

REVIEWS

FREE AT LAST FREE AT LAST

A Tribute to
Martin Luther King, Jr.
The Kitchen, New York City
January 24, 1986

A recent concert at the Kitchen in honor of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. was an unfortunate demonstration that even the most ambitiously and creatively conceived music program can result in an unsuccessful final performance. The idea for *Free at Last, Free at Last: A Tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr.*, held at the Kitchen's new quarters on January 24, 1986, must have seemed exciting on paper. The promising new music violinist and composer Malcolm Goldstein would join with jazz saxophonist Archie Shepp in an evening of compositions directly inspired by Dr. King. This New Music meets New Jazz theme would be realized by alternating Shepp and Goldstein pieces, played by a dazzling ensemble combining some of the best contemporary jazz musicians with Goldstein and his frequent collaborator English hornist Joseph Celli.

Regrettably, the concert provided yet another reminder that marriages of jazz and music in the European tradition, from classical to new music, frequently result in uneasy, incompatible alliances.

Several well-publicized attempts have been made in this direction, including Paul Whiteman's now thoroughly discredited Aeolian Hall concert in 1924, and the more credible promotion in the 1950's of a jazz/classical hybrid called "Third Stream Music" by Modern Jazz Quartet pianist John Lewis and New England Conservatory conductor Gunther Schuller. There certainly have been significant exceptions, but the rhythmically based improvisational foundations of jazz, with its Afro-American cultural and musical origins, are not easily mixed with the largely notated, pre-conceived music of the Western European tradition. In addition, jazz/classical combinations have frequently been marred by the implication (sometimes explicitly stated, sometimes not), that jazz musicians had to *prove* that they could play classical music, while classical players could "relax" and "unwind" by playing the less "serious" jazz. Although such implicitly racist overtones did not appear to be a problem at the Kitchen concert, the performance was undermined by the failure of the composers and players to blend their very different musical styles and orientations, as well as by an obvious lack of sufficient rehearsal time (although this was not noted in the program notes, the concert had apparently been presented previously in Washington, Boston, New Haven and Philadelphia, which makes its disorganization surprising) and by the

inadequate and insensitive drumming of Denardo Coleman.

The concert's opening piece, the spiritual "Been in the Storm So Long," illustrated the concert's few strengths and many weaknesses. The piece began with an elegiac French horn solo by the up and coming Vincent Chancey. Chancey is heard to great advantage as a member of Lester Bowie's Brass Fantasy, and he brings an emotional richness, and, when called for, a swinging, fluid approach to an instrument with which few jazz musicians have had much luck. Chancey's solo led into a duet with Fred Hopkins on arco bass. Hopkins, a member of the group Air and the ensembles of Henry Threadgill and David Murray, is certainly one of the greatest modern jazz bassists. He has an extraordinary tone and is an extremely sensitive accompanist. Hopkins was the most consistently impressive musician of the evening, and the only player who seemed completely comfortable moving back and forth between Shepp and Goldstein's compositions and styles.

"Been in the Storm So Long" evolved slowly into a stomping blues, punctuated early on by the plunger mute cries of trombonist Ray Anderson, one of the most excruciatingly underexposed players in contemporary jazz. Anderson would become a bit carried away later on in the show, but his keen understanding and assimilation of changing trombone styles in the history of jazz was evident throughout the performance.

The problems began when the rest of the ensemble joined Hopkins, Chancey and Anderson. Goldstein's idiosyncratic and frenetic violin style and Borah Bergman's choppy, chordal piano playing undermined the immediacy of this poignantly emotional gospel song, and when drummer Denardo Coleman entered the fray, the beauty of the piece was lost in a perplexing jumble. Coleman (the son of alto saxophonist and free jazz visionary Ornette Coleman) insisted on using syn-drums, whose elastic, *electric* sound was completely out of place in a jazz context. Coleman seemed unsure of himself throughout the concert. He has a very shaky sense of rhythm to begin with (an unpromising condition for a drummer, to say the least), and his playing followed a pattern throughout the night: he initially cast about for each piece's time signature, couldn't find it, and then reverted to a modified, usually completely inappropriate funk beat. The entire evening would have been greatly improved by a sensitive, confident drummer playing a standard drum kit—Andrew Cyrille, Pheeroan Aklafl, Steve McCall, Smitty Smith, or Barry Altschul would have done just fine.

The two most famous musicians in the ensemble began playing fairly late in the piece. David Murray was

heard throughout the night on his second instrument, the bass clarinet (the tenor saxophone is his primary horn), and is beginning to make his mark on this notoriously difficult instrument (only Eric Dolphy ever really thrived on the bass clarinet). Alto saxophonist Henry Threadgill joined Murray for a brief duet, but it was a sign of how the rest of the night would turn out that neither Murray nor Threadgill could make much of an impression. With the exception of Hopkins and the excellent but underamplified cellist Diedre Murray (no relation to David), none of the other musicians listened to each other, and little deference was paid to Murray and Threadgill. The two were simply drowned out. By the time of Joseph Celli's musette solo, it was clear that the ensemble was simply not jelling at all, and that the group's brash dissonance and cacophony, used to such emotional advantage in other jazz settings, were not serving much of a purpose here.

The second song, "Funeral," was a reworking of a 1963 piece written by Archie Shepp as an elegy for Medgar

his strange, almost arhythmic syndrum playing. Coleman's inability to swing was particularly apparent when set against Hopkins' walking bass lines. The remainder of the piece contrasted the sharp, rhythmically confident playing of Threadgill, Hopkins and the two Murrys on the positive side, with Coleman and Shepp, who moved from the tenor to play a weak, choppy piano accompaniment, on the negative.

The first half of the performance closed with "Soweto Stomp," a partially notated composition by Malcolm Goldstein commemorating the 1976 Soweto uprising. The opening melody of the piece was taken from "Nkosi Sikelel'i Afrika" (God Bless Africa!), the anthem of the African National Congress. This melody was played as a shuffling vamp with a fine trombone solo by Ray Anderson. But the notated main body of the piece was unimpressive. Goldstein seemed to have difficulty in adapting his compositional and conducting style to an ensemble stocked with improvisers of such extraordinary energy and ability. As the song meandered on with what

This music is dedicated to the black people of South Africa in their struggle for freedom and equality in which approximately 1,000 black people killed in the Soweto uprising in 1976.

Evers. Shepp introduced the piece, and one was immediately struck by his appearance. The former angry young man of the 1960's free jazz scene has become almost an *eminence grise*. Shepp, who currently spends most of his time teaching, provided a charming, dignified introduction both to the song and to the memory of Dr. King.

The opening passages were among the most enjoyable of the evening, and "Funeral's" introduction featured a wonderful exchange between Shepp and Hopkins. I had not heard Shepp live in many years, and reports that his playing had mellowed were an understatement. At first impression, he sounded as though he had slipped out of time; his tone has broadened and thickened to such an extent that I was reminded of no less a saxophonist than Ben Webster in his middle and late years. As the duet progressed, Shepp launched into a series of extended runs that evoked the memory of John Coltrane, Shepp's mentor in the 1960's. But the beauty and dignity of this opening was ruined by the maddeningly omnipresent Denardo Coleman, who again throttled the proceedings with

was now becoming a standard of direction, another significant problem became evident: Goldstein nor Shepp was strong enough to lead this ensemble. The concert concluded with "... that co-leaders' problems were as common as fire on heaven," a composition Shepp seemed to lack discipline by Goldstein that was excluded and Goldstein, although he played at length in the program, did not play. The members of the ensemble fully understood the rhythm were to extend and transform the attack and force of his music overall pitch and tonal shape of Dr. King's famous "I Have a Dream" invited immediate and unfeigned speech. The piece was the low comparison with the precision of the night; it was simply cohesiveness and compositionally unrealized. An interesting call and response opening led inevitably into Threadgill and David Murray an absolutely chaotic middle section were so underutilized by Goldstein that grew steadily in volume, and Shepp. Threadgill and Murray were involved in several wasted yet again and Coleman was using projects that combine almost unlistenable. A crudely new music, another failed *Ascension*-like finale had the players throwing in everything but the kitchen sink, and the show ground to a halt with Shepp chanting "Free at Last" over and over in one last futile attempt to bring Dr. King's spirit into the proceedings. But this concert, however worthy its intentions and however skilled its musicians, successfully evoked neither Goldstein's dramatic, dissonant memory nor the message of the great black leader.

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