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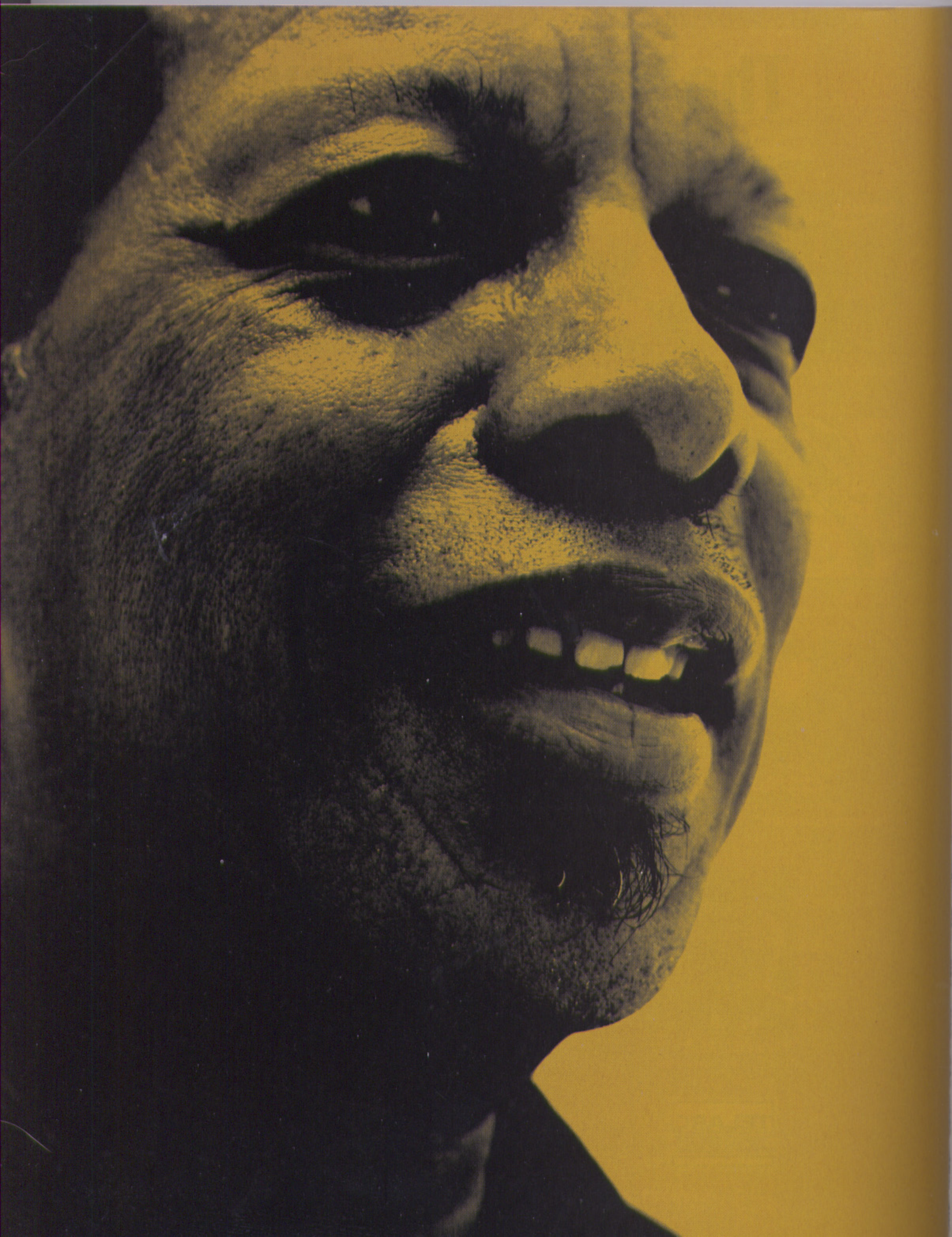
ORNETTE'S CALLING



Ornette Coleman: Change of the Century

When it comes to multi-dimensionality in the jazz omniverse, nobody holds a thing on Ornette Coleman, the innovator who would be king.

by Josef Woodard

At a time when many of the most vaunted jazz musicians are conscientiously aping idioms and fashion statements created decades ago, Coleman lives up to his long-standing reputation as a man ahead of his time, outside of his time. Again, it's the multi-dimensional thing, coming back to the head. And now, if all goes as planned, Ornette Coleman — one of the last great American musical heroes — may, at last, be coming to a music store and/or venue near you.

These days, the saxist-composer-theorist-living-legend holds court in a large sixth floor suite in a building in Harlem. It is from this outpost, a full-service studio with offices, that Coleman and his entourage are conducting an increasingly busy business — guided by his son Denardo, Ornette's regular drummer and also his manager. On a crisp, near-perfect October afternoon, Coleman is taking some time out from a recording session with vocalist Jayne Cortez to meet the press — part of his process of renewed energy and organizational initiative.

At age 65, Coleman is ready for his next burst of activity. On this day, he's funkily chic, in a chapeau, a vivid-hued vest, and a striped shirt. We repair to a back office, where he instinctively offers me the comfortable executive chair. When Coleman finds out that he's in the presence of a musician, he freely dispenses miniature lessons in the theory of harmolodics, scrawling out illustrations of his findings and notions on any paper handy. "It's like an alphabet," he reasons, explaining the background of his musical language. "We all use the same alphabets to spell our name, but we speak differently." Every once in awhile, the conversation — which can veer off in unexpected directions, like an Ornette Coleman solo — is interrupted by the dull, thudding roar of the elevated train visible across the street. Then Coleman calmly stops in mid-thought, matter-of-factly picking up where he left off when the urban intrusion has passed. Such has been the way of his musical life, as well.

The music never stopped, despite the seeming dark passages over the course of his career. Coleman is a humble iconoclast, soft-spoken but disinclined to making anything akin to a compromise. After years of quietly fighting to make his art, and sidestepping the usual industrial music machinery, Coleman is making a bold attempt at resuming his public persona. Suddenly, he's poised to make his presence known again in the fickle playground of American culture. With the release of *Tone Dialing,* from his electric band Prime Time, Coleman has officially launched his new Harmolodic label, under the aegis of the mighty Verve. The stage for a full-fledged comeback has been set in recent years, courtesy of his being given a MacArthur "genius" grant last year, and the colossal, acclaimed 6-CD reissue of his complete Atlantic recordings, *Beauty Is a Rare Thing,* by Rhino in 1993.

Coleman was born on March 9, 1930, in Fort Worth, Texas (home of John Carter, Dewey Redman, Ronald Shannon Jackson, and other notable jazz musicians), but he laid the groundwork for his folksy jazz revolt in the Los Angeles of the late '50s. There, he corralled kindred spirits: bassist Charlie Haden, drummer Billy Higgins, and trumpeter Don Cherry. (Cherry died last October, not long after this interview with Coleman was conducted.) A great, forward-leaning quartet was born and jazz paradigms were being boldly challenged,

but few in the "cool"-minded landscape of Southern California paid much attention. Everything changed, almost instantly, once the Coleman quartet landed in New York — in a legendary stint at the Five Spot — over 35 years ago, proposing the shape of jazz to come.

That redefined shape had to do with a liberation of stubborn ideas about song and solo structure in jazz, and a much freer harmonic and rhythmic vocabulary. He organized his ideas about equality of melody, harmony, and rhythm into his "harmolodic" theory. In an interview a few years ago, Cherry recalls the taunts from the band's detractors: "A lot of people thought that we didn't know what we were doing, that we didn't know about chord changes or forms in jazz or pitch — the science of fine tuning. It's not true, because Ornette's harmolodic concept, I think, is one of the most important concepts in Western music."

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Haden likens his experience working with Coleman to "a lesson in listening, in concentration, in spontaneity, in creating." "It just so happened," he says, "that Ornette and Don and Billy and I met at the right place in the right time for all this to happen in music. We started rehearsing at Don Cherry's house and everyone was getting into the language. After we went to New York, music critics started asking us questions about 'Did you realize that you were developing a new kind of innovative music?' We were just thinking about different ways of playing what we were hearing, and getting it out. We weren't really thinking about the controversy or anything else.

"To play with Ornette, you have to listen to every note that he plays, because he's constantly modulating from one key to another. So I had to listen. Also, you have to realize that there was no piano. In most traditional jazz bands, there's a pianist or a guitarist laying down chord structures and chords. With Ornette, I had to be the pianist, as well as the bass player. It was really an unbelievable learning experience."

Quickly, the Coleman quartet began its inspired outpouring of albums for Contemporary and then Atlantic, with such telling — and not at all immodest — titles as *Tomorrow Is the Question*, *Free Jazz*, and *Change of the Century*. Despite his reputation as a gadfly working on jazz's new cutting edge, Coleman has always produced songs and solos of angularly tuneful, almost folk-like themes — a sweet breeze of Texan spirit blowing onto his alien stylistic turf.

After the early '60s, though, Coleman's discography became spotty, as his relationships with and trust in the conventional music industry grew shaky. There were good albums on Blue Note and Columbia — count *Science Fiction*, *Broken Shadows*, and *Skies of America* as definitively ahead-of-their-time projects. But his career continued in jagged, broken patterns. In the '70s, Coleman plunged ever-forward with *Dancing in Your Head* (A&M) and *Body Meta* (Artists House), and entered the electric jazz world on his terms with the collective-improv-ish, layer-oriented group Prime Time — two guitars, two basses, two drummers. That group can be heard on *Of Human Feelings* (Antilles) and on half of 1985's *In All Languages* (Caravan of Dreams), an important project which blended Prime Time and a reunion of Coleman's first quartet, with Haden, Higgins, and Cherry.

Around the same time, Pat Metheny tipped his hat — and extended his new major label clout with Geffen — to collaborate with Coleman on the album *Song X*. Coleman briefly flirted with mainstream visibility in 1988 when he recorded *Virgin Beauty* for Portrait/Epic, featuring a cameo by none other than Jerry Garcia, one of the many rock musicians who admired Coleman's music. Garcia invited Prime Time to play on bills with the Grateful Dead. But, alas, the flirtation failed to ignite any further commercial activity. Multi-dimensionality was failing to register with a sizable body politic/market share, and Coleman went back to work on commissions in Europe and such occasional side projects as an integral role in Howard Shore's music for the movie *Naked Lunch* (a great soundtrack album available on Milan).

Part of the problem in fully appreciating Ornette Coleman has to do with the very unique qualities of his musical purview, the breadth and intensity of his vision. It takes more than casual exposure to get a sense of his grand bank of ideas. One rare occasion to explore grander concepts arose in October of 1994, when Coleman deplaned at the San Francisco Jazz Festival to marshal a multi-media extravagan-

za under the umbrella title "Tone Dialing." Here, he spread his creative and contextual wings to include separate sets by his latest acoustic group, the New Quartet — with the harmolodically-attuned pianist Geri Allen, bassist Charnett Moffett, and drummer Denardo Coleman — as well as a performance by the current, electricized Prime Time group, playing many of the tunes that appear on the new album.

But, wait, there was more. An elaborate video production, with cameras traversing and hovering over the stage, resulted in real-time large-screen projections behind the performers, edited into live montages and high-tech, psychedelic progeny of another San Francisco concert tradition — light shows. Vincent Harding read a moving poetic text, "In the Light of Thought" (re: "tone dialing" as a plea for social solidarity). Dancers provided further kinetic, bodily charm on stage. And, on a more controversial note, the between-set diversion was a live, on-stage body piercing performance called "Mastering the Mind of Matter," conducted by Fakir Musafar. Flesh was cloven as Badal Roy issued rhythmic urgings on tabla. Various members of the audience registered dismay by heckling or leaving. Some in the audience were perplexed about the relevance of this flesh puncturing episode to Coleman's musical vision, but he has never been one to follow a straight linear path.

In these mid-'90s, as throughout his serpentine musical life, Ornette Coleman has been all about the pursuit of a new kind of happiness. Or maybe the real objective is the pursuit of new modes of pursuit. Somebody's got to tend to the shape of jazz to come. "When you care about something," he says, "like when you're in love and having a really good experience with someone you're sleeping with, the signal that you get that makes you want to be there…you want that signal to always be new and to interject something that hadn't come to you before. I'm always trying to stay in touch with that kind of experience. It's not just to show you how good I am and let you deal with that. I'm not interested in that."

It seems that you're about to reenter the media atmosphere. Is that a goal of yours?

Yeah, I think so. I know that's about to happen. I just hope that it's more musical than hype.

How did you go about putting together the current line-up of Prime Time?

This is my second Prime Time band. My first one was in '75, and it went until '90. With the one I first started, I went out and just found musicians where I liked the way they played. This time, I searched for musicians who played in a certain way, to get a much more precise sound. It worked very well from the fact that I really searched out the instrumentation, which was a classical guitarist, a lead guitarist, an acoustical bass, a bass guitar, the tablas, piano player, and the drums, and me on the sax, trumpet, and violin. Denardo was playing percussion, with Badal [Roy]. I specifically set out to find those particular players that I chose. I'm always writing a lot of music, and sometimes it takes me a long time to teach it to someone who has a hard time reading the parts. So this time, I asked [guitarist] Chris [Rosenburg], "What classical composition to you really like to play?" He said, "Oh, I like this Bach prelude." I said, "Oh, play it for me, and then I'm going to take my horn and interpret it in a harmolodic way." He played it and I did that. When I did that, he said, "I want to join your band."

With harmolodics, you don't have to worry about improvising. You can play anything for an idea. You don't just have to play as if there's a hole and you have to fill in that hole. Plus, harmolodics is a word that's used as a menu for many different things to describe what you might like to do. So it worked out really well, but it took about three years to get that band up to the speed of what we have on the record. That is one reason why I've been trying my best to get a good band. You could be playing for hours and not saying anything. Once you just dissect chords, that doesn't mean you're playing creatively. That just means you're a good technician. But in creative music, if you're actually playing ideas, then you can hear those ideas. I've always been trying to find out how to allow a person to play musical ideas, in his own way, that matches everyone else's.

You can really hear that on this record. But there was a period of adaptation, where the musicians got used to this way of operating. Well, you know, most bands are either playing rock, Dixieland, or bebop. If you give that person a change, they immediately know how to fit the idea in a style. What I try to do is first to take a look at a composition and say, "This is a melody. This is not the lead, it's just a melody."

When you think about how music is constructed for ideas, this is the biggest problem that exists in music [he writes out a flat, sharp, and natural sign on a piece of paper] — the natural, the flat, and the sharp.

Because it locks you in?

Yeah. That eliminates your choice of notes when you're playing an instrument that can only play half steps or whole steps. That's why the piano has been a jail house. When did you start breaking away from conventional thinking about music? To tell you the truth, it was when I started analyzing bebop music. I have written a theory book, and I've completed it 10 times. Every day, I get up and say, "Oh, I left this out." I'll be sitting here thinking about things, like I am here; something will come up that I hadn't thought of, and suddenly I'll say, "Oh, it's changed today."

I started trying to compose harmolodic music in a way where the harmony would sound like a melody and the melody would sound like a harmony. When you're talking, you never translate your voice to speak a word. So, for me, that's how I look at harmony. Harmony came from putting notes together, like pancakes. Then melody came eating the pancake. Then you have the rhythm and dynamics. All these are symbols that describe what the sounds sound like when you arrange them in certain environments. In fact, in European music centuries ago, the church abandoned the third because they say that it gave too much pleasure to its citizens. But now what is a chord made up of? Thirds. So they really make everybody get naked. That's the truth.

I have nothing against sex. But I would rather have love than sex. But sex is what activates people when they're not required to show you their passport. When they're not required to identify themselves, people feel more close to nature.

You dip into the rap and hip hop world with the tune "Search for Life," from your new album. Do you see some similarity in this music to what you've been doing, with overlapping layers and borrowing from different areas?

When you think about it, the rap music sound to me is like street opera, telling a story and putting an image to it. The concept of opera is that every note in every scene is sung by a sound. In rap, every environmental condition is sung with a rhythm unique to that environment. It's street opera. It's mostly used to just involve rhythm and the voice, but now they're incorporating sound to go with it.

In my band, I didn't write an arrangement that used that sound to ride on. I played just as forceful to that as I did on any other song. I didn't just say that I wanted to feature this particular element because I wanted to hear this. I just made it equal. I wrote the poem and I had [Avenda "Khadijah" Ali] interpret it in rhyme and rhythm, and then I played to that. The message has nothing to do with anything but people. It's not about something someone has done to somebody. It's about "Who are you and how did you get here?"

You had another lyrical tune in the late '70s, "Science Fiction." Are you sensitive to the dangers of language, as opposed to the more abstract meanings of music?

Music is such a powerful, pure thing, apart from language. I know music is higher than language, because there are so many different words that mean the same thing and yet people say they can't speak another language. But they are speaking another language by saying they can't speak another language. Sound is higher than words, and music is higher than language. If you took "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and asked some Chinese people to say that, they wouldn't know what they're saying. But if you asked them to hum the melody, they wouldn't have any trouble with it.

That's why I don't understand why Americans opt to put song form music above instrumental music. In Europe, they don't do that. They put instrumental music equal to song form music. Here, it's not equal. Everybody who plays instruments must feel down because of that. How can you be against something that's so dramatic? It's as if they're saying, "You must be a radical. What are you doing? Did you want us to help you? We don't care about this stuff."

You've just launched your own label. How does that feel?

Denardo is responsible for getting that relationship going with Polygram. I've tried to do that before, but it never worked for me, because I thought that all I'd have to do is to make music. I have learned a lot of things from him being my manager.

So he's your liaison with the business end of things?

He has no enemies. I don't have enemies, either, but I feel that I've been misunderstood by a lot of people who I felt exploited by. But I don't think they're my enemies. They just took advantage of the fact that I was ignorant.

History has it that there was a sort of instant explosion of attention when you hit the Five Spot in 1959. Was it actually like that?

I would say so. It was like that for audience and musicians. I remember lots of classical guys like Leonard Bernstein and Gunther Schuller coming down, and guys who were playing Dixieland and bebop and pop — they were all coming down to the Five Spot. It was pretty wild. I was pretty used to that kind of stuff. I had that same experience in Texas. All the time, I was playing everywhere. I would get hired to play, and a guy would tell me to play a solo and I would do that. I wouldn't be improvising. I'd be thinking about playing something that was equal to what I heard. It didn't fit well with the other arrangements. I was always writing music, and I eventually just put together my own band. Because you knew that was the only way to get your music out.

Actually, I had sold some songs to Contemporary Records, but they didn't approach me to make a record. The guy just approached me to do some writing. Then, one day, the guy called me up and said, "We can't find anyone to play this music. Can you play it?" That's how I got my first record date, and I had to put a band together.

Did you have those tunes earmarked for any particular artists?

No. When I was in Texas, I used to play all the local

"For the last 20 years, I've been playing with all sorts of indigenous musicians, not realizing whether it's rock and roll or jazz. It's all folk music."

nightspots for Mexicans, for blacks and whites — for house bands. Bebop was just coming up. This was in the mid-'40s, because bebop was very big in, say, '47. I was just 15 or 16. I said to myself, "I want to play this instrumental music," because I'd been playing music for people who were beating each other and fighting and cussing each other and all that. I said, "This other music is in a different environment."

I was always studying music. Then I found out that I wanted to learn how to write music. I taught myself. I'm self-taught. It's nothing to brag about. But the more I learned bebop, the less jobs I got. It was not a popular music at that time. It was more popular for musicians. It was not as popular as it is now. It's very popular now for kids to learn it and play it.

You did nine albums for Atlantic in the space of two years. At that point, did you start recognizing the frustrations of working with record companies?

No, my frustration was that I've never had anybody to work with. I would go in and make a record and then leave. Jazz music has always had low esteem for success. I saw guys hanging out, saying, "My record company's not doing anything for me. I could be joining these guys in the gutter." Why should they treat me any different? Jazz music has a masculine image. It's very hard to communicate with the person that's paying you. That person's not necessarily going to spend his money to make you free of him.

Lately, though, I've found that with Josh Redman, they're really doing a good job for him. They're putting him everywhere but on the moon.

And he's even a good player...

Yeah, he plays good. But I think there are lots of good players, and all they would need is for someone to do that for them. His father [Dewey Redman] was a very good player. He came up when I came up, and he's been hurt and disappointed. People would never approach him the way they approached his son. But he plays fantastic. He's from Fort Worth.

In fact, I went to San Francisco on my way somewhere. I went up to North Beach and passed this nightclub, and heard someone playing the saxophone so incredibly. I went in and it was Dewey. Then he came over and said, "Did you recognize your tune? I was playing one of your songs." I said, "Is that right? I've got to help you, if you're that dedicated to this music. I know you're playing too great to be stuck here. The world should hear you." So I asked him to join my band. I didn't even need a saxophone player. I was just trying to help him to grow, you know.

It was the same way with all the guys who have lived with me. I wanted to help them. They'd say, "I've never had my music heard." I'd say, "Here's some music. Go down the hall and play your music." I know I got that way from the experiences I've had. When I was working at Bullock's [in Los Angeles], I went to get some lunch one day. On my way to a cafe, I saw an art gallery that had a painting of a beautiful woman. The gallery was full of valuable paintings, and this painting was sitting in the back. She was sitting there with the loneliest, saddest expression you ever saw. I went home and wrote a song called "Lonely Woman," and I thought, "From this day on, I'm going to help every artist I can, regardless of what they do. It doesn't matter how good or how bad." I'm speaking about painters as well as people who "being an artist" is applied to, being musicians or whatever. I've been trying to keep my word in that.

Ever since then, I've been trying to find the art-in-the-back quality, which I know exists. That's why I never complain about business or how someone treats me. I know for a fact that people only support things they like. If they're not interested in you personally, then they don't give you any attention, even if they hire you to do something. It's because art is so personal, I guess. But it doesn't bother me, because regardless of how well you like to eat, there's always something you haven't tasted.

So it hasn't been important to you to constantly be in the public eye?

It's been important, but not to the point of putting anybody down or complaining about it. I just write music and say, "Well, one day someone will hear it." That's what I've been doing since the last record I made. I've been writing music. I wrote a ballet last year for eight different dancers ["Architecture in Motion"], and I got a few different commissions from countries in Europe.

There's something that I either haven't learned or found the right environment for. When I play, I have an audience, but the people who sell people to people and the people that buy

people from people haven't included me in that arena yet. I don't think it's that they don't like what I'm doing. It's just that they prefer to spend their money on something else, which is their prerogative.

Does that reflect back on cultural myopia?

It's getting better. In California [the San Francisco Jazz Festival], it was very good. Usually, America doesn't have time to glorify the artist. It has more time for counting money. I would like to count the money, too. It just so happens that I spend more time trying to make the quality of what I'm doing match the quality of what I could be counting. I'm still going in that direction.

Is that partly why you want to have your own label, to maintain control?

Not exactly. I made *Skies of America* with Columbia, and I remember when I got back from Europe, Clive Davis had left, and I didn't have anyone to work with. I've made so many records where the person I started with gets promoted or leaves the company to get a better job. I'm always starting over and over again. Once a person gets the tape from you, they're not interested in you anymore. That's what happened with the *Virgin Beauty* record. I started a relationship with someone to make that record, and that person got a big promotion and left us there to work with someone who didn't have any idea who we were.

We were just biding our time, going up against the wall. Everybody said, "You know, that's a very good record." But the person who is in Artists and Repertoire wants to impress someone he's bringing to the company, not go back to someone else's work. So that leaves you flat. That's one reason why we started the company, so we wouldn't have to be in the way of a person who is playing musical chairs. The person who starts out in the stock room and wants to be the president can't have time to be worried about what you want him to do for you. He's worried about the company.

You sent out a jigsaw puzzle with the press kit for the new album, which reads "remove the caste system from sound." Do you care to elaborate on that?

For the last 20 years, I've been playing with all sorts of indigenous musicians, not realizing whether it's rock and roll or jazz. It's all folk music. People might say, "Oh, you're playing with ethnic musicians or folk people," but everybody is folks. That music is not any lesser because it's called "folk." I thought that if the caste system of sound were removed, they'll allow anyone to be in the first place at some time. It's true. I don't see anything sinful or dirty or bad about that. It would stimulate the economy even more. But I'm not an American. I'm just a citizen born in America.

Are you a jazz musician, per se?

No, I personally realized that I'm neither a classical or jazz musician, or rock musician. I am a composer who performs. I think of myself as a composer that deals with sound. I have a theory, a music called harmolodics. That's what I really do know about myself. That, I do know.

Do you see the problem with rock and roll being its limited palette of sound possibilities and appetites?

It's not the problem with rock and roll. It's the problem with people who are only pushing something and won't let anyone else in that territory. When I went and played with the Grateful Dead, it helped me share the sound of my band. People said, "Oh, we want a tape of that. We like that."

Do you have any reflections on Jerry Garcia?

He had a beautiful tone and a fantastic ear. When he played with us, I just told him, "Play yourself." I showed him some of the things I'd been working on. He took his guitar and started, and that's what he did. He played really well. We tried to get him to do a tour with us, but he was so busy with his own band and the Dead. But he said, "Yeah, I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it." Because lots of rock musicians welcome ways of going out and doing something different, to change. They don't have insecurity. I know I'm trying to get my band more visibility without being compared to any other music. It's hard.

What was striking about the San Francisco Jazz Festival show was that it covered a broad spectrum of stimuli and impressions, from the acoustic to electric, from the high-tech aspects versus things happening in real time on stage. That was really something, to have so much information. I'd like to have been observing that myself, sitting down and experiencing it. I've never had an experience like that. That, to me, is what we should be going towards in the 21st century. If more people of all expressions come together, it's going to make the energy more enjoyable and put less pressure on the principles. I think that would be real good.

I wonder if it all boils down to thinking in a multi-dimensional way. Your music seems to lean towards a multi-everything approach. Does that partly define what your aesthetics are about?

I wouldn't say that: that it defines it. But it's like a chef cooking a meal. When you end up cooking the meal, all you end up doing is eating it, seeing how it tastes. You mentioned mul-

tiples and all of that — in my band, we have eight people. Someone gets a 100-piece orchestra, and all you hear is one person singing. Imagine a 100-piece orchestra playing [harmolodically] while she was singing, then you would have something of a multiple.

I think of the idea of multiple things and themes only as branches on the tree. You see a tree and so many leaves, but it's still part of the tree. I think of it like that, not so much like multiples. Each part is just another part of the tree. ◆

Tone Dialing (Harmolodic/Verve)

Beauty Is a Rare Thing (Rhino) [6 CDs]

Tomorrow Is the Question (Fantasy/OJC)

Free Jazz (Atlantic)

Change of the Century (Atlantic)

Broken Shadows (Moon)

Of Human Feelings (Antilles)

Song X (Geffen) [with Pat Metheny]

Virgin Beauty (Portrait)

Naked Lunch: Music From the Original Soundtrack (Milan)

Further Discography:

At the Golden Circle, Vol. 1 (Blue Note)

At the Golden Circle, Vol. 2 (Blue Note)

The Empty Foxhole (Blue Note)

Prime Design/Time Design (Caravan of Dreams)

The Shape of Jazz to Come (Atlantic)

Currently Unavailable but Worth Looking For:

Science Fiction (Columbia)

Skies of America (Columbia)

Dancing in Your Head (A&M/Horizon)

Soapsuds, Soapsuds (Artists House) [with Charlie Haden]

Body Meta (Artists House)

In All Languages (Caravan of Dreams)