

## GREAT CIRCLE SAXOPHONE QUARTET

New World Records 80516

"The last thing the world needs is another sax quartet disc."<sup>1</sup>

This was my initial (and perhaps overly sarcastic) reaction after receiving a cassette of this disc. What I really meant, I think, was, "who would ever want to hear a CD of saxophone quartet pieces by virtually unknown musicians?"

But upon reflection I realized that three of the members of the Great Circle Saxophone Quartet may already be familiar to some listeners, as participants on Gamelan Sekar Jaya's wonderful *American Works for Balinese Gamelan Orchestra* (New World Records 80430-2), where the somewhat equally tempered tuning of the European saxophone is pitted against a set of beautiful Balinese gong-chimes. Immediately you have a situation that puts this sax choir miles above the usual variety of French conservatory types or chord-change jazzbos that often make up such groups. Also, the members of the GCSQ have, at one time or another, played with such notable sound artists as Pauline Oliveros, Anthony Braxton, and Cecil Taylor, in addition to participating in numerous unusual situations. These guys enjoy a challenge.

Because I was such a cocky SOB to my friends,<sup>2</sup> I have been given the great privilege of leading you, *the listener*, through this marvelous recording (as long as I avoid using the word "searing" to describe any of the music herein). So, rather than boring you with a blow-by-blow account of the music, or worse yet, prolonging the agony by writing a Beat poem of my feelings while listening to this music,<sup>3</sup> I'll tell you a bit about what went into the formation of the group and what led to this particular recording (or at least my impressions about them).

As you may have already guessed, I've known each of the quartet members for some time. Dan Plonsey I've known the longest--ten years now. Next would be Randy McKean: nine years. Both are friends from Mills College in Oakland, California. (Before I go any further, you should know that Mills College was a magnet for saxophonists/composers, due largely to Anthony Braxton's presence on the faculty. This information may prove useful later in the liner notes.) Chris Jonas and I met through Randy and Dan, and I got to know his playing through their original saxophone unit, which was known simply as Smokehouse (named after an East Bay fast food joint).

In the late eighties, Smokehouse (Jonas, McKean, Plonsey and Mtafiti Imara) began the long incubation period that each creative music ensemble must go through before it begins to realize its potential. As usual, it meant lots of writing, seemingly endless rehearsing, and occasional performing for little or no money. At some point the group became SPONJ (a somewhat acronymic title) before Jonas and McKean relocated to the East Coast. Finally, with the addition of Boston-based Steve Norton, they became the Great Circle Saxophone Quartet. (Before I forget, Steve Norton and I met by mail about eight years ago, in a strange set of circumstances involving a radio station in Corvallis, Oregon.)

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<sup>1</sup> Then again, the world needs liner notes even less!

<sup>2</sup> Also, because I don't really care for the sound of the saxophone, preferring instead the timbre of the bass clarinet and electric guitar, the GCSQ thought I would be able to bring something unique to the saxophone quartet's liner notes.

<sup>3</sup> see Ralph J. Gleason's liner notes to Miles Davis' recording *ESP* (Columbia)

It's no use talking about their musical influences when we live in an age where any style of music is available at any time. To do so would only bias your ear into a particular commercial pigeonhole. Instead, I'd like to begin more generally, perhaps in a sentence, with what I've noticed informs each of them:

Randy McKean: a budding absurdist fiction writer who can read logic into the logicless, a skill quite useful when composing and improvising.

Dan Plonsey: a fascination with the preposterous and a love of the silly, but with a gift for true intellectual inquiry into both.

Chris Jonas: a serious student of the visual arts and their intuitive correlations with sound.

Steve Norton: Enchanted, as both Ives and Webern were, by the minutiae of information particulars, while holding an interest in the extremes of irrationality.

Together their focus has been to work within the narrow timbral range of the saxophone. By narrow, I mean that it always *sounds* like a saxophone.<sup>4</sup> They already know the work of the great saxophonists, and are, as a result, more interested in being composers and musicians than just facile technicians on their instruments. This, I believe, puts the GCSQ in a unique category. As both players and composers, they aspire to create a new voice for the saxophone ensemble that neither falls into the obvious Jazz associations (the capital *J* referring to the revered forms that populate tobacco- and alcohol-sponsored festivals, television commercials, and so forth; music by those to whom Anthony Braxton has referred as "stylists") nor relies on the novelty aspect of four saxes playing conventional pop or classical transcriptions.<sup>5</sup>

My favorite example of their aspirations for this ensemble is Steve Norton's composition *A Hole in the Sky*. Although originally orchestrated for his group Debris (drums, guitar, cello, and sax), the GCSQ version immediately takes off in its own direction. Melodic lines are sharpened. Rhythms are clarified. It is completely engaging--a new piece of music that you just happen to know the melody to.

(For those inclined to ask, *A Hole in the Sky* gets its title from the lyrics of a tune by The Pixies.)

*Child King Dictator Fool* is a concept disc, perhaps in the same way that *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* was for the Beatles. Each of the pieces was created separately; each piece has its own rules, forms, and guidelines, but was conceived with an overall group awareness and focus. The

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<sup>4</sup> This seemingly flip comment refers to how such divergent players as Ornette Coleman, Marshall Allen, Evan Parker, and John Butcher have expanded the range of the saxophone, thus upping the ante for the aspiring sax student and listener.

<sup>5</sup> The exploitation of the novelty aspect of ensembles of similar instrumentation is a common pitfall, whether it be sax groups, percussion ensembles, or mandolin quartets. The temptation is always there to play music that was never intended for a given group of instruments, thus (in my opinion) cheapening the overall aesthetic experience of such groups. Help stamp out transcriptions!

performances are not merely readings of highly notated works. They are informed renderings from a group of individuals who have a shared (or at least agreed-upon) outlook. In one sense, this disc merely exists as an artifact of what the group does. They do not exist to make records, but rather to share in the intellectual and visceral pursuit of musical creation.

As a concept work, the title of the CD may describe each of the players' roles at any given time, in any given situation--but in constant flux (anyone with children will understand). For instance, the composer of a fully notated work may be assuming the role of King or Dictator (in a similar way that the rise of the symphony orchestra coincided with the industrial revolution). Or one may simply play the role of the child (or fool!), innocently observing the play of relationships in a more open-ended structure, such as McKean's *Son of Splorb*.<sup>6</sup>

Chris Jonas describes his *Snake Tectonics* as a "strategy for improvisation." In this instance, it is only through mutually shared exploration and rehearsal that such strategies can successfully exist as sound beyond the notated page. *Snake Tectonics* gives the players a chance to take either an independent or supportive role in the piece, and indicates specific points where players can change their focus from the self to the selfless: from the yang to the yin.

A more conventionally notated work such as Plonsey's *Stay Fresh Baggies* also reaps the benefits of having spent time under the microscope of rehearsal rather than getting a spurious run-through by some ad hoc ensemble. But in this case, a player's familiarity with the background of the piece helps in the successful realization of the work:

When you buy a Coke from a street vendor in Bangkok, he pours it into a baggie, inserts a straw, and gives you that--thus getting to keep for himself the most valuable part of your Coke: The bottle. Coke without the bottle is just another too-sweet cola: the label is all. A sort of "old wine in new bottles" piece, "Stay Fresh Baggies" is an evocation of heterophonic Thai band music, a dismissal of Coca-Cola-style creativity-as-label, and the sort of post-military march that one might hear after an apocalypse, before it's all built back again, when we're all on the same social footing, jostling one another for space.<sup>7</sup>

Actually, Plonsey's description may in fact describe this entire project: just another group of "local artists" making creative music for anyone who has the courage to use their ears and minds rather than submit to mainstream commercial forces. Like the regional potter that sells his wares by the roadside, the Great Circle Saxophone Quartet offers you their unique (searing) view from inside the confines of the saxophone (quartet). Enjoy.

—Gino Robair

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<sup>6</sup>*Splorb*, as used in this title, may refer to an early prototype of the group that McKean formed while still at Mills College.

<sup>7</sup> Taken from electronic correspondence with the composer, November 1996.

Gino Robair is a percussionist and thereminist who enjoys both composing and improvising. He can be heard performing with The Splatter Trio, Ebola Soup, and The Club Foot Orchestra.

### **SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY:**

#### **Chris Jonas:**

Crawling with Tarts:

*Mayten's Throw*. ASP.

Gamelan Sekar Jaya:

*American Works for Balinese Gamelan Orchestra*. New World 80430-2.

William Parker's "Little Huey" Creative Music Orchestra:

*Flowers Grow in My Room*. Centering Records CD 1002.

Various

*(Y)earbook, Volume II*. Rastascan BRD009.

#### **Randy McKean:**

*So Dig This Big Crux*. Rastascan BRD012.

Anthony Braxton:

*4 (Ensemble) Compositions 1992*. Black Saint 120124-2.

Crawling with Tarts:

*Mayten's Throw*. ASP.

Gamelan Sekar Jaya:

*American Works for Balinese Gamelan Orchestra*. New World 80430-2.

Fredrick Lonberg-Holm

*Theory of Motion*. Curious Pogus CP1.

Tom Schmidt:

*Rabble*. Koch KOC 3-7819-2H1.

Teratoma:

*Teratoma*. Broke Dick.

Various:

*(Y)earbook, Volume I*. Rastascan BRD008.

*Jump Or Die*, (with Splatter Trio, McKean, et al.). Music & Arts CD-843.

#### **Steve Norton:**

Debris:

*Errata*. Eighth Day Music EDM 80011.

*Rapture in the Church of Disreputable Daydreams*. Music & Arts CD927.

*Jump Or Die*, (with Splatter Trio, McKean, et al.). Music & Arts CD843.

*Terre Haute*. Rastascan BRD-011.

Either/Orchestra :

*Dial "E"*. Accurate AC-2222.

*Across the Omniverse*. Accurate AC-3272.

Various:

*(Y)earbook, Volume III*. Rastascan BRD-010.

#### **Dan Plonsey:**

*Ivory Bill*. Music & Arts CD982.

Gamelan Sekar Jaya:

*American Works for Balinese Gamelan Orchestra.* New World 80430-2.

The Manufacturing of Humidifiers:

*Dire Images of Beauty.* yesnolp 02.

Various:

*(Y)earbook, Volume I.* Rastascan BRD008.

*Wavelength Infinity--A Sun Ra Tribute.* Rastascan BRD018.

Produced by Great Circle Saxophone Quartet

Recorded February 5–6, 1994 at Roulette, NYC, by Jon Rosenberg, except *Red and Green* and *Emma's Nemesis*, which were recorded June 29, 1993,

at PBS, Stoughton, Massachusetts by Peter Kontrimas

Mixed by Jon Rosenberg at Acoustic Recording, NYC

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All titles published by Red Notebook, BMI, except:

*Falling From Grace* and *Son of Splorb*, McKeanics Publishing, BMI

*Red and Green* and *Blood Indigo*, Red Notebook/McKeanics Publishing, BMI

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 Tom Varner/*Long Night Big Day* (80410-2)

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**Great Circle Saxophone Quartet 80516-2**  
***Child King Dictator Fool***

1	Stay Fresh Baggies 1 ( <i>Plonsey</i> )	2:03
2	Falling From Grace ( <i>McKean</i> )	10:00
3	Black Shag ( <i>Jonas</i> )	1:25
4	Red and Green ( <i>McKean, Plonsey</i> )	2:13
5	Emma's Nemesis ( <i>Jonas, Norton</i> )	1:16
6	A Hole in the Sky ( <i>Norton</i> )	9:18
7	Now What? ( <i>Plonsey</i> )	7:47
8	Thing Turning (for Janet) ( <i>Norton</i> )	9:05
9	Blood Indigo ( <i>GCSQ</i> )	2:04
10	Son of Splorb ( <i>McKean</i> )	8:31
11	Snake Tectonics ( <i>Jonas</i> )	12:53
12	Stay Fresh Baggies 2 ( <i>Plonsey</i> )	2:03

Chris Jonas: soprano saxophone

Randy McKean: alto saxophone, B flat clarinet on *Thing Turning*

Dan Plonsey: tenor saxophone, E flat clarinet on *Thing Turning*

Steve Norton: baritone saxophone, bass clarinet on *Thing Turning*, soprano saxophone (left channel) on *Blood Indigo*

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