

THE KITCHEN

CENTER FOR
VIDEO, MUSIC
AND DANCE

Musician, June 1981

ETHNIC HERITAGE ENSEMBLE

Bubbling forth from the seemingly bottomless well of AACM talent come yet three more gentlemen from Chicago, and, like those who have made the journey to New York before them, they have clearly paid their dues in the Windy City beforehand. You can hear that pervasive AACM influence in their equal respect for tradition and innovation; the substantial use of non-Western musics and unusual instrumentations; and a propensity for dressing weird. But what makes this ensemble distinct from the majority of AACM alumni is the accessibility of the kind of musical fare they served up at The Kitchen — perhaps the most intelligently programmed concert series in the entire city.

Marching through the audience chanting, "let your inner light shine," they immediately established a strong balance between entertaining playfulness and powerful music — the showmanship doesn't come across on their recent Moers Music release. Then, revealing the underbelly of their Chicago heritage, they switched gears, jumping from Kahil El'Zabar's conga solo and vocal forays into the hard-hitting Art Ensemble of Chicago tenor harmonies of reedmen Edward Wilkerson and "Light" Henry Huff.

The night progressed with Zabar providing the majority of the non-Western connection with his arsenal of gongs, cymbals, hand drums and sanza (thumb piano), as well as being the showman of the band: anyone who can get a Kitchen audience to chant "peace on earth" has got to have

some kind of charisma. Wilkerson and Huff kept the music "heavy" and their fairly impressive woodwind chops complemented each other exceptionally well. Huff's approach to tenor and soprano sax reflected a solid confluence of current avant-garde stylings but leaned heavily on a Coltrane sharp-edged sound. He also had the ability to go into the sax's altissimo register and "out." For me, though, Wilkerson possessed the most original, thus most interesting, conception of the three. On tenor his sound was huge, dark and rich, and his sense of rhythmic displacement was particularly gripping (sort of a cross between a hot R&B tenor and an avant-garde Ben Webster, if you can imagine that). With alto in hand, he mirrored some of the more abstract considerations of the Chicago school. But through all of his playing ran a strong thread of compositional continuity — you can hear he's studied composition extensively.

The Ethnic Heritage Ensemble may not be the next Art Ensemble or Air of the 80s — the music's not that heavy — but next time you're trying to wean a friend from his or her hard-bop milk or cure their fusion malady, give this band a try, it might just do the job — painlessly. — *Cliff Tinder*

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