

ARTIST FEATURE

PETER GANNUSHKIN / DOWNTOWNMUSIC.NET



ANDREW LAMB

BY GEORGE GRELLA

Andrew Lamb has been keeping the flame of spiritual jazz burning bright and strong. The North Carolina-born saxophonist, clarinetist and flutist plays with a powerful and deeply expressive and emotional sound. He has been active on the New York jazz scene for some four decades as a collaborator and a bandleader, playing frequently with musicians like drummer/percussionist Warren Smith and bassists Alan Silva and Tom Abbs. He also maintains projects in Europe, frequently performing and recording live throughout the continent. His latest domestic release, *The Casbah of Love*, leading the Andrew Lamb Trio, is on Abbs' Birdwatcher Records.

He used to play with Abbs frequently, then "at one point we had lost contact for a little while, then we got back in touch," Lamb says. "We talked and he invited me up to his studio just so we could source some things. When we went up there, we had a set thought in mind and that's when I met [drummer] Ryan Jewell, who had been working with Tom and lives up in Tom's community in the Catskills. And we blended right in. We just went straight to work then." Lamb brought some material to the session, but describes what ended up on the album as "a lot of spontaneous composition. Some things are first takes, the majority are first takes. Once we started, once we locked in, we just flowed."

Flow is a word Lamb uses often when he talks about his music and also "vibration"; the music flows as the musicians vibrate together. That way of looking at music is at his core as a spiritual player and how he found his way to that style. "Well, it was a calling, actually. It came about, it's sort of like the music came and got me. So when I heard it, could communicate with it, I could express myself through it. So it just continued along that path for me.

"I was listening to a lot of different things. But I heard some very late Coltrane and some Albert Ayler and when I listened to the music I heard the truth in it. I was attracted to that, I could tell that there was truth being told in most of it, it wasn't just about playing for playing's sake, for entertainment, you know what I mean? It was true expression. And I was always one who needed to express himself. I'm not a very boisterous-type person, always having some sort of expression. But I went there [musically]. I also listened to everything else also, to everything that was being played. Listened to all the traditional music. I heard truth in everything, in all the traditional music. But this particular thing resonated in me the most."

When he plays, he feels like "I'm just conveying what comes through me...I'm being honest about how I feel through. And everything is coming through me. That's the blessing of the Creator and that comes through me."

Finding musicians to share that experience with him means having "kindred spirits around you in order to develop and play certain things. That's when things can really happen. When you don't have that,

there are many levels of this thing that you are not going to truly touch in the way that you are going after. It won't really happen that way, because some people are there for the sake of the gig, so to speak, they're not really there for the other thing, [being] in tune with some of the other vibrations. So you need kindred spirits that are in tune with the vibrations that you seek."

He has been playing this way for decades, appearing in live settings far more often than in the studio and *The Casbah of Love* is just one of his recent albums. "Previously, in 2017," Lamb explains, "there was a record that I made [*The Sea of Modicum*, NoBusiness Records], on vinyl. I made it live in Lithuania, at the Vilnius International Jazz Festival, with [percussionists] Warren Smith and Arkadijus Gotesmanas. It's also available streaming and digital."

That's just one of several projects he has going on, the most ambitious of which is the Circadian Spheres of Light Project. That group has a multimedia performance at Saint Peter's Church this month. In line with Lamb's unique sensibilities, the show is not the usual music-with-video agglomeration, but instead music accompanied by a visual artist, a dancer and even a magician.

Lamb breaks down the personnel: "That group has Marvin 'Bugalu' Smith, Lloyd Haber, Newman Taylor Baker, Jose Abreu [percussionists]. Right now it's got [bassist] Hilliard Greene and [trombonist] Dick Griffin, Melanie Dyer [violin], Lester St. Louis [cello]. I have Jimmy James Green, the visual artist, doing some spontaneous visual art. And Ngoma Hill, poet and spoken word, Trashina Conner, dance, and a magician, The Great Olmedini. I'm very excited about it, I'm looking forward to it."

As Lamb describes it, the Circadian Sphere of Light is a seamless whole. Green, Hill, Conner and The Great Olmedini are "going to be working with the music, within the music. The visual artist is going to be painting spontaneously with the music, the poet is going to come in and out, the magician is going to come in and out, but it's all going to flow together. There won't be any stopping point, it's going to flow throughout the whole experience."

Despite the impact of the live experience of an ensemble like this, he hopes to put a version of the band on record. He adds that he's "also looking at a couple other studio records, one with Tom and one with a trio that I have in Paris with [bassist] Yoram Rosilio and [drummer] Rafael Koerner."

That trio released an album earlier this year, *The Night of the 13th Moon* on Le Fondateur de son, recorded live at a Paris club. It's "moving very well in Paris and Europe," Lamb says. "I'm looking forward to those things, absolutely. And also another collaboration with Arkadijus Gotesmanas, doing another record. These are all things I'm definitely looking at and working toward and everything is in motion. So we'll see how the blessings go and the things flow." ❖

For more information, visit facebook.com/babaandrew.lamb. Lamb is at Nublu 151 Oct. 19th and Saint Peter's Church Oct. 25th. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Andrew Lamb – *Portrait in the Mist* (Delmark, 1994)
- Dennis Gonzalez New Southern Quintet – *Old Time Revival* (Entropy Stereo, 2002)
- Andrew Lamb/Warren Smith – *The Dogon Duo* (Engine, 2004)
- Andrew Lamb Trio – *The Hues of Destiny* (CIMP, 2008)
- Andrew Lamb/Warren Smith/Arkadijus Gotesmanas – *The Sea of Modicum* (NoBusiness, 2016)
- Andrew Lamb – *The Casbah of Love* (Birdwatcher, 2018)

THE SULTAN ROOM
AN EXOTIC OASIS IN BUSHWICK

10/7 SARAH DAVACHI + MATCHLESS

10/8 TIM BERNE REFLEX W/ NASHEET WAITS & REID ANDERSON

10/12 Y LA BAMBA + STEFA* + NOIA

10/14-15 "BATTERIE" A DRUMMER-CURATED SERIES FEATURING JIM BLACK

10/31 ELYSIAN FIELDS

11/1 ADELINE

2/21 JOHN ZORN'S SIMULACRUM (JOHN MEDESKI, MATT HOLLENBERG, KENNY GROHOWSKI)

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ART BLAKEY

INDESTRUCTIBLE LEGACY

BY RUSS MUSTO



ALAN NARIGAN

The final set of this year's Charlie Parker Jazz Festival was by Carl Allen's Art Blakey Centennial Project, playing songs from the Jazz Messengers songbook. Allen recalls, "It was an honor to present the project at the festival. For me it was very fitting because Charlie Parker changed the direction of jazz as we know it and Art Blakey changed my conceptual approach to playing music and leading a band. They were both trailblazers...Art represented in music everything that I imagined music was supposed to be: intelligence, thought-provoking, spiritual, soul-searching, gritty, humorous and a whole lot more."

Art Blakey was born on Oct. 11th, 1919 in Pittsburgh and began playing music at an early age in order to escape the toil of working in coalmines. Legend has it that he switched to drums from piano at the behest of a gun-toting club owner who felt that Erroll Garner was better suited for that position. Soon afterwards he hit the road, first with a short-lived small group led by pianist Mary Lou Williams and then with the big band of Fletcher Henderson. Roy Haynes, who heard Blakey with Henderson recalls, "He was a great drummer, definitely. He reminded me a little of Chick Webb." But touring through the Jim Crow south didn't suit Blakey and he left the band, settling in Boston for a short time where he formed his own group. A call from Billy Eckstine to replace the drafted Shadow Wilson in his orchestra sent Blakey back out on the road in 1944. The pioneering band is rightfully credited as the incubator of the nascent bebop movement that would revolutionize jazz and Blakey was the engine driving the music in its new direction. Haynes remembers hearing him with the band and noted the change in his playing. "This new music was happening—this so-called bebop—and he was dropping bombs." Blakey stayed with the Eckstine band until its demise in 1947. By that time he had relocated to New York and started his own big band, the Seventeen Messengers. It was with that group that he made his first of many dates as a leader for Blue Note. Although the group was short lived Blakey found plenty of work as the house drummer at Birdland and recording as a sideman with ex-Eckstine band members.

Following a stint with Buddy DeFranco, Blakey was back in New York, recording on dates by Clifford Brown, Lou Donaldson and Horace Silver for Blue Note. Then on Feb. 21st, 1954 the drummer teamed up the three and bassist Curley Russell for a live recording by what was to be dubbed the Blue Note All Stars but, as Donaldson relates in the film *Beyond The Notes*, a bribe paid by the drummer to Birdland emcee Pee Wee Marquette resulted in the band being called the Art Blakey Quintet. The resulting albums really launched Blakey's career as a leader. At the end of one of the sides Blakey can be heard saying, "When these guys get too old, I'll get some young ones." Thus the philosophy of Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers was born.

The earliest Jazz Messengers dates done later that year were actually made under the leadership of Horace Silver. The group with trumpeter Kenny Dorham, tenor saxophonist Hank Mobley, bassist Doug Watkins and Blakey played predominantly originals by Silver, which, while maintaining the harmonic sophistication

and rhythmic vitality of bebop, took on a gospel-tinged melodicism buoyed by polyrhythmic drumming, giving the music a more accessible sound that was dubbed hardbop, a name that would be used to describe the Jazz Messengers style throughout its long existence.

By 1955, following a slew of trio recordings as a sideman with the day's most inventive players, Blakey had taken over leadership of the band with Dorham, Mobley, Silver and Watkins, recording the first Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers album *Live at the Café Bohemia*. The group disbanded due to internal conflicts, but Blakey kept the name and formed a new band with Donald Byrd, Ira Sullivan, Kenny Drew and Wilbur Ware, recording for Columbia. When that group broke up, a new one with Bill Hardman, Jackie McLean, Sam Dockery and Spanky DeBrest followed, with Johnny Griffin later added to the band and eventually replacing McLean. It was the group with Griffin that would record the classic *Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers with Thelonious Monk* album for Atlantic.

After years of changing personnel, recording for different labels, the Messengers trajectory solidified with Blakey's return to Blue Note in 1958. On Halloween eve of that year the group, now consisting of trumpeter Lee Morgan, tenor saxophonist Benny Golson, pianist Bobby Timmons and bassist Jymie Merritt, went into Rudy Van Gelder's Hackensack, New Jersey studio to record what remains its most classic album. Originally released with the eponymous title *Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers*, the date included Timmons' "Moanin'" and Golson's "Blues March" and "Along Came Betty", songs that greatly increased the band's popularity and remained in the Messengers repertoire right up to the group's final days. Golson would soon leave the band, but not before adding two more staples to the Messengers songbook: "Whisper Not" and "I Remember Clifford".

Golson's replacement in the group proved to be equally proficient and even more prolific. Saxophonist Wayne Shorter brought a whole new level of sophistication to the group, giving the band a more contemporary, but no less soulful sound that wrapped Blakey's incendiary drumming around singable melodies and opulent harmonics. As the band evolved to include Freddie Hubbard, Curtis Fuller, Cedar Walton, three similarly talented composers, along with bassist Reggie Workman, Blakey finally had a stable unit that would be hailed as his greatest group.

The ensuing years, following Shorter's exodus to join Miles Davis and the other members' departure to form their own groups, resulted in another period of shifting personnel during which time Blakey enlisted dozens of talented players. However, the Messengers star was fading in a post-Beatles era of popular music and Blakey took time off to tour with the allstar Giants of Jazz ensemble. But as a born leader Blakey could not relinquish his mantle heading the Jazz Messengers for long and soon he assembled a new group, reuniting Hardman and recruiting tenor saxophonist David Schnitter to form a frontline to play with a revolving cast of pianists, including George Cables, Albert Dailey

and former band pianist Walter Davis, Jr. With the replacement of Hardman by Russian trumpeter Valery Ponomarev and the addition of alto saxophonist Bobby Watson to the band, Blakey once again had a stable unit, replenishing his spirit, as can be heard on the album *Gypsy Folk Tales*. The drummer was soon touring regularly again, feeling his oats, as reflected in the titles of his next records, *In My Prime* and *Album of the Year*. The latter date introduced Wynton Marsalis, along with tenor saxophonist Billy Pierce and pianist James Williams, ushering in the "Young Lions" era.

In the years to come Blakey would fuel the jazz pipeline with a bevy of talented young players, including Branford Marsalis, Donald Brown, Terence Blanchard, Donald Harrison, Philip Harper, Javon Jackson, Benny Green, Robin Eubanks, Brian Lynch, Geoff Keezer, Frank Lacy and Essiet Essiet, all of whom would go on to become leaders in their own right. After a period of woeful neglect Blakey would once again receive the critical and popular acclaim he had long deserved, elevating him to the top of the jazz world, where he would remain until his death, one week after his 71st birthday on Oct. 16th, 1990.

On the night of what would have been Blakey's 99th birthday, drummer Ralph Peterson, one of only two drummers to play alongside him in the Jazz Messengers Big Band, launched his Messenger Legacy band with fellow alumni Lynch, Watson, Pierce, Keezer and Essiet. He notes, "As we continue the celebration of Art Blakey's 100th Birthday touring The Messenger Legacy, I am struck by the amount of work it took for him to travel and deal with the rigors of the road. I never heard him complain about it. He loved doing it. Art Blakey was a leader of men and the roster of Messengers alumni and what they have accomplished in music and life speaks for itself and needs no defending, only celebrating. It has been a great experience. The audience response has been overwhelmingly positive. It really confirms that the Jazz Messengers sound is timeless. It's a sound that will always have a place not only in jazz history, but as a fully relevant and important part of the modern idiom of this music." ❖

For more information, visit artblakey.com. Blakey tributes are at *Juilliard Oct. 1st, Birdland Oct. 2nd, Dizzy's Club Oct. 7th-12th and 21st, Jazz Standard Oct. 8th-9th, Smoke Oct. 10th-13th and Manhattan School of Music Oct. 17th. See Calendar.*

Recommended Listening:

- Art Blakey Quintet—*A Night at Birdland, Vol. 1 & 2* (Blue Note, 1954)
- Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers—*Moanin'* (Blue Note, 1958)
- Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers—*The Big Beat* (Blue Note, 1960)
- Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers—*Buhaina's Delight* (Blue Note, 1961)
- Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers—*Free For All* (Blue Note, 1964)
- Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers—*Album of the Year* (Timeless, 1981-82)