

Invisible jukebox

KING OLIVER

"Wa-Wa-Wa" from King Oliver's Dixie Syncopators (Ace of Hearts)

This is nice. I like this. [*He sings, conducts and stomps his feet.*] I've heard the song, but I have no idea who it is. I'd almost say it was Jabbo Smith, but I'm not really sure. It's not Louis Armstrong. No, but he gave Louis one of his first jobs.

Oh yeah. That's a pretty good hint — it's King Oliver. Okay. Yeah. I like that. I just like the whole idea of this music — the sound, the way it's played, and just the spirit of the music basically. You really have to capture your era, and this is a really good example of what Dixieland came to later be. But this is a much purer form. And it's tricky too. Do you think it's important for a jazz player to listen to music from this period?

Oh yeah, definitely it's important. These are things that are essential. These are the basics roots of jazz trumpet playing — you have to listen to King Oliver, to Jabbo, Beiderbecke, Louis Armstrong, any of those guys. I use it as reference material and try to somehow incorporate that into what I'm doing. It's essential that elements of early jazz are embedded in your mind because the only way you are going to create something new is to be familiar with what has already happened. Because if you're not, you may think you're creating something new and actually you aren't. Are there connections between this music and the music you play in *Brass Fantasy*?

Well, there is a very good connection in that we are both trying to deal with contemporary music. And I think that some people, especially now in jazz, have forgotten that they have to be contemporary. Our brass thing is kind of an extension of the New Orleans traditional

Every month we play a musician a series of records which they're asked to identify and comment on — with no prior knowledge of what they're about to hear.



PHOTO: JAK KILBY

lester bowie tested by Philip Watson

Lester Bowie is one of jazz music's great mavericks. A founder member of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and leader of the boisterous, piano-less 10-piece Brass Fantasy, trumpeter Bowie has been a musical provocateur for over 35 years. Famous for his on-stage lab coats, two-pronged goatee, theatrical soloing and pugnacious intelligence, Bowie was brought up in St Louis but moved to Chicago in 1966. Since then, in addition to his

work with his own groups and the AEOC, he has played in Jack DeJohnette's New Edition, recorded with such players as Archie Shepp, David Murray and Taj Mahal, and lived and played in Nigeria with Fela Kuti. Most recently he appeared on his namesake David Bowie's CD, *Black Tie White Noise*, emphasizing his continuing interest in popular music and songs. His latest album, *The Fire This Time (In & Out)*, is a live CD recorded in Switzerland last year.

marching brass band. My father was a marching band director and all my uncles were in marching bands, so I've got that in my blood. So there is a connection between all these elements — especially in the spirit that the elder musicians had.

GURU/DONALD BYRD "Lounjin'" from Jazzmatazz (Chrysalis)

It sounds like Miles, but this ain't *Doo-Bop*. Is it Donald Byrd? Yeah, but I don't know who the rapper is. I'm not familiar enough with their styles to know one from the other. It's Guru from *Gang Starr*. He describes this project as "an experimental fusion of HipHop and jazz". This is a good effort to try to make some sort of fusion, but I don't really think it comes off. You've really got to put a little bit more into it. It kind of sounds like the jazz players are playing down a bit. I'm in favour of fusion, but I don't believe in playing down to anyone. I think you should put just as much creative energy into a fusion as you would to anything else. More could be done with the form; something should be added. You can't just layer — put a solo over a rap track and then call that it — you've really got to put some music in there. Brass Fantasy have a tune that's an experiment in this area, but it's quite different from this approach. There is rapping, but there's an arrangement and everything. We actually put some time in thinking about how it was going to be voiced, what kind of feeling it was going to have. And we wanted to do it without a guitar, without a backing track, without any scratching. But you gonna feel all of the grooves you would feel if you had heard a rap record. That's the way I approach those kind of things. For me, when I experiment with other



forms, it's a take-off point. I mean, we play Willie Nelson songs, but we play good arrangements of Willie Nelson songs. It's not half an effort that ends up with something half-arsed.

And Donald Byrd?

I've been a Donald Byrd fan for a long time. I mean, I knew about Donald Byrd before I knew of Bird. And when Bird died I thought they were talking about Donald Byrd. He used to play like these really long lines — Donald Byrd was a monster. I mean, he could play a line that would go around the corner and then meet itself coming the other way. But then he had a lot of problems with his chops, and he can't play like that anymore. But at least he's still making an attempt to make a connection. Whether it's successful is another thing.

**MANDINGO GRIOT
SOCIETY/DON CHERRY
"Musubalanto" from The
Mandingo Griot Society (Flying
Fish)**

Okay. Well it sounds like Don Cherry on trumpet. Don Cherry, to me, is one of the most underrated musicians. I mean, Don Cherry, first of all, *is* music. This guy is just a one big piece of music. His whole being is music. Now, people speak about technique, but that has only a minor part to do with music, because Don has done more for trumpet players, more for opening up the music, than any of these guys who can play the concertos. So it's not about technique, it's about who really contributes. I mean, after Miles Davis, it was Don Cherry who really freed up the language of the trumpet — it gave us the impetus to really go and search out our own ways. So his influence has really been felt in anybody who is playing so-called free jazz on trumpet — they're coming from Don Cherry. He's really made a strong contribution and he's been really neglected. People always see him as some sort of fucking joke or something, but Don Cherry's a total musician, and a true traveller. Now, you talk about fusion — Don Cherry does real fusion. He takes the elements and he really puts a spirit into the music. Don Cherry's like travelled the whole world — he's the guy you really need to talk

to about fusion, because he has really done it successfully. He opened up the whole world music thing. Great job done, great job. As always.

BRYAN FERRY

"Rescue Me" from Taxi (Virgin)

That almost sounds like "Rescue Me" man. Wooooahhh. Yeah! Fontella [Bass] has got to hear this. I got to get this. It sounds like David Bowie, but I don't know who it is. *[He sings along.]* *It's Bryan Ferry and I think this song means something to you doesn't it?* Oh yeah, it sure does. I must have played that song about six million times. And that's a nice version. I mean, you know, things like that I can respect. He takes a familiar song and comes up with a different version. He puts something into the music. That kind of stuff I like — to do a song like that in an original way, to me, is just great.

That was [first recorded by] my first wife, Fontella Bass, and I was her musical director. I remember when we first came to England, my name was never mentioned in the papers — they just wrote "Fontella Bass was accompanied by a coloured trumpeter". Those were the first printed words about me in England. But that record was very popular, and still is.

You've always had a very positive and open attitude to pop music. Well, it didn't get to be pop music because people didn't like it. For me, as a jazz musician, it's not about what I play, it's about how I play it. So I take influences from all directions. And in pop music there's the appeal of the song, the melody, the rhythms — there's something there that can be explored. And I think the artist has an obligation to reach the audience. And when I say that I don't mean go down — I'm trying to bring people up to my level, not condescend. But I've never had anything against pop music. I like pop music, and I don't see anything wrong with it.

MILES DAVIS

"Agitation" from ESP (Columbia)

That must be Tony [Williams] on the drums. And that's Miles — after the first note, you know who it is. Miles Davis was one of the greatest trumpet players who ever lived.

And I get particularly angry with people who try to defame him. Especially now that he's dead. I heard Wynton [Marsalis] say something about Miles recently and next time I see Wynton somebody may have to hold me back from slapping him upside his head. He's said things about Miles that I just can't understand. I was always brought up with the idea that if you can't say anything good about the dead, you don't say anything. Now what's this guy talking about accusing Miles Davis of treason. *Who is this guy*, who has done nothing yet to even approach the level of anything Miles did? [In a recent issue of *Downbeat*] he said Miles was like a general who had sold out and gone over to the other side. That was the straw that broke my back. I was already mad and didn't like what he was doing, but then I thought man this guy's really out to sabotage the music for real.

After that last interview I've started to seriously question just what his involvement with this music is. I think it's detrimental. I think there's something evil somewhere. Because it's getting out of the realm of just not knowing or just being young. This is like a deliberate effort to sabotage the development of the music. I mean, if that's the way he's talking about Miles, he must think I'm a piece of shit. Wynton was in my band when he first came to New York, but now he doesn't come around me. I think he's scared of me or something. *You said once that you think Wynton is using the concept of the tradition to destroy the tradition.* Yeah, to destroy it. He's using a partial concept of the tradition. If you're talking about the tradition in jazz, what about the tradition of innovation, creativity, moving forward, being contemporary. Is that not part of the tradition of jazz? What about the tradition of having and maintaining *an individual voice*. Tradition has to be taking the music as a whole.

What we were doing in the 60s was trying to be different — that's the whole idea. All the guys then taught us to be creative, so what were we going to do — come up with an imitation of them? We had to come up with an alternative — that's the way we thought it was done. You try

to make a legitimate contribution to the extension of the music. That's what those guys, Miles, Cecil Taylor, Ornette, Coltrane, Bird taught us: be different. As Max Roach once said to Jo Jones: you can't join the throng until you sing your own song. That's always been the way it goes.

Cats today should be finding out some new notes, some new ways of playing that I don't know anything about. I'm a grandfather — what I am doing being the revolutionary? There should be some guy out there, 25 years old, playing things that I can't even imagine. Wynton, for instance, has the technique — if he applied it — to play some remarkable things, but he's just wasting his fucking talent.

So I take it you don't want to hear the Wynton track I was going to play you?

Oh well, no, we can talk about that.

WYNTON MARSALIS

**"Allegro; Cadenza" from
Tomasí's Concerto for Trumpet
and Orchestra/Philharmonia
Orchestra/Esa-Pekka Salonen
(CBS Masterworks)**

You can stop it there — I've heard this before. I'll tell you about this whole conspiracy thing. This is how Wynton has been tricked himself. You see, he's been miscast. Now, Wynton is an excellent musician. I think Wynton could be the greatest classical trumpet player that ever lived. But they tricked him. They're using him too. They're tricking him out of that because I don't think they want him up in there, being that good. You'd be surprised — there's so much racism in classical music. Those guys give him a hard time — they try to sabotage his performance, the orchestra will half play their parts, the conductors will be trying to fuck with him. Plus the vibe is always funny and when you're trying to play music you don't need a funny vibe — you don't need guys in the orchestra looking at you funny as if to say, who is this negro here; who does he think he is? But if Wynton was really strong, if he had nerve, if he was really a man, he would fight all that shit and stick in there and become the greatest classical trumpet player — ever. He should be developing orchestras, *(continued on page 71)*

(continued from page 47)
developing black orchestras, getting some things together — you know what I'm saying. But because he could do that, because he can play the concerto, it doesn't make him the king of jazz. The thing about jazz is that it reveals who you really are. Wynton is not a jazz innovator — he's just not that kind of a person. But he's an excellent trumpet player and he has a knowledge of music that none of these classical guys can even touch. They couldn't even get close — Wynton would kick their arse. Yeah, he's a brilliant trumpet player; he's just not a . . . brilliant person.

ICE-T

"Warning" from Home Invasion (Rhyme Syndicate)

[The track is a warning that if you are offended by such words as "slut", "tramp", "bitch", "shit", "nigger" and "low motherfucker", you shouldn't continue listening.]

[Laughs] Well, music can be used a lot of ways, and a lot of ways can be detrimental. A lot of people just use things to get attention or cause controversy or just sell albums. None of these words were words that my five-year-old grand daughter hasn't heard. So it's not as if these things are out of the ordinary. But I don't think the emphasis should be put on them as much. I think a lot of it can teach a lack of respect for women, for gays. Some of the things in this music are very negative and I'm against negative images in music.

So where do you stand on "Cop Killer"?

[Laughs] I think that everything should be available; I think people should know about these things. But I don't want to say what I really think. I'm not going to say. I know how to deal with Wynton, but the police I've got to deal with every day. In some ways, his attitude towards the police was realistic because the police kill so many people, needlessly. If I was in that bag, if I were a guerilla warrior, yeah I would do a whole lot of cop killing. I would be a really good terrorist you know.

But we are trying to promote a positive image — as long as we keep promoting these negative attitudes

we are just perpetuating the same racism, the same homophobia, the same bullshit that's already going on. So my objective, what I'm trying to do with the music, is to try to get out of this kind of situation, to try make things a little bit better.

We've run out of time. There's no time to play you the Kenny Dorham track I'd dug out.

Oh, that would have been nice. I'm crazy about Kenny Dorham. Kenny Dorham's the reason I'm playing trumpet now. He was just so hip, and I just wanted to be like that. I just wanted to be a cat like Kenny Dorham — he was a musicians' musician. But, you know. . . there is something I'd like to hear. Do you just happen to have any Rex Stewart.

Yeah, but only some of his later stuff from the 50s, I think.

Well play me some of that — people tell me I sound just so much like Rex Stewart.

REX STEWART

"Tillie's Twist" from Rendezvous With Rex (Limelight)

Yeah, I sure do sound like Rex Stewart. Rex has this more vocal approach; I think what I've done is taken up where he left off. Where some guys use his tricks or his comments, I've taken them as a basis for a whole other conversation. Like I say, the music was so wide open years ago. Now it's getting that it's so closed. When I first went to New York there were so many different trumpet sounds — Kenny Dorham, Blue Mitchell, Johnny Coles — I mean, they could play the same song and you'd hear five totally different solos. Now you get these guys copying Wynton — copying a copy — and they sound like fucking clones. That's why I call these guys fucking androids. They're clones man. □

Lester Bowie appears with the Art Ensemble of Chicago at London's Union Chapel on 8 July, and at the Glasgow Jazz Festival (1–11 July).