release later

by **Josef Woodard**

this year from the vaults of Columbia/Legacy. "It's all very nice," says Zawinul, on the phone from Melbourne, Australia, where his band Zawinul Syndicate was on tour. "People who have not had the opportunity to hear us can hear how good this actually was, and how fresh it sounds today."

And when we listen to the music, we can hear music that evolved through highs and lows over the course of the band's 16-year history and, in a sense, fed off its own in-house mythology. Weather Report was, ironically, a major avenue in jazz, but also something that operated on a parallel path just outside of the mainstream: They were part of the thrust of the fusion craze in the '70s, and continued on into the '80s, after others in that hybrid world started drifting away.

"Wayne and I worked together 16 years, and not once did we have an argument about music or anything," says Zawinul, looking back on the band's history. "From the beginning to the end, we always tried something. It was never like, 'Hey, man, we gotta make another record.' We were lucky with a couple of LPs that sold very well. *Heavy Weather* is a good record. But there are some other ones that I like better, like *Black Market*. I like *Night Passage*, too. I like them all, but there are special ones to me."



MIROSLAV VITOUŠ

COURTESY: MCA



JOE ZAWINUL

MIROSLAV VITOUŠ

Make no mistake: "Birdland" changed the landscape for the band, which had already gained a solid following and crossed over into the rock scene. But the single was only the most publicly audible charm on an album that seems like a thing of near perfection and unprecedented taste, a shining example of the artistic possibility of fusion's cultural mash process. For one thing, the album represented the dynamic debut of Jaco Pastorius, who had shared the bass duties with Alphonso Johnson on the earlier *Black Market*. *Heavy Weather* found him coming up swinging mightily as a player with a revolutionary approach to the electric bass, and also as a composer with a new voice. His charisma oozed throughout, and he unleashed his brash elegance on his riff-lined "Teen Town," while also demonstrating his smart harmonic palette on "Havona." Jaco was just the juice the band needed at that moment.

And with the propulsion of a hit behind them, Zawinul says in understatement, "we became rather big. What we did, and this is also something that was never really appreciated, was that Wayne and I always put money back into the band, into equipment. We used to travel with two big trucks. At one point, we had two buses, one for the road crew and one for us, and two gigantic trucks, because we had our own sound system and our own monitors. We had 15 or 16 guys on the road to do that. We had screens, we had projectors and lasers later on.

"And critics say, 'Yeah, they're playing this music to make money ...' We didn't make shit, not compared to what we could have made if we had not done all this investing. It was never about making money. And that's another thing that Wayne and I never argued about. We were totally in tune: it was a feeling of



WAYNE SHORTER

MIROSLAV VITOUŠ



“We are not capable of making a one-star record.”

—Joe Zawinul

‘they, these are modern times.’ Wayne is a modern thinker and I hope I am. Let’s give the people something. That’s what we did, worldwide. Therefore, people don’t forget us.”

In conversation and in his musical life, Shorter has better things to do than abide by linear rules. But poetry is always lurking where Shorter treads. Asked about a newly burgeoning retrospective interest in Weather Report, he ponders the arc of the band he co-led for 16 years. “Historically, a lot of things are not what they seem. With obstacles comes growth. Weather Report music doesn’t have all those ingredients that promise instant gratification based on the toilet training that has gone on in the major markets. A lot of products come out, I’m talking about all kinds of products, and we should just pull the chain (*laughs*). Anything of creative value will be in line to be retrospectively.”

Auspicious beginnings and a sense of destiny went into the first Weather Report album, as well. The band was forged in the symbiotic bond of Zawinul and Shorter. Both had been prominent sidemen in the ‘60s: Shorter as a key player and composer in Miles’ classic quintet, and Zawinul as a pillar in Cannonball Adderley’s group.

Their personalities were complementary, but in a strange way: Zawinul could be brash, resistant to false modesty and take-charge when necessary; Shorter, conversely, was always on another plane, a bit too enigmatic to assert skills as a bandleader on his own. Together, they made a new kind of music. After they played together in Miles Davis’ early electric bands, especially on the atmospheric clarion call *Bitches Brew*, a bond and a band were

crystallized. Zawinul and Shorter recognized a common goal, to create something that extended and personalized their work with Miles. They knew that the group would involve new grooves and an improvisational work ethic.

Brazilian émigré Aírto Moreira was their first choice as percussionist, having helped establish a new role for percussion in jazz contexts through his work with Miles. But his allegiance to Miles at the time kept him from being a more active part of the group.

“Joe Zawinul really insisted that I would be part of that band, no matter what happened,” Moreira remembers. “He put it like that and said, ‘This is going to be the best band in the world, and you have to be part of it, because you are the best percussionist in the world.’”

Percussion was, from beginning to end in Weather Report’s history, a necessary ingredient. Also on that first record date in 1971 were percussionists Barbara Burton and Don Alias, although not credited (as detailed in Brian Glasser’s forthcoming book on Joe Zawinul).

But as it turned out, Moreira’s stint with the band consisted only of work on the first album and one private concert for CBS PR people. When Zawinul realized that Moreira couldn’t tour, he asked for a recommendation. Moreira suggested a friend in Miami, Dom Um Romão, who became the first in a succession of percussionists in the band, including Manolo Badrena (who now plays in the Zawinul Syndicate), Robert Thomas Jr., Jose Rossy and Mino Cinclou.

Bob Belden, the noted musician/reissue specialist/jazz scholar/fusion apologist who’s been doing production work on the forthcoming double CD of Weather Report live tracks on Columbia/Legacy, sees the birth of the band as a culmina-

tion of musical forces, dating back to early liaisons. “The first fusion guy was Cannonball Adderley,” Belden says. “And there’s an unissued Wayne Shorter record on Blue Note, which is Wayne, Miroslav [Vitous], Alphonse Mouzon, Barbara Burton and Joe. That was the first sort of Weather Report get-together. Before Weather Report got started, you could look at Miroslav’s *Mountain In The Clouds*, the unissued Wayne Shorter record on Blue Note and Zawinul’s [solo] record on Atlantic. You get the idea that the group came out of Miles. But Cannonball was ahead of Miles.”

In the beginning, Shorter says, “There was no music being played like that, or chance-taking like that. We were using train sounds, steam liner whistles and honkings, and people in market places, and voices. We had Orson Welles’ voice on the record, from *War Of The Worlds*. We were going to call Orson to have him speak on the album for real. Those are the kinds of ideas we were working with.”

They had no pre-existing game plan, although they proceeded with a general sense of freedom on more than just the “soloing” level. Shorter puts it this way: “We said, ‘Let’s do music without capitalization and paragraphs and period and semi-colons and colons.’ Then we found out what those capitalizations and indentations and colons were, what we were talking about when we knew we were approaching something new. We didn’t want to approach those things that have been done.”

“Miles said one time that, after awhile, (*in gruff Miles-speak*) ‘I don’t like music that sounds like music. You know what I mean?’”

Miles loomed in the band’s periphery, as a historical point-of-departure, a spiritual mentor of sorts, and a proud progenitor in the literal wings. As Shorter recalls, “Miles was gone for six years during the ‘70s, and he said there wasn’t anything

Shifting Winds

Grounded in the brain trust of Zawinul and Shorter, the Weather Report personnel changed many times over the course of its life, but much more in the drum than the bass chair. This was partly because of Zawinul's demanding, and also ambiguous, vision of how the drums affected the ensemble whole. There is also the fact of musical chair turnover in jazz groups. Bass-wise, it was a fairly clean evolution: Miroslav Vitous begat Alphonso Johnson begat Jaco Pastorius begat Victor Bailey in the final version of the band. But drummers came and went, partly because Zawinul was a stern taskmaster in that department, as one who loves and plays the drums himself.

Zawinul says now that the drum factor in Weather Report, for all its high points, "was always a weak spot. Drums are very difficult. A lot of those guys were very good, but nobody was a total guy, like what Tony was for Miles. We hardly ever had that."

He offers a thumbnail history of the group, from a drum kit perspective. On Williams, who played on *Mr. Gone's* "Punk Jazz," Zawinul says, "He would not have been the drummer, either, for that band. He was too busy. It was a hard band to play with. Omar Hakim was really good, and [Alex] Acuña was good. I think Eric Gravatt was a genius, but he had such a small little bass drum, we couldn't play the things I wanted to play. That's what broke that up. It wasn't that he didn't play good enough. He was a bad dude, man. From the jazz side, Eric Gravatt was my favorite of them all."

A legend who bowed out of the music scene, Gravatt, who played on *I Sing The Body Electric*, *Live In Tokyo* and *Sweetnighter*, ended up working as a prison guard in Minneapolis. "He couldn't remain in the band because when we went into the studio to do the third album, I wanted to have what's today called the hip-hop beat," Zawinul says. "You hear it on '125th St. Congress.' And 'Boogie Woogie Waltz' was a hip-hop in 3. But I needed a low bass drum. Eric had one of those long small little things, that went 'boop.' That didn't make it, so I had to hire another guy who had that bass drum sound. When Eric saw this guy in the studio, he kind of freaked out and his spirit was not there anymore. That, unfortunately, changed a lot of things."

"But we had Greg Errico for a minute, and he was good. He never recorded with us, unfortunately. But he had that thing. He could play 'Boogie Woogie Waltz' better than anybody."

Shorter remembers the stint with Errico, who had been with Sly Stone, as the beginning of a shift in the band's rhythmic focus, as well as its audience make-up. "He was the first one to evoke a notice from 15-year-olds," he says. "A lot of people say that when Jaco came, younger people started to have an affinity for us, they started to inhabit the empty seats [laughs]. But it was a noticeable graded crescendo of people starting from the visual embracement when we had Greg Errico. Then came Jaco."

"Also we had the drummer with Genesis with us for awhile, Chester Thompson. That was not so much a visual thing as a change in the sound. The beat was more one-size-fits-all. You nod your heads in unison."

The band with Thompson also had Acuña on percussion. Acuña, Zawinul says, was "the only guy who could play both percussion and drums. When we played the Bottom Line in New York, Miles was there. When the set was over, Miles jumped on the chair and started a standing ovation. Miles was loving this band, because it was a hard grooving band."

"When Alphonso Johnson started that band with Billy Cobham and George Duke, we needed a bass player. We got Jaco, and Jaco and Chester couldn't play together. It was just one of those things. So what we did was to have Alex play drums. That worked well, and then we had Manolo."

"Alex left the band and we had Peter Erskine. He can really play very loose and relaxed, and being a big band drummer helped us a lot. He had some big band chops. It was one of the best periods. Erskine is a hell of a musician, man. After that, was the band I liked just as much, with Victor Bailey and Omar Hakim."

—J.W.

else happening except Weather Report. I think that inspired him to come back and get back into the fray. He used to be backstage quite a few times in New York, just listening. Miles was an open person."

Flying high after its heady *Heavy Weather* experience, the band came back with the more fragmented *Mr. Gone*, which presaged a historic encounter with Down Beat. They sat down for an interview with Larry Birnbaum in Chicago in 1978 (published in '79), just before the magazine published a one-star review by David Less. In hindsight, it's one of those classic errant reviews, suitable for a jazz corollary to Nicholas Slonimsky's *Dictionary Of Critical Invective*, opening with the startling line, "Weather Report has done to jazz in the '70s what Paul Whiteman did to it in the '20s."

Peter Erskine, who had just joined the band at the time, remembers, "We agreed to meet in a restaurant not far from the hotel, on a blustery November day. As we're being seated at the table, the writer dropped the bombshell. 'Oh, by the way, your new album is getting a one-star review.' Then he pushed the record button. And the interview was just the band flipping out, on record."

Sparks flew and Zawinul issued his memorable edict, "We are not capable of making a one-star record." And it's true. Heard in hindsight, *Mr. Gone* may be among the band's greatest projects, with its experimental verve, collage-like complexity—mirroring the jacket artwork—and several plainly infectious tracks.

Zawinul remembers the Down Beat encounter. "I was angry about it, not because somebody gave it one star. That is totally a reviewer's right and privilege. What I didn't like is that it was such a good production. A lot of effort went into that, and we're no dumb motherfuckers, you know? We tried to do something a little different. Maybe it didn't come off yet as well as it did later. That is also a point. But, to give somebody one star is just outrageous. Therefore, I was just mad at the time, and I am getting mad now."

This was also the album that introduced Erskine, on record, the drummer who would last the longest in any incarnation of the band. Drummers Steve

Gadd and Williams play on other tracks, while Erskine's own virgin voyage on record was on a raw, raucous version of Shorter's older tune "Pinocchio."

Erskine recalls that it was a sound check deemed worthy of release. "Whenever I think of the way Tony played that with Miles [on *Nefertiti*]," Erskine says, "there was so much finesse and it was so slippery. Ours was definitely a harder, electronic version of it. So I was crestfallen when they went in to listen to the way it sounded and said, 'Hey, we're done. Let's just use this.' I was, 'Wait, wait ...' And Jaco turned to me and said, 'You have to join the band the same way I did, with the first take.'"

Erskine got to stretch more and taste the band's unique creative process in the studio on the work that became the fourth "studio" side of *8:30*. "One cool thing about Weather Report was that they would take stuff in the studio, and then the real magic would begin, and they'd get into editing," Erskine remembers. "'Sightseeing' was the same way, which, incidentally, was my favorite track I ever played with the band. The thing with Jaco playing the didgeridoo, the antique cymbals and crotales, and that kind of funny funk thing it goes into, we came up with that after we cut the tune. We were just fooling around, to create an interlude.

"There was a very deliberate sense of mystery around the band, which they nurtured. A lot of times, music was discussed in philosophical terms, sports metaphors, any number of things. My first assignment when I joined the group was to read Nietzsche. So there I was, reading *Zarathustra* and *Man And Superman*."

 f all the Report alumni, Erskine is perhaps the most avid archivist, keeping literal scrapbooks and taped artifacts. Erskine leads me into his nicely equipped studio in the backyard of his Santa Monica house, breaking into a special stash of Weather Report live tapes. He pulls out a tape, like a coveted vintage wine, with a particularly sizzling version of "Fast City." A tape taken from the sound board at the Hammersmith Odeon in London, circa 1980, the sound quality is dry and humble, but the performances are bracingly good.

Shorter's solo is fiery, akin to his more heated playing from his '60s Blue Note period, and the tempo—Erskine's propulsion and Jaco's fierce walking—is punishing and cathartic. "Fast City," indeed. This won't be on the double CD, but suffice to say, there's a lot more where that came from.

The group with Erskine and Jaco was an unprecedented firebrand of an ensemble, that combined the intrinsic musicality of the group as well as Jaco's Hendrix-meets-Charlie Parker antics—especially on his nightly solo, "Slang." It was, as much as any other version of Weather Report, a live-wire live band, which you hear amply on *8:30*, of which three sides were live, the often live nature of *Night Passage*, and even on this band's final bow, 1982's *Weather Report*.

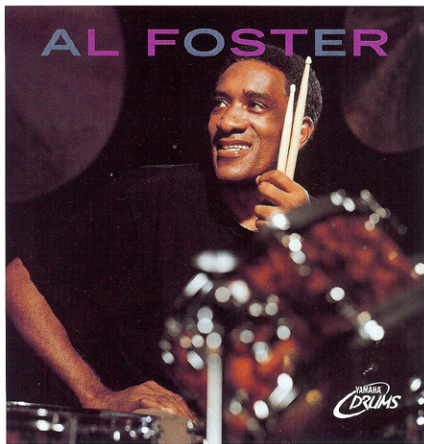
Relations became strained toward the end of this incarnation's run, as Jaco was looking toward starting an ill-fated solo career, kicked off with the promising *Word Of Mouth*. Tensions flared on a flight to Japan when Zawinul insulted Jaco after hearing rough mixes from

Word Of Mouth. Drinks flowed on the flight, and Jaco was nearly arrested on landing. The first concert in Tokyo was "sabotaged" by Jaco, who refused to play the tunes and sullied the air with excessive feedback and recurring refrains of his "Portrait Of Tracy."

Erskine remembers that a sense of crisis was in the air. At the hotel after the gig, he and Zawinul "were up very late and a lot of frantic calls were being made, because Joe just thought this would continue. He was asking who we could get. Joe told me to call Tony Levin, to see if he was available.

"Anyway, the next morning Joe called me up and said, 'Everything's cool.' Jaco had shown up at 7:30 in the morning at Joe's door, dressed in a suit and tie, to offer his formal apologies. So it was forgotten."

The next album, *Weather Report*, recorded at the Power Station in New York, was a strong collection, including the bracing "Volcano For Hire," the suite "NYC," a couple of Zawinul ballads and Shorter's charming jewel, "When It



Was Now." While Shorter's tunes often came in as long scores destined for drastic editing, for "When It Was Now," Erskine remembers, "That tune had that feel when he brought it in. I think we borrowed a Linn drum machine for that, and I overdubbed percussion. We did that at Joe's house."

Jaco and Erskine left the band, without a follow-up tour. Jaco, besides having begun a long, downhill slide of erratic behavior, pursued his solo career. Erskine had run a natural four-year course and had begun playing with Steps Ahead as well as Word of Mouth. Change was in the air.

After Jaco's departure, Victor Bailey came into the fold, as a compadre of drummer Omar Hakim, with whom he had played in Miriam Makeba's band. He's a veteran Zawinul sideman now—a current member of Zawinul Syndicate—and he knows something about the way he leads a band.

"Joe's a conductor, basically," Bailey

says, sitting in his living room in the Baldwin Hills area of Los Angeles. "Joe has a very hard demeanor. He's gruff. If he wants everybody to bring things down, he doesn't know a nice way to say (*whispers*), 'Hey, bring it down.' That's just his way. Some guys get in the band and they take it personally, and he totally ruins their spirit. I know personally, from having played with him from such a young age, that he doesn't mean anything by it."

Shorter was something else, again, an elusive character with a bold musical charisma. "I remember when I first played with Wayne," Bailey comments, "he said to me, 'You sound really good. You're like the girl who left her shadow in the drawer, but when she went to get it, it wasn't there.'" He pauses, and flashes a quizzical expression. "Anybody who figures that out, let me know."

However casual and free-form the band might have appeared from the outside, a powerful work ethic kept the group's creative pistons afire. "They never stopped working on the music,"

Bailey recalls of his stint with the group. "Every sound check, even with Joe to this day, is a rehearsal."

As a 21-year-old musician getting his first taste of the big time, Bailey remembers, "I just wanted to go hang out with the girls, drink some beer and do whatever unmentionables we were doing at that age. I didn't want to hear about the music after the gig."

But the bandleaders were "constantly throwing things at you, and they never stopped," Bailey continues. "It was a pain in the ass. But in retrospect, everything about the music, live more than on the records we made, there was nothing lacking."

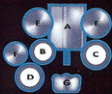
Erskine remembers the same dead-on focus that trickled down into the ranks. "We would do post-mortem discussions every night after the concert. I was never in a group that was more concerned and involved with the creation of music. The band had this undeniable belief in its place in music, a sense of destiny about what it was doing. It was expressed in a very machismo, chest-thumping manner. But at the time, the band really did stand for something."

The Bailey-Hakim group released three powerful albums—*Procession*, *Domino Theory* and 1985's *Sportin' Life*, the group's last great record. But fusion, by this point, was transitioning out of the commercial scene, with the more vapid progeny of smooth jazz just beginning to emerge. Weather Report still had a respectable and dedicated fan base to keep it active. The decision to end things came from within, a natural act of closure for musicians looking toward new horizons, not to mention a break from the sportin' life often spent on the road.

If there is a weak link in the Weather Report discography, it is their 1986 swan song, *This Is This*, essentially a toss-off project done to fulfill their contract with Columbia. The tracks may have had creative potential left only partly tapped, due to tight time schedules and a band that was effectively on its way out the door: Shorter, who appears only sporadically, was already on his way to becoming a solo artist, and Hakim, who plays on only one track, had been hired by Sting.

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WHAT AL PLAYS

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"*This Is This* was a contract record that we had to do," Zawinul explains. "Wayne was already on the way out, doing other things. So was I. So we just did boom-boom-boom, a little bit here and a little bit there. 'Man With The Copper Fingers' was hard. Carlos [Santana] played it with some good feeling, but we had to rely on playing eight bars, then another eight bars and another four bars, putting it together like that. You just can't hide that. On our former records, we never had to do that. We just played everything very freely, with a lot of confidence."

Eventually, inevitably, Shorter and Zawinul's intensity of focus ran its course, and they called it a day in 1986. As Shorter says, the band for many years was "all we did. There was no one working two jobs, at the factory or whatever. When we got the group together, that's all we did. Then we found out after so many years that we had to do something else. For me, I wanted to be more devoted to my family. You want to write as a single person, not as a team of writers. You have to splinter off and seed-plant. You have to go through the sporing process. That's what's happening."

Although it's been many years since the two have played together, Zawinul feels that the empathy remains, across time and space. "I don't even have to tell you what Wayne meant to me musically, just to be on the bandstand with him. We never had to talk about anything, what to play, what key. We just played. And it was always perfect. You can listen to some of those duets we played. There was never any discrepancy in terms of going into another direction harmonically or melodically. Wayne and I were in tune, man. On the same wavelength."

Which doesn't mean a reunion is necessarily in the offing. There was talk and energy extended toward such a project a few years ago, but it failed to materialize. "Things don't materialize when two people don't want it, you know," Zawinul says. "Wayne is my best friend. We are partners forever. We just talked the other day. He is a great guy and a great, great musician. But we've done that, man. We were there, we did it, it's OK. You know what I mean? I don't believe in encores and I don't believe in reunions."