



art for your ears

Bill  
**Laswell**  
 Remixes  
**Miles**

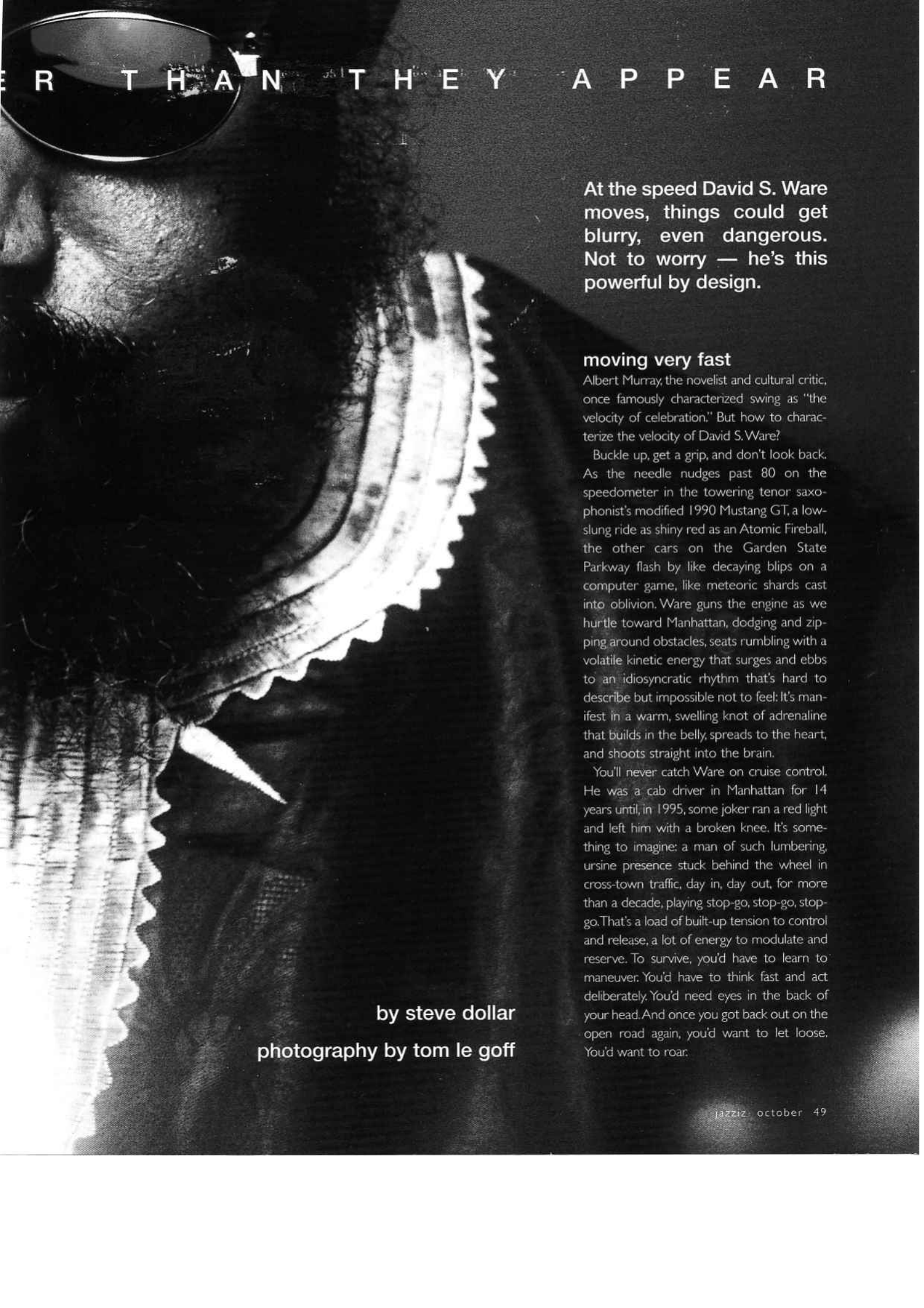
Jazz Education  
 Comes of Age

Acoustic  
**Alchemy's**  
 Rite of Passage

David S. Ware

**Speed**  
**kills**





# ER THAN THEY APPEAR

At the speed David S. Ware moves, things could get blurry, even dangerous. Not to worry — he's this powerful by design.

## moving very fast

Albert Murray, the novelist and cultural critic, once famously characterized swing as "the velocity of celebration." But how to characterize the velocity of David S. Ware?

Buckle up, get a grip, and don't look back. As the needle nudges past 80 on the speedometer in the towering tenor saxophonist's modified 1990 Mustang GT, a low-slung ride as shiny red as an Atomic Fireball, the other cars on the Garden State Parkway flash by like decaying blips on a computer game, like meteoric shards cast into oblivion. Ware guns the engine as we hurtle toward Manhattan, dodging and zipping around obstacles, seats rumbling with a volatile kinetic energy that surges and ebbs to an idiosyncratic rhythm that's hard to describe but impossible not to feel: It's manifest in a warm, swelling knot of adrenaline that builds in the belly, spreads to the heart, and shoots straight into the brain.

You'll never catch Ware on cruise control. He was a cab driver in Manhattan for 14 years until, in 1995, some joker ran a red light and left him with a broken knee. It's something to imagine: a man of such lumbering, ursine presence stuck behind the wheel in cross-town traffic, day in, day out, for more than a decade, playing stop-go, stop-go, stop-go. That's a load of built-up tension to control and release, a lot of energy to modulate and reserve. To survive, you'd have to learn to maneuver. You'd have to think fast and act deliberately. You'd need eyes in the back of your head. And once you got back out on the open road again, you'd want to let loose. You'd want to roar.

by **steve dollar**  
photography by **tom le goff**

"I got this up to 120 once," Ware announces with pride, gloved hands steering with casual calculation as he details an impromptu race he staged with another Mustang driver one morning.

I'm wondering, of course, about the obvious: Did the driving influence the saxophone playing — or vice versa?

"Vice-versa."

To paraphrase the tagline of the time-travel fantasy *Back to the Future*, where David S. Ware is going they don't need roads. Or speed limits. Time and space become elastic concepts, relativities, transparencies. Sure, you've got a gig, and it's supposed to last an hour; let's say. And in that hour you might decide to play one song or four songs or none at all. You might decide to be the hurricane or you might decide to be the hurricane's eye. You might become as one with the forces of nature, or the forces of nature might kick your ass. And you might find, after doing it for 30 years, that the sound of your horn — that sound you've come to claim as though it was another fingerprint — is the high-ringing shout of a lost tribe.

You can hear it, in excelsus, on Ware's new album, *Go See the World*. (The title is courtesy of Ware's mother, who gave him that advice the minute he was born.) There seems to be no shadowed corner of the sonic spectrum that his breath can't expose. A moment skips by, and Ware's tangled in the guts of a scale, hollering Mississippi roadhouse and Holy Spirit, at once calculated and inchoate, evoking phantom foot-stomps, tambourine rattles, wordless hymns. It's only a moment, though, and it flies with a piercing, oscillating momentum through a volley of notes, melodic fragments of bop-like "changes." Then: fierce, spine-raking squeals. Then: a seismic honk from the bottom of the bell. Then: a bright smear of tones, up and down, up and down, capped with a sustained eruption of lung power that storms the heavens. Then: a sudden, inevitable arc, as if caressing a time-worn lyric, the rainbow after the thunderclaps. It's not show-offy. It's not schtick. It is, even at paint-peeling, brick-loosening extremes, alarmingly coherent and sophisticated.

And there's still another 14 minutes to go on Ware's version of "The Way We Were." Marvin Hamlisch's mash note to nostalgic amour — a signature hit in 1974 for pop diva and movie star Barbra Streisand — makes an ironic choice, indeed, for the "standard" the saxophonist often decides to include on his albums, which now number a baker's dozen. Since last year, when the 48-year-old New Jersey native signed a deal with Columbia Records, Streisand has been his label-mate. Babs may be shocked at the audacious

makeover Ware and his stellar working quartet — bassist William Parker, pianist Matthew Shipp, and drummer Susie Ibarra — give the song, yet it's perfectly in sync with the jazz tradition: whether you're hearing John Coltrane turn "My Favorite Things" into an Eastern odyssey or



Sonny Rollins transmute the rough leather of "I'm an Old Cowhand" into a silken vessel for improvisation.

## hooking up

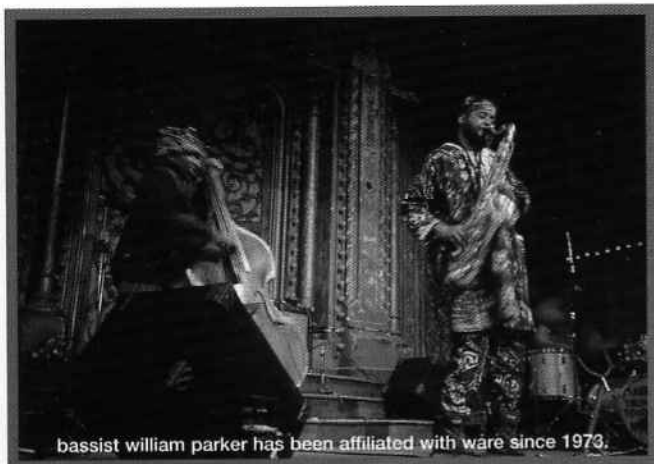
"I ain't hooking him up; he's hooking us up!" Branford Marsalis declares. The high-profile saxophonist, who with Pulitzer Prize-winning brother Wynton has been a mainstay of Columbia's jazz roster since the early 1980s, made signing Ware the first order of business when the label hired him as creative consultant for its jazz division last year. "I'm not that old, but I'm old enough to think back to the days of Miles and Trane — and Elton John and Billy Joel — and remember when record companies actually let artists have careers."

It's not the most obvious choice Marsalis could have made (such as inking a frequent bandmate, drummer Jeff "Tain" Watts). Especially given Columbia's tentative recent history with anything remotely tagged "avant-garde," as is often the phenomenally charged and compositionally open music made by Ware and his colleagues. Mordant visionary Henry Threadgill logged three critically acclaimed, if commercially ignored, discs before exiting the label last year. A decade and more back, a trio of promising reeds-players — Tim Berne, Jane Ira Bloom, and Arthur Blythe — had their fleeting moment, and guitarist James "Blood" Ulmer recorded three of his strongest discs for the label between 1983 and 1985. Ornette Coleman passed through in the mid-1970s, with *Science Fiction* and *Skies of America*. None of these artists built careers at Columbia — not like Miles, not like Bruce Springsteen, not like Bob Dylan, not like the Marsalis kin. The label was, instead, a brief stopover between other deals with European or Japanese imprints, or home-brewed concerns like Berne's do-it-yourself Screwgun label. The emergence of the latter is a sign of the times for the scrappiest players not plugged into the mainstream (including Ware, who made his previous disc for AUM Fidelity, one of several new-fangled indies with an eye on college radio and younger listeners who hear commonalities in such frontier genres as avant-jazz, techno and its variants, and the noisier reaches of rock).

But Marsalis expresses confidence that times can change. "It's not like we're gonna call David S. Ware and have him do the music of the Supremes or Stevie Wonder songs," Marsalis says, taking a crack at jazz marketing's vogue of "concept" productions. "We wanted to just erase the stockbroker mentality that has invaded the industry. If we can succeed, we can do a great job of getting the weight off of artists at other labels pressured to do dumb shit." The saxophonist first heard Ware's quartet playing three years ago at a festival in France and hastened to make his acquaintance. "He was playing 'Yesterdays.' He was going out, but I could hear the melody, dude! I thought, 'Wow. This is the shit I like!'"

"There's no Spice Girls factor here at all," Marsalis says. "No





bassist william parker has been affiliated with ware since 1973.

Hanson factor." There is, instead, the "Trane factor:

"David's music was always very strong," says bassist William Parker, who has anchored Ware's group for a decade, and who's been affiliated with the saxophonist since 1973, when they shared the stage in a Cecil Taylor big band. "He was coming from the highest spiritual place, the focus on where the music of Albert Ayler, John Coltrane, and Pharoah Sanders was centered from. He had the aesthetic of that music, the thing that made a lot of us interested in it later. That fire. That scream. That cry. That heart. That soul. There were a lot of tenor players at that time. David Murray had just got to town. Daniel Carter. Arthur Doyle. Marzette Watts. He had a sound that was really different from all of their sounds. He always had that deep, soulful, bluesy sound."

It's a sound largely rooted in the 1960s — extending the approaches Coltrane began tackling late in his career, amid controversy — and developed during the so-called "loft jazz" scene of the early 1970s, a loose network of performance spaces, galleries, and residences in downtown Manhattan that became a collective *salon des refusés* for the period's most adventurous musicians. Ware, along with musicians Gene Ashton (Cooper-Moore) and Marc Edwards, performed as the trio Apogee at spots like Sam Rivers' Studio RivBea and 501 Canal Street, where they lived. "When I began to play music in the Lower East Side, there were several camps of musicians," Parker says. "They were sort of loners in the community. They had their own thing working." Subsequent stints in the Cecil Taylor Unit (he performs on 1974's *Dark Unto Themselves*) and, in the '80s, Andrew Cyrille's group Maono, were key to Ware's development.

"Cecil was upset with me because I wasn't fully dealing with his written music," Ware says, looking back on a pivotal phase in his life. "I could easily have done that. He was upset with me because I took the approach that I did. Now I understand why. You know, learn to improvise through what's in front of you. You have plenty of time to go off on your own thing. You can do that in your own band. That's what I learned from him. I don't think I was ever cocky, but I had just a little bit more something to prove."

It doesn't take a prolonged investigation of Ware's catalog or more than a few minutes at one of his concerts to know that he's still making a case. Beyond the telepathic grace of his quartet, beyond the beatific barrage of his horn, beyond the illuminated filaments of

melody exploding into fireworks or darting as quietly as a lightning bug, there's a core of idealism that pulses like a heartbeat.

"You can't write a love letter in somebody else's words, you have to use your own words," says Joe Morris, the Boston-based guitarist who has recorded frequently with musicians in Ware's circle and who wrote the liner notes for Ware's new album. "Maybe the recipient doesn't understand them, maybe they're too complicated or not complicated enough. But that's where David's originality lies: He's stripped everything away from the music so much that it just sounds like him."

This is music made by a man who wants to stand the planet on its ear, and in the troubled, complex, and irrefutable long march of jazz through the century, what other kind of individual made any difference at all?

## saying it out loud

"I could let it go unsaid," Ware begins. It is early afternoon, and we are sitting at a table on the screened porch of his home in Plainfield, New Jersey, the house he grew up in privy to his father's 78s of Billie Holiday, Illinois Jacquet, and Coleman Hawkins. Ware considers every word, often repeating a phrase several times for emphasis or suddenly raising the soft, sandpapery tone of his voice to underscore something he feels is definitive. The effect, when Ware gets flowing, is similar to a Baptist preacher's Sunday oratory, with resonant pauses, earnest reflection, and iron conviction. "If I talk about it, people might read it wrong. I don't want to have it read wrong. So now, I'll give it to you, about John Coltrane: I have this desire, so to speak. I would like to have his mantle — his mantle of creativity for the tenor saxophone. Coltrane's mantle. Thirty years ago, I heard this phrase: Coltrane's mantle. Now what does that mean? That means a lot of things.

"It means how deep an effect your music has on people's psyche. You know, it means recognition. You know, it means stature. There's nobody who has gone beyond the stature of John Coltrane as the saxophone goes. Not even Charlie Parker."

Not everyone who hears Ware's playing appreciates his heartfelt ambition. The intensity of his blowing freaks people out. They denounce him on the Internet. They furrow their brows during jazz festivals and wonder when Kevin Eubanks is coming on. They miss the melodic complexities encrypted in every gust. People didn't get Coltrane — English poet laureate Philip Larkin once detected in his music "a new inhumanity" — or Parker, either. They might be surprised to learn that Ware prizes logic. His skronk is architectural.

"Melody!" Ware exclaims. "You can't escape melody. How you gonna get beyond melody? It's ridiculous. It's a myriad of things you can do with a melody, but I don't see how you gonna play music and you don't have no melody."

A delightful conference among the birds, flitting amid the overgrown shrubs, seems to affirm Ware's thesis.





Nearby, Bebe and Mikuro, the two Shibas (an economy-sized, Japanese canine breed) the musician shares with his wife, Setsuo, amuse themselves. "Her name means Black Beauty," he says, petting Mikuro, inspiration for the blues that leads off *Go See the World*.

It's a domestic oasis — calm interrupted only by an occasional phone call with details about a Finnish festival date — but the topic has Ware amped up. "When I listen to certain records... no, I'm sorry," Ware frowns, addressing some wayward someone, not mentioning any names now. "Your composition sense is nonexistent. You need a framework to work out of. You can't work from nothin'! If you don't have that natural sense of building a composition when you play, you better write it down in front of you, then. Some of us have some strange ideas about the avant-garde: It's about how loud you can play, how long you can play. I don't know, these ideas exist. All ideas of being musical, sometimes, I feel are just thrown out the window. I don't quite understand where this comes from, some kind of purist idea.

"A strong reason why this music is not accepted on the level that it could be accepted is because some of it lacks any kind of intelligent structure. I don't mean you can't have spontaneous structures. That's fine, but it's got to be musical. Melody, harmony — you can't escape these things. Motifs. You can't escape that. It's got to have some of that. If it hasn't got some of that, you might as well bang on some garbage cans. Throw some stones. Break some glass."

With that credo in his heart, Ware ventures as far as his imagination and his cardiovascular system will take him. It's rooted in his crucial relationship with the man who knows more about melody and improvisation than nearly anyone in jazz.

"I received letters from Sonny when I was in junior high school," Ware says, recalling how he first came to know Sonny Rollins, after a music buddy met the tenor legend at a concert and told him what a big fan this young saxophonist was. One day the adolescent Ware, who frequented Rollins' gigs at the Village Vanguard and the Five Spot, happened upon his hero at a fruit stand and asked if he could play for him. "And we started hanging out together. It was very simple. I used to go over and play for him sometimes. Or he would rent a loft space, and we'd go in and practice for two or three hours. He did nothing but encourage me to keep going. Sonny was involved in yoga philosophy, and that certainly influenced me. I was interested in anything he was interested in because he was that type of figure for me. So the parallel with music and spirituality was always very important for me. I started looking things up. That whetted me for a whole Eastern way of thinking. It's all about creativity, connecting and integrating a creative force in your life, trying to maintain an open approach

to the music rather than be limited by what someone else thinks."

And Rollins? He hears a kindred spirit. "I don't want to sound self-serving," he says, "but I heard me in some of his playing. I wouldn't have him coming around if he wasn't a really real person. I know it hasn't been a straight line to acceptance for him, but he keeps that vision, and I'm all for that."

"David hasn't played anybody's game, and a lot of people resent him for that," says pianist Matthew Shipp, who got his first break when

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he was invited to join the quartet in 1990. "When someone's a maverick and that powerful at the same time, then it really scares some people. Despite the fact that he's signed to Columbia, he doesn't play the jazz game. He doesn't play the 'Downtown' game. He stays in Jersey."

Actually, he doesn't. In fact, Ware tries to explore the growing, grass-roots circuit of colleges, churches, and alternative spaces that has begun connecting the music of the saxophonist

and his peers with a burgeoning Gen-X audience. And when Ware ventures out, he makes an impression. Leading his quartet in an hour-long set during the third annual Vision Festival in New York last May, the saxophonist cut a visual swath in bright blue African-style garb and sneakers like floppy moon boots.

"I call David the heavyweight champion of the tenor saxophone," says Roy Campbell, the versatile trumpeter (Other Dimensions in Music, Pyramid Trio) who, as the show's emcee, cracked wise about Ware being left off the *Godzilla* soundtrack. And indeed, Ware is massive, in the exact way that, say, James Brown was massive, that Muhammad Ali was massive. Except that the extroverted wallop of his horn is only equal to the introspective focus that guides it. Watching the group play from the side of the stage, it's like what you imagine electrons do as a tornado is spawned. The vortical tumult approaches rapture, then swirls slowly down an underlying melodic helix, Parker's bass thrumming like God's footstep, Shipp's fistfuls of dark, scattered keys keeping the floorboards nailed down, Ibarra's drum kit a ceaseless splash of color and texture.

But forget metaphors and similes, particle physics and meteorology, mathematics and mysticism, calculations of miles per hour — all the systems and strategies we use to make the abstract concrete and the intangible tangible. It's all pretty simple, really, what we're talking about when we talk about the David S. Ware Quartet.

"The naked passion," says Morris. "There's nothing hidden in this music. Those guys bare their souls when they play, and that is not trendy. These days everybody's reserved. Everybody's trying to be detached. I always thought that being boldly sincere and passionate and plainly stating your deepest feelings is the coolest thing you can do, and I think those guys agree. That's soul to me." ♦

*Steve Dollar is chief pop-music critic for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. He writes frequently for JAZZIZ.*

**David S. Ware *Go See the World* (Columbia)**