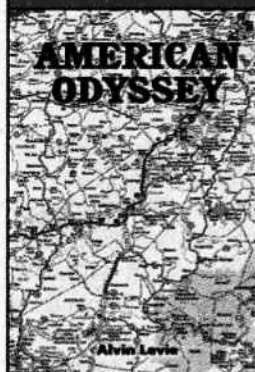


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MUSIC

Quartet for the End of Time

BRIAN MORTON

DAVID S. WARE

When David Spencer Ware was a baby, his mother pronounced a blessing over him. *Go See the World* became the title of the saxophonist's first major-label record, for Columbia. Now, his new three-CD set suggests that he may have taken her mission statement a step further. It's possible, of course, to read

a title like *Live in the World* in two ways. On one level it's straightforwardly descriptive—these are live dates recorded in Switzerland and Italy. But it also sounds like an injunction not to overlook the near-at-hand.

That might strike an unexpected note for those who know—or think they know—Ware as a remote, otherworldly artist. The inside jacket of *Live in the World* (Thirsty Ear) features a passionate prayer to Lord Ganesh, one of the five principal Hindu deities. And Ware has long had a penchant for allusions to the cosmos, karmic responsibilities and occult rhythms. But let's be clear: However mystical and spiritually inclined, David Ware is also profoundly committed to the basic mechanics of jazz music, its nuts and bolts, and its history. This is, after all, a man whose absorption in Eastern religions and Vedic astrology is balanced by a passion for the race cars he used to watch throwing up dust around Plainfield, New Jersey—a spiritualist who has spent much of his spare time shooting his rifle at target ranges.

A casual exposure to some of Ware's earlier records—*Flight of I* (1991), *Third Ear Recitation* (1992) and *Earthquation* (1995) or the titanic *Godspelized* (1998)—might lead you to think that his work merely picks up where John Coltrane left off. The fact that Ware has worked for the past fifteen years in the same format as the classic Coltrane quartet—tenor saxophone, piano, bass, drums—does little to dispel this impression. Not surprisingly, he is often described as a latter-day exponent of the restless, questing, avant-garde jazz of the 1960s known as Fire Music, and as an heir to its Holy Trinity—Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders and Albert Ayler. It's an association that irritates him, despite his abundant admiration for these musicians, because his think-

ing has evolved beyond their often troubled investigations and because his influences are much more various and also more traditional in nature.

Listen closer to Ware's stentorian tenor and you will hear unmistakable echoes of Coleman Hawkins and Ben Webster, the two figures who arguably gave his instrument its authority as a solo voice in jazz. You will also hear echoes of that great 1960s eccentric, the multireedist Rahsaan Roland Kirk, who was especially fond of those bastard children of the saxophone family, the manzello and the stritch, and who was among the first musicians to call jazz "black classical music." Playing those uncertainly pitched horns, as Ware did in his early solo efforts, might have been a creative blind alley. Kirk's cultural pride certainly was not.

Yet these influences go only so far in explaining Ware's art, which comes from a place deep within, the result of constant practice and experiment rather than evenings studying old *Impulse!* records. It was not until the mid-1980s, when he was well into his 30s, that he developed his mature style—comparatively late for a jazz musician. The era of high-velocity, cacophonous loft jazz was coming to an end, and Ware began deliberately to slow down his previously dense harmonic thinking so that the contours of chords and the dramatic topography of a song could emerge from the mists. No longer interested in simply developing his own version of the extreme chromaticism and microtonality associated with Coltrane, Sanders and Ayler, he started to analyze the basic intervals that make up jazz and to re-examine their role in his improvisation, in search of a musical language that was still profound and expressive but also more straightforward.

At the same time, he began to rethink jazz's use of standard song forms, much as Coltrane did with his extraordinary decon-

Brian Morton is the co-author of *The Penguin Guide to Jazz* on CD.

structions of Broadway songs like "My Favorite Things" and "The Inch Worm." But where Coltrane took a Rodgers and Hammerstein tune, bent it to the wayward pitching of a soprano saxophone, stretched it extravagantly and made it sound like some mournful Indian raga, Ware has taken songs like "Autumn Leaves," "Tenderly" and "The Way We Were" and made them sound almost symphonic. Thanks to his phenomenal saxophone technique, which allows him to imply chords as well as single lines, and his empathy with the group, he is able to develop simultaneous lines of musical inquiry rather than simply running through a song's harmonic structure. And yet he never loses track of the song. Refined, linear and firmly anchored in a structure even at his most intense and frantic, Ware's approach to standards owes less to Coltrane than to his mentor Sonny Rollins, the forgotten giant of post-war American jazz.

David Ware was born in New Jersey in 1949. At the age of 9 he began playing saxophone—literally playing, by his own account: no tunes, no structure, no accompaniment, just the solitary sound of a horn. It's a discipline he has explored on occasion since, as on the unaccompanied *From Silence to Music* (1978) and *Live in the Netherlands* (2001). At 17 Ware enrolled at the Berklee School of Music in Boston and began a period of formal training. He appeared on record for the first time in 1968, on a session called *The Third World* led by alto saxophonist and flautist Abdul Hannan. Along with pianist Cooper-Moore and drummer Marc Edwards, Ware formed a group called Apogee, which also seems to have recorded. In 1973 Ware moved to New York City and distinguished himself in some of the best free-jazz groups of the day, including pianist Cecil Taylor's Unit and the drummer Andrew Cyrille's brilliant Maono ensemble.

Not until 1977 did Ware make an album under his own name. *The Birth of a Being* was issued on Hat Hut, a new label based in Switzerland, after Ware's work with the Unit came to the attention of the label's owner, Werner Uehlinger, a sponsor of Taylor's music. The following year Ware recorded a set of solo saxophone pieces and saxophone/cello duets with Jean-Charles Capon for the tiny European label Palm. These associations established a pattern still reflected in the provenance

of the *Live in the World* tapes—Chiasso in Switzerland, Terni and Milan in Italy. Like many of his predecessors, Ware has long been as well-known across the Atlantic as at home, and perhaps more widely admired, and he spends much of his time in Paris.

What's more significant about the solo pieces on Palm's *From Silence to Music* is that apart from the significantly titled "From Deep Within," they are all still standard repertory songs—"Deep Purple," "Prelude to a Kiss" and Jimmy Van Heusen's "It Could Happen to You"—a clear sign



David S. Ware

that even before his major stylistic overhaul Ware was thinking in terms of conventional structures, however unconventionally played.

Living in the world is not always easy, and the period from 1978–88 were lean years for Ware. Though he practiced continually and clocked up important credits with Cyrille and a range of European improvisers, he was forced to earn his living as a messenger, delivery man and taxi driver. In 1988 Ware struck out anew, releasing his own *Passage to Music* on Silkheart, the first in a series of markedly personal albums. The quartet on *Live in the World* is essentially the group he has worked with since his Silkheart debut. It was a trio before the pianist Matthew Shipp came on board to record *Great Bliss: Volume 1 & 2* in 1990. The band's anchor is William Parker, arguably the most influential bassist in free jazz today, and perhaps the most prolific. Like Ware,

he has explored freedom and structure in equal measure, and has performed both as a soloist and as a leader of his own groups, notably the Little Huey Creative Music Orchestra, an enormous ensemble of improvisers. Parker's sonorous articulation is in a direct line from classic bassists like Jimmy Blanton, keystone of the greatest Duke Ellington band; Wilbur Ware, who worked with Thelonious Monk and Sonny Rollins; and Paul Chambers, one of the stars of Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* quintet. A stalwart from the Apogee days, Marc Edwards was the first drummer, replaced in turn by Whit Dickey, Susie Ibarra, Hamid Drake and Guillermo E. Brown, the latter three of whom appear on *Live in the World*.

Each of these fine percussionists brings a different sensibility to the Ware quartet, from florid (Ibarra), to fiery (Drake), to deliberately understated (Brown). Yet all of them are keenly attuned in their individual ways to Ware's peculiar demands. The role of the percussionist in Ware's groups is not so much to propel Ware's playing as to surround it with rhythmic energy—to draw an analogy with the Coltrane bands of the mid-1960s, it's more like Rashied Ali's role than Elvin Jones's. Instead of playing one meter against another—the essence of Jones's poly-rhythmic approach—they seem to play several simultaneously and in such a way as to give the music a rich, complex pulse that is virtually impossible to count off in the conventional way. All three perform superbly and idiomatically.

There's some older material here—"Elder's Path" from *Passage to Music*, "Co Co Cana" from the mid-1990s—but Ware's approach has become more open and loose-limbed, his sound less clotted, particularly in the quartet's joyful rendition of Sonny Rollins's classic 1958 "Freedom Suite." In a nearly twenty-minute performance of "The Way We Were," the band transforms the song made famous by Barbra Streisand into a thing of brooding, turbulent majesty. Throughout the record, Ware and his bandmates call on a shared pool of ideas and structures. Shipp is a masterful accompanist, offering the kind of harmonic sophistication McCoy Tyner brought to the Coltrane quartet, but also something of Cecil Taylor's rhythmic dissonance. In recent years, Shipp has flirted with electronic keyboards, but the miracle of his approach is that he is able to create the same ambiguous

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tonality and multilayered sound on a conventional (and sometimes, as on one of these dates, a not very responsive) piano. He bends and splits the harmonies in exactly the way that percussionists multiply their rhythms. He and bassist William Parker put in especially strong solos on the second and third parts of "Freedom Suite," but it's their ensemble work that's most impressive.

The same applies to Ware himself. One of the more obvious differences between the 1998 material and the Italian concerts five years later is how even and contained his articulation has become, how fluidly it meshes with the rhythm section. There's no less fury, but his lines have become much less abstract, and he seems more interested in playing with his band than in towering above it by the sheer force of his horn. Like a number of critics, I cynically assumed that the more "inside" approach on Ware's disappointing *Surrendered*, his last record for Columbia, reflected the wishes of the label. Judging by these performances, he was moving in that direction entirely on his own—and without compromising his art in the least.

Live in the World is a valuable document from a musician who is now in his mid-50s but still too often treated like an up-and-coming talent. Lord Ganesh seems exactly the right tutelary deity for the record and for the career as a whole. The son of Shiva and Parvati, he is the god of success, knowledge and education, the sweeper away of evils and obstacles. The broken tusk he carries in his right hand is the instrument he used to inscribe the Mahabharata, a damaged symbol of sacrifice. He rides on the back of a mouse, a surreal and anomalous image but a reminder of the elephant god's basic humility and his unexpected lightness.

Like the elephant and his trunk—depicted as a saxophone on the cover of *Live in the World*—the man and his horn now seem indivisible. Ware's music breaks down the artificial obstacles that still separate "avant-garde" jazz from the mainstream. He can journey for many illuminating minutes on a pop theme as common as a mouse. And in the course of a career that has involved considerable sacrifice and humility, he has created a body of work that is—uniquely on the current scene—epic. His work doesn't just fulfill the mission his mother bequeathed him but extends it: not just to see the world, but to live in it, fully and intensely, aware that it's not the only reality, simply the most immediately pressing one. ■

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