



**T**here's a special world of sound which Marty Walker traverses, just off the radar of traditional instrument usage. He understands that the bass clarinet is a particular beast unto itself, accessible to a broad and sometimes enigmatic range of tones—and, not incidentally, overtones. He savors the exploratory nature and the secret passageways tucked into this instrument, suitably dignified in the jazz world by the likes of Eric Dolphy and others, but still a *rara avis* as a solo instrument in the classical orbit.

Some connected exploratory instinct also governs his attitude towards music itself, an attitude fostered by composer and teacher Barney Childs. Hence, the title of Walker's new recording—*For BC: The Redlands Sessions*—can be freely interpreted as an ode to the instrument heard mostly in solo contexts here, and also for an important early mentor, Barney Childs, an individualistic American composer who taught for many years at the University of Redlands in California.

Childs, who died in January, 2000, imparted an important philosophy to a young, impressionable Walker. He remembers that "Barney was intolerant of performers who strive only to play hackneyed pieces carved from the Western European tradition; they were loathsome in his eyes. Instead, his sights were on encouraging local composers and performers to collaborate and create *new* music.

I admire his thinking, and largely because of it, I work to do the same."

For Walker, as evidenced on this project, the importance of the here-and-now reigns supreme. Improvisation is central to his musical being, the dominant practice in settings like his *Ghost Duo*, and a recurrent feature on this CD. That link to things current also extends to his active engagement in the small but healthy new music scene in the Los Angeles region. He is currently a member of the California E.A.R. Unit, among other liaisons, and is seen frequently on local stages where new music rears its feisty head.

That ongoing, interactive pact with local musical thinking is a subplot on this album—in its own way, a portfolio about West Coast new music making. More to the point of Walker's own personal history, this recording was done in the Frederick Loewe Performance Hall at the University of Redlands. The space was recently renovated with a mind for recording. "It has tunable acoustics along the side walls and all wood flooring. Plus, the stage's ceiling, sides and back are rough cedar, which all makes for a nice sound. Except on the electronics, none of the recording has any artificial reverb added." Electronics notwithstanding, the only effects you hear—the expressive palette of extended techniques—are summoned from the musician in question.

**W**e're sitting on the balcony of his house, overlooking Sunset Boulevard and the maze-like sprawl of Los Angeles below, and Walker is musing about his instrumental cause. With this project, as with much of his musical work, generally Walker states a case for the bass clarinet and its farther-reaching possibilities. Standard practices are not the main concern.

"I remember saying to someone after the recording that there are very few *regular* notes on this CD. For example, on Leo's piece, there are a lot of places in the score where he wanted harmonics and multiphonics added." Fink's piece *Epitaph*, he comments, "is one of the few places where I'm just reading notes and playing them straight; although *Din*, which Michael wrote later, as a prelude, is all humming and playing. The composers I work with are always very interested in the improvising I do. My focus while improvising is usually on seeing what kinds of sounds I can pull from the instrument. Then these sounds creep back into the pieces that are written for me. That's the result of collaboration."

Aside from its "legitimate" tonal range, a vast timbral world lurks within the bass clarinet, waiting to be coaxed out. He's happy to be associated with the instrument, although, he admits, "I used to shy away from solely bass clarinet projects because I didn't want people to think that I don't play the other clarinet, too. I don't really care what they think now," he laughs. "The bass clarinet is rich with possibilities. Also, I've never studied bass clarinet, formally, so I don't have teachers' voices in my ears saying 'no, no, can't do that'."

**W**adada Leo Smith is a composer and trumpeter whose roots in the Chicagoan AACM and other "jazz" traditions (he also played the "Miles Davis" role in the YO MILES! project) confer a particular patina on his writings for new musical settings. Improvisation often plays a role in his

compositional processes, as does a certain looseness of scoring. The vertical coordination of parts on *Betty Shabazz: A Consistent Voice of Love, An Inspiration for Life* is flexible, a situation in which Walker and pianist Vicki Ray engage in a fluid dance around Smith's impressionistic evocations.

*Din/Epitaph* is an integrated combine of pieces by an old ally of Walker's, composer Michael Jon Fink (also the guitar-playing half of *Ghost Duo*). Whereas the free-range scheme of *Din* was conceived in 1996, *Epitaph* (a requiem for no one in particular) is an ethereal dirge, written in 1990.

One of the earliest compositions in the set dates from 1991, when Walker had returned to the Southern California swim of things from a teaching post at Northern Michigan University and taught at the College of the Canyons, alongside Bernardo Feldman, who, keen on electro-acoustic interactions, wrote the textural mosaic that wound up being *Portraits of Friends and Relatives, Recuerdos de un Antaño Triste*. Walker notes that the piece "started with Bernardo sampling some of the sounds I use when I improvise, free-jazz-based, non-pitched material for the most part. He would sample those and then manipulate them in different ways. I then would add more stuff, and we assembled it like that over quite a long time, about a year and a half. Eventually, this piece came out."

The only piece here not written specifically for Walker is Barney Childs' *London Rice Wine*, although the composer did ask Walker to perform it. Dedicated to Robert Hall and Gavin Byars, and designated for "any woodwind instrument," the piece mines the poetic and conceptual aspects of Childs' compositional thinking. As Walker says, in Childs' music, "style ran the gamut. He was

known for indeterminacy, and there's a lot of room for performer choice in his music, but it's not all verbal instructions like this one."

Said verbal instructions, in this case, make their own kind of music. However, given the liberties of these instructions, Walker reacts accordingly, on his own musical terms. An excerpt:

Play a pitch. This is the real sound, and by making it you rule all. Enjoy this.  
PLAY. Make it be heard.

Stop playing it (but it goes on,  
somewhere)

Think about it going on.

Play it as it will sound,  
somewhere,

and stop before you think they expect it to stop.

But now you have played too much. Perhaps all (we all)  
play too much. Think about this. The instrument should be put away.

However

When Walker asked Arthur Jarvinen to write a piece, the composer revisited an old score dating from 1982, *Carbon*, and reconfigured it into *Carbon 1999*. In performance, Walker utilizes delay units to create shifting contrapuntal voices. In this recorded version, Walker thickens the textural plot via overdubbing in an unfussy cascade of echoing "clones."

Throughout the CD's program, many instances of player-specific influence emerge, such as in the works of both Bernardo Feldman and Shaun Naidoo.

"Shaun's piece and Bernardo's are very different, yet they're very similar in a way. I like to think that that's my influence on them."

Shaun Naidoo, a versatile young composer, incorporated Walker's instrumental voice into his score for *Waking in the Dirt*. Naidoo had been moved upon seeing photographs of mass graves in Bosnia, and the piece is partly an elegy for that troubled geography. Sampled bass clarinet parts provide the sonic foundation of the tape aspect. While Walker moves freely in the first half, he adheres to a strict structure in the second part, subtitled "Turning the Soil," a title which assumes chilling, ironic double meaning considering the work's original visual impetus.

For the CD's final piece, Jim Fox's *All Fall Down*, Walker again departs from a strict solo context. Here, Walker overdubbed three parts, on a sad and graceful piece that basks in languid and deceptive simplicity, a quality that the composer equates with an ambiguous "film noir" quality.

Closing with Fox's music makes for a logical finale for the project, on extra-musical terms, as well. Fox and Walker are frequent collaborators, who first met at the University of Redlands, where Fox came to study with Childs in the mid-'70s. Fox also presented Childs' music on his own West Coast-oriented Cold Blue label.

Walker maintains standards about what new music is, and should be, about. This project, though, has nothing to do with upholding an easily defined stylistic agenda. It's about paying respects to influential histories and forging new paths and new liaisons, whatever the incidental matters of tonality and/or structure. By turns contemplative, provocative, impressionistic and abstract, this recording paints imagery and tells stories-within-stories, as only the not-so-lowly bass clarinet can.

—Josef Woodard, 2000