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TOUCHING ON THE TRANSCENDENTAL

**Tenor titan David S. Ware leads one of the most enduring bands in avant-garde jazz, his music fueled by an awareness of the cosmic self and the common language of sound.
Story by Ed Hazell, Photos by Michael Galinsky**



There's a Sufi adage that says one should be "in the world, but not of it." If any musician has tried to live up to that ideal, it's saxophonist David S. Ware. His quartet's new 3-CD set of concert recordings is called *Live in the World*, but according to Ware the music comes from a place that is not of it, it comes from a transcendent spiritual plain. "For me, this is what life on earth is supposed to be about. It's supposed to be going toward a higher reality," he says. "For me, the spiritual gives meaning to what I do. The playing, the traveling, and all the hard times — it gives it all meaning."

The meaning of his music and his intent for it are the keys to understanding Ware's art and its overwhelming urgency. The technical or formal aspects of what he does, the way he composes, the way his long-established quartet works together — in other words, the worldly aspects of his art — are important. But with Ware, as with any artist working in the lineage of John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, and Pharoah Sanders, if you don't pay attention to what he says about the spiritual motivations and metaphysical content of his music, you not only miss critical reasons the music takes the shape that it does, you also miss his point.

"I want to ignite people, like you ignite a fire," Ware says of his intentions for the music. "I want them to walk away, in a sense, ignited on some level, so that they can manifest changes in their lives. The music is supposed to make people think and to try to raise their awareness and consciousness up towards the Supreme Being or the supreme reality. I want the music to move them to the point where they want to enter into and stay in that world of beauty all the time. This is why I play music. For me, music has always run parallel with spirituality."

Wrestling with problems of spirituality in a material world — being in the world, but not of it — is as ancient as humanity's first imaginings of a higher power — and as universal. It is Ware's particular genius to travel across the interface between the material and spiritual worlds along the intertwining paths of Eastern religions and African American music and to make out of this journey some of today's most invigorating and demanding music. The dynamic relationship between the physical and metaphysical at the heart of the music on *Live in the World* is the key to its joyfulness, its cathartic energy, its turbulence and fluidity, its discipline and clarity, its dreadful otherworldliness, and its touching humanity.

The third disc in the new Thirsty Ear set features a version of Sonny Rollins' 1958 classic, *Freedom Suite*, recorded in Milan in 2003. It exemplifies the way Ware manipulates his material for deeper spiritual content. "We did 'Freedom Suite' a number of times throughout Europe," Ware says. "On this particular concert, we decided that we'd

been doing it a certain way, a certain way, a certain way, so let's try to open it up even more and break up the form a little bit. That's exactly what happened in that concert, we broke up the form and built various parts of it differently that we had. During the concert, I knew that we touched on the transcendental several times as we played it. Sometimes you don't realize what you're touching upon, but this is one of those rare occasions when we did realize that we were touching on the transcendental. The music transcended, it went beyond itself, it went beyond playing music and it touched upon the spiritual plane.

"This is one of the ultimate things in musical experience, to touch upon that universal, that cosmic reality, that makes us all related," Ware continues. "That makes us, all human beings on this planet, truly brothers and sisters. When they say 'self' in Yoga, they mean God; they don't mean the small, individual self, but the larger cosmic Self. This is what makes us all brothers and sisters. This is why you should love your neighbor as yourself, because on that spiritual level it is yourself. Not the outer self, but the inner most being is the same in all of us. That's what the music touched."

Ware selected the music on the two other discs — a 1998 concert from Chiasso, Switzerland with Susie Ibarra on drums, and a 2003 concert from Terni, Italy featuring Hamid Drake on drums — because he feels it also touches on the transcendental.

On "Mikuro's Blues" from the Chiasso concert, Ware sculpts radiant phrases that flow inexorably toward a climactic revelation in sound. That same session yields a majestic outpouring from Ware on "The Way We Were" From Terni, Ware's solo on "Elder's Path" seems driven simultaneously inward and upward as linear melodic variations give way to deeply contoured waves of abstract sound. "Manu's Ideal" is steeped in deep sorrow and grief that crests into a healing surge of compassion and consolation. In many ways, Shipp is the bedrock around and over which the music flows. His shifting textures and chords of contrasting densities and colors roll in wavelike motions behind Ware on the Chiasso version of "Aquarian Sound." His interplay with Parker and Ibarra is magically close on "Logistic," with beautifully synchronized motion between a stated and implied beat. Parker feints and darts beneath them, creating rhythmic tensions as his lines move in across the music's pulse. His arco bass shadows the movements and contours of Ware's tenor in a remarkable display of empathy on "Sentient Compassion" from the Terni concert. Each drummer brings something different to the group and modifies its character. One of the great pleasures of the set is hearing how each one navigates an individual path through the music.

On every track, each member of the quartet is free to explore, yet tethered to a core that keeps them circling in coherent formations at all times. There is an equally of expression and a sense of collective storytelling as strong as any that's existed in improvised music, a jigsaw of individual voices that fits together seamlessly. One reason for the quartet's strength as a collective is Ware's method of putting the music together. It's a method that acknowledges both the composer's intent and the performer's essential value in realizing that intent. Arrangements are often created by playing and working through ideas in rehearsal; they feel spontaneous because they are. In addition, this lends the group a signature sound because the material is a natural outgrowth of the musical personalities that developed them.

"David has a pretty big scope as a composer and even his most minimal sketches suggest so much that I'm just going off what he gives to us," Shipp says. "He hired us because of our styles, so I think there's a premise at the very beginning that stylistically we match up and he can trust whatever we come up with. Sometimes he does have very specific ideas; he'll want a certain bass line or a certain style of bass line or a certain form of accompaniment. I can start out using a staccato jazzy sort of accompaniment and he'll say, 'Now, I don't want that, I want more of a rolling sound, more of a sustained sound.' Sometimes he'll come in with a line, because a lot of his things are just lines, and we come up with a progression, although sometimes he does have a harmonic structure. It differs from composition to composition."

"He really created his own language within the common language of sound," Parker observes. "He's doing things his way without feeding directly off of what people have done in the past. He puts the music together in a way that's similar to the way Cecil [Taylor] puts his music together — in phrases — but it comes out differently. He doesn't put together a 32 bar song, but phrases that are connected and not really regulated by a set of changes. David doesn't really play off changes, but off melody. Melody can imply harmonic changes, but also rhythmic changes. And we follow the thrust of the music, the propulsion of the music that goes into upper registers of sound."

"In concert, David never tells you what you're going to play before you play it," Parker continues. "You have a whole big book of tunes, and you never know what you're going to play, never tells you how it's going to be played or when. After the rehearsals, it's pretty open as you what you have to do. There's a trust in there that you can do the right thing or the music will guide you do to the right thing in the performance of the music itself. That's where he's coming from. One of the things I got reinforced about working with David, is

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that you really don't have to know everything that's going on. Everything does not have to resolve itself. Sometimes you're stepping into this world of music where you don't know what's going to happen. It's a world with its own sense of poetry, of story, of color, and timing, and beauty.

"And it's not just the material, the intervals, the sound," Parker concludes. "David's music reconfirms for me, that it's not just the information that sets the music free. It doesn't really matter what note you play; I'm really convinced of that. It's how it's played and who you are. They are the most important thing in making the music come to life. That's the thing — the key to David's music is David. You really feel like there's something special happening when David is playing. I can't really explain it. He's got a gift to rise the music up."

To make the music rise up, the group must have highly developed and disciplined instrumental technique, and musicianship that can draw equally on intuition and intellect. But Ware emphasizes that it's really the spiritual elements that make the music ascend. "The essential way — not the technical way — to grow in music is through consciousness," Ware believes. "Of course, I have to practice because I have to be prepared on the technical, on the physical level, but the basis of music is beyond all that. It's like the secret ingredient. Knowledge is structured in consciousness and when you're dealing with purer consciousness, different lines can be related because they're taking place on that same spiritual plane. It's part of that transcendental conversation. It's very possible to be in harmony like that because there's a knowingness that's present when you deal with pure consciousness. When I say that, I don't mean aware of the instrument or aware of the audience, I mean Pure Consciousness or God. That's the metaphysical part of it. The forces of nature bring that together, the intelligence that exists in nature brings people together and they do what they have to do together."

Ware's twin odysseys — musical and spiritual — began during his childhood, growing up in Scotch Plains, NJ. Now 56 years old, Ware knew he wanted to be a musician when he was 12. John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins (with whom Ware has long been friends) were particular favorites. He was also a spiritual searcher at a young age, rejecting organized Christianity in favor of Yoga. "I went to church when I was very young, but that didn't work for me," he says. "I began to see through that very early. There was a lot of hypocritical stuff going on. Outrageous stuff, like people stealing money from the collection plate. But besides that, what they were actually teaching, I couldn't buy it, I couldn't buy it. My consciousness was not able to

deal with that teaching, so I went on to explore Yoga and meditation. I've been into that ever since."

The musically gifted and spiritually questing teenager moved to Boston in 1967, where he attended Berklee College of Music, but paid frequent visits to New York. In 1971, he met drummer Marc Edwards and pianist Gene Ashton (a.k.a. Cooper-Moore) and they formed a free jazz group called Apogee, which at first devoted itself to free improvisation and later began performing compositions. (The 1977 hat Hut album *Birth of a Being* is essentially an Apogee recording released as the David S. Ware Trio.) After Ware moved to New York in 1973, the city's black spiritual energy music players quickly noticed him. Besides working with Apogee, he was a member of Andrew Cyrille's Maono from 1975 to 1981 and the Cecil Taylor Unit in 1976 and 1977.

Ware and Parker first met in a Cecil Taylor big band that played at Carnegie Hall in 1974. Over the following years, their paths intersected at jam sessions at Studio Rivbea and 501 Canal Street, where several musicians, including Ware and Cooper-Moore, lived. "We would always talk and I highly respected David because he was very serious about the music," Parker remembers. "He was getting to the essences of sound. He was going for the upper areas of improvisation and vibrations. He knew the language of saxophone and you could hear it without him playing the whole thing; you could hear it in his sound. It's the same when you play the blues, you don't have to play the form, you can hear it in the sound. Anyone who heard David in the '70s knew that he was the one who was going to go all the way. He had the strongest sound, he was into Yoga, had some religious studies, and was going down that particular road. So coming out of listening to Ayler and Coltrane, if you wanted to get in that particular area, you would try to get David."

Ware would often leave the scene to woodshed, study (the *Bhagavad Gita* is a favorite text), and meditate, but by the late '80s, he felt ready to attempt presenting his music again. He formed the trio with Parker and drummer Marc Edwards that eventually recorded *Passage to Music* in 1987 for Silkheart. In late 1989, Ware decided he wanted a pianist in the group and hired Shipp on the recommendations of both Parker and bassist Reggie Workman. "Since David and I played the first time, it was like we'd been working together our whole lives," Shipp says. "I have my own groups, my own ideas, but I feel this natural affinity for orchestrating his ideas. It gives me the joy of being able to work with my music within his music. He gives me a lot of freedom to be myself. I'm playing his music, but I'm being myself. It brings out another aspect of myself that doesn't come out playing my own music all the time. It's a

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left to right:
William Parker, David S. Ware,
Guillermo E. Brown, Matthew Shipp

situation that I'm comfortable with, but I have to go outside myself.”

The story of Ware's quartet since their Silkheart recording debut, *The Great Bliss Project, Volumes 1 and 2*, in 1990 is one of intensifying concentration and focus. He's packed away the manzello and stritch that he played early in the quartet's life and now plays only tenor. He turns down sideman gigs and performs exclusively with the quartet or its members. Founding members Parker and Shipp have stayed on board as several drummers for various reasons have come and gone. The original drummer, Marc Edwards, was followed by Whit Dickey (from 1992 to 1996), Susie Ibarra (from 1996-1999), and finally Guillermo Brown, who is currently with the group.

This relative stability — Ware has kept the band working for an amazing 15 years — has helped them develop a concept that has moved well beyond its roots in the free jazz of the 1960s. “We're considered a free jazz band, but once you get to that point where there's a compositional body of work and a specific band that's played them through the years, you're not really dealing with the mindset that you usually consider to be free jazz,” says Shipp. “It's a very, very focused way of dealing with the music.

Not unlike how Monk dealt with his world, his thing. It's an approach that not many people take these days. But that utter focus is there. David's whole thing is geared toward his quartet. His compositions and his world view as reflected in the music. His universe is about his band, his compositions, or other people's compositions that work in his language. That's his vision, that's how he lives his life, he doesn't deal with anything else.”

The group is also able to draw on a wide pool of resources, stylistic references, and techniques to enrich and extend the music's range. “I think that in this period of the music, everything from the '60s, along with other aspects of traditional jazz, world music, and classical music probably enter into it,” says Shipp. “Of course, it's hard to say world music aspects, because Coltrane and others have played with African drummers and things like that, but I'd say that elements of classical music and other musics, probably enter the music in more overt ways. Because we've had this period where we've had a chance to digest all this, the instruments in the group don't always fall into the proscribed roles.”

None of these musical considerations would mean much to Ware, if they weren't in service to a higher pur-

pose. In fact, these days he makes a religious offering of the fruits of his labors in the world. “Fairly recently, I've given my music over to a force of nature called Ganesh,” Ware says, referring to the elephant-headed Hindu deity who appears on the cover of *Live in the World*. “I've given my music over to him because I've reached a point spiritually where I feel like it's silly for me to play for myself. It's silly, man, because I'm an individual. It's not about me; it's about what's coming through me. And it's silly to play for oneself, I'm playing for a spiritual being who is so intimately connected to this world, it's unbelievable. Ganesh is not some figure sitting out in space; he's within you. He's within everyone and you contact him within. He is of us and we are of him. It's the beautiful thing about the Vedic teachings: It's not about belief and it's not about faith, it's about experiencing directly for yourself these beings. So this music is an offering to Lord Ganesh. He's also the lord of arts of science and of music, so I'm very certain that he will be pleased with it.”

Live in the World is available now on *Thirsty Ear*. Ed Hazell wrote about the *Revolutionary Ensemble* in *STN#35*