



CAMIN●CIEL●ECHO●

TOM RAINEY TRIO

WITH

MARY HALVORSON

AND

INGRID LAUBROCK

INTAKT RECORDS

## **RATTLING ECHOES, ON RAINEY TIME**

In certain situations, for a supposedly objective music observer/scribe type, having a long-standing personal relationship with a musician can potentially cloud judgment and unduly sweeten the deal of listening with mind open and informed by cool discernment. To wit: when I hear and hear about Tom Rainey, I think about a drummer with a particular and strong voice to offer the contemporary music cosmos, but also the guy who I knew and hugely admired in high school in Santa Barbara, California. Back then, he kindly stooped to my humble level as a guitarist and we jammed on “Red Clay” and unnamed free jazz blowouts or blues jams at late night hangs in a friend’s garage. Back there and then, at San Marcos High School in the mid-1970s – and in Santa Barbara, California, and Southern California more generally – Rainey was an enlightened oddball of great skill and versatility, yes, but of equal importance, he was a player with some uncommon x factor of musicality and the all-important searcher’s instinct. We knew he would head out of town, follow an eastward destiny.

Over the years, I’ve kept tabs on and greatly appreciated Rainey’s work, in sturdy “mainstream” mode with Kenny Werner and Fred Hersch, through his long and strong rapport with Tim Berne, Tony Malaby, Drew Gress, Mark Helias, Nels Cline, his empathetic ally (and now wife) Ingrid Laubrock and other liaisons with the free play community. But some small, nagging voice tickled the inner ear. Could it be, I wondered at various moments, that my regard for Rainey the Friend from Youth was blurring my sonic vision?

Now that Rainey has, at long last, begun to release albums under his own name and creative guidance, with his brilliant and freewheeling trio (alongside Laubrock and guitarist extraordinaire Mary Halvorson) on 2010 album *Pool School* and now the same trio's even more assured identity amply evident on *Camino Cielo Echo*, any lingering clouds of self-doubt about my judgment have lifted. Rainey, informed by free improvisation and subtle compositional strategies, and by echoes of jazz eras and modes of conduct past and future, is one of the important persons of interest in the realm of creative musical action at this moment in history. That is so.

With the new album, the local Santa Barbara angle comes back to haunt in a literally and poetic way. Rainey, who maintains a fondness for the sweet old (and now affluent) beach-meets-the-mountains hometown north of Los Angeles, reaches into memory banks, alluding to the echoic allure of the place in his musical thinking. *Camino Cielo* is the winding, mountaintop-crowning road from which a dramatic vista view sweeps down to the seaside city of Santa Barbara spread out below. Under the circumstance, those who know the place will hear in the atmospheric wistful textures and breeze of the album's title track, "Camino Cielo Echo." On a clear day, you can peer down and see "Arroyo Burro" beach, a favorite of locals more than the transient tourist crowd, and now given an hypnotically unhinged and coloristic anthem in the form of Rainey's piece on the album called "Arroyo Burrow."

In fact, friendly ghosts of Santa Barbara popped up on *Pool School*, as well, in the form of the title "More Mesa," after the large expanse of a mesa leading to a cliff over the ocean, not far from Rainey's childhood home. It's also one of the last holdouts of unde-

veloped coastal land in this land of coveted, developer-ravaged real estate, and worthy of a tribute by freedom-loving sound poets.

This is not to say that the innately modern music made by the Tom Rainey Trio projects any kind of identifiably indigenous Santa Barbaran or even west coast sensibility. Quite the contrary. But an implicit point is made: artists carry with them the residue, memory materials and patina of life experience, even when their particular road takes them far away from that locale, to Brooklyn, Europe, and/or wherever ears are open to the creative improvisational impulse in jazz-after-jazz.

While Rainey's evocative, time-morphing and occasionally implosive drumming plays a central role in the musical materiality here, his trio is very much an integrated ensemble. The commanding component parts are critical to the vibe and behavioral manner and conversational of the whole. Laubrock is a saxophonist of unusual textural sensitivity and intellectual savvy, who can summon up proper deposits of abandon, knowing restraint and sly references to jazz' past in the midst of her purely improvisational explorations. Halvorson, one of the important "avant-jazz" guitarists of her generation, takes the abstracting and deconstructionist influence of, say, Derek Bailey into account in her playing, but has come up with her own way of melding that freestyling painterliness with shards of line and sonics – including tasteful deployment of effects units, a well-placed vibrato effect, ring modulation or distortion blast adding to the range and contemporary relevance of what she does. Together, they make a refreshing new and not-sentimental kind of beautiful music.

If Rainey's approach to a drum kit conveys an open loose relationship (to quote the trio bandname of his group with Mark Helias and Tony Malaby), and he shows a rubbery way with time and musical language, his way with song-titling shows the mark of a witty elasticizer of word language. Thus, we get titles like the nearly anagrammatic album opener "Expectation of Exception," a phrase somehow telegraphed in the anticipatory spirit of the music itself, and the apropos, raucous intensity of "Mullet Toss." "Mr. and Mrs. Mundane" opens with a spidery, spirited dialogue of drums and tenor sax, suggesting that Rainey and Laubrock are anything but a couple guilty of wallowing in the mundane. Spacey tracteries of sound, including Halvorson's flanged and echo-laden mumbling, Laubrock's tenuous assertions and Rainey's tinkling cymbal and percussive sonics, amount to a more gently introspective group think/touch on "Strada senza nome" (*Street with No Name*, a film noir number with Richard Widmark, from 1948).

Much of *Camino Cielo Echo*, in fact, keeps a relative cool, moderating the impulse to unleash fury before its proper time, or to excess. But the heat is cranked up, too, on intense workouts with apt titles "Corporal Fusion," "Fluster" and the penultimate collective meeting, "Two Words" (as in "I'd like to have two words with you," which then translates into a rambling rant). Late in the game on that piece, a growling guitar solo transition leads the charges into a semblance of a coda.

In a field where extended improvisation is a norm, the Rainey Trio keeps variety and balance in the picture on an album which plays like a well-considered and varied "album," thirteen tracks balanced out over 70 minutes. The album's two "epics" – the alter-

nately feisty and circumspect "A Third Line into Little Miss Strange" and the ambient ambling of "Mental Stencil" – clock in at just over seven minutes, enough time to expand and contract on three-way musical themes and notions.

To cap off the album, the going gets crepuscular, with the languid soft glow of the ballad "June." Even here, pieces are in place for a tune in the brooding balladry tradition, somehow reminiscent of a Paul Motian trio floater of a piece. But a looser spirit prevails. Echoes and unfinished melodic fragments slither around a center which we feel without being able to nail down, and a sense of a resolute finale sneaks up on us, begging questions after the last sounds fade. It is, in its way, a happy ending. On Rainey time.

Josef Woodard

Contributor to *DownBeat*, *Jazz Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and other publications, in and out of Santa Barbara.