

Larry Ochs' interview with Luca Canini for AllAboutJazzItalia.com via email in winter 2013.(published April 2013.) Questions in bold.

Some years ago, when I first listened to “Electric Ascension”, I was shocked by the intensity and power of the performance: past/future, tradition/innovation. That disc and the few concerts around the world are a deep reflection on jazz, history, improvisation, sound. But everything started back in 1995, when Rova decided to celebrate the 30th anniversary of John Coltrane’s masterpiece. Can you tell me something about the birth of the project? How do you decide to approach such a “problematic” piece (if you consider Ascension a “piece”)? And do you remember the first time you listen to Ascension?

I think Coltrane’s “Ascension” is one of the great jazz compositions of all time. A great formal structure; a great piece. Not that I consider myself an expert on all jazz music. I really don’t. But I am an expert on the greatness of that composition. We have played it 11 times as “Electric Ascension.” And yes it is true that we re-arranged the piece and changed the instrumentation, but the basic composition “Ascension” is absolutely at the center of “Electric Ascension;” it totally influences all the music we play in the spontaneous performance. There is no doubt of that.

I remember seeing John Coltrane live at the Village Vanguard with his late great quartet in 1967. I was 18. The music overwhelmed me completely. There were maybe 20 people there for that second set of their night. Maybe 20. Less by the end of the set. Just a little bit of a factoid to contemplate. I probably listened to Ascension as a radio dj in Philadelphia a year or two later. And I would imagine that I dug the energy, being a fan then of The Who, Hendrix, etc. But probably I didn’t really hear the music yet.

Rova is always looking for challenges, and for excuses to mount larger projects that involve more than the saxophone quartet. In 1995 we noticed that the 30th anniversary of the original recording of “Ascension” was coming up, and at that time we thought it had never been performed live, so we decided to do it. And Black Saint, the legendary Italian label that we all wish still existed, they wanted us to record it. So we played it live and recorded it in San Francisco. Then a couple of years later we played it at Bolzano Jazz Festival. But at the time we played the original arrangement and with the same instrumentation: 5 saxophones, 2 trumoets, piano, 2 basses, drums... (But just to be clear: the arrangement was the same but the actual music was ours; no transcriptions of solos!!)

Some years later everything changed, with the inclusion of electric instruments. A step beyond. Why?

In 2002 we knew that Rova's 25th anniversary was coming up; we wanted to mount some special concerts in San Francisco to celebrate that. We decided one of them would be Ascension again. But now we were in the 21st century, and we thought: if Coltrane were still around, surely he would use different instrumentation now. And once we changed the instrumentation radically, it only made sense to redo the arrangement. I use the word "arrangement" a bit loosely because really what I do is "arrange" who will play when. I decide before the show starts who plays in each section, who is out. A few other musical parameters are determined in real time. And we know that the original "head" that Coltrane composed will be played near the beginning and near the end of the piece. Other than that though, it's wide open as to what kind of mood and approach will happen in any given section of the piece.

At the end, last year, Orkestrova (after three years of silence?) played "Electric Ascension" again, at the Guelph Jazz Festival. Nels Cline, Fred Frith, Hamid Drake, Chris Brown, Ikue Mori, Carla Kihlstedt, Jenny Scheinman, Rob Mazurek and the Rova Quartet: a dreaming band! Tell us something about that evening and the musicians involved...

Yes: It was the first EA show since the 2009 show in Saalfelden and only the second since 2007. This show (which might be the last; who knows?) was recorded live to 32 channel multi-track and filmed by 5 cameras. I've been involved in mixing it down since October. And sometime in 2013, we will have first an audio version and then a DVD version; the video is absolutely beautiful. The DVD will have 5.1 Surround Sound so this version is going to sound FANTASTIC in movie theaters with good sound systems. I look forward to blowing many, many minds.

To cover the costs of shoot Rova decided to use a "crowd founding" instrument like Kickstarter. Did it work? In Europe It's still quite difficult to raise money from listeners and jazz supporters (maybe because festival and venues are still supported with public funds), but I see that in the USA the crowd funding is quite popular. Do you think this could be a way to survive for musicians and artists?

No,no,no.... survive on crowd-funding. Forget that one. BUT we could never have shot the film that we did shoot without Kickstarter. The money raised – every last dime of that – went to the 5-camera professional film crew. But we have this great document now, so we are happy. But we are not wealthier because of it. What Kickstarter allows you to do is to finish projects that you believe in but that no funders are likely to believe in. It's also less formal than applying to a foundation. More fun too.

Speaking of musicians and surviving, what is Rova:Arts? How does it work? And which are the aims of the foundation?

Well, I am sure when we decided to start this non-profit corporation, we did hope that it would help us to survive, which means that eventually Rova:Arts would pay the four of us a salary. We were in fact encouraged to do this by Kronos String Quartet, also located in San Francisco. But unlike Kronos, Rova never was picked up by what used to be called “a major label,” and our situation has remained much the same. What our non-profit has done successfully is to raise money through foundations for specific projects, so we have had many great collaborations that helped us grow musically. Rova:Arts also was quite successful at finding money for commissions during the 1990’s when we were very interested in that. (See the three CDs called “The Works” on Black Saint or the CD “Bingo” on the Victo label from Canada). In this time period, when money is much tighter world wide, we are helping local musicians to raise their own funds for their own projects as well as paying musicians to work with Rova, as usual... But as everyone knows, the value of the arts in society has been downgraded in the past decade or two. So all this gets harder. (This year 2013 Kronos will be 40 years in existence while Rova Sax 4 is 35 years in existence. We may collaborate on something for the first time since 1984, a long 27 years ago. And we are also looking for sponsors to commission Wadada Leo Smith to compose a piece for Rova, Kronos and Wadada to perform.)

On the Rova site there’s a page called “favorite street”. Quite interesting finding Buddy Guy and John Lee Hooker on your playlist with Morton Feldman, Braxton, Scelsi and Varese...

My tastes spread pretty far and wide, like every other musician I know at this point. But the blues is at the center of it. When I was a kid in college I did a blues show once a week at the college radio station, which had a fantastic record library. I learned a lot by listening.

I should direct your readers to go to www.rova.org and sign up for the Rova newsletter. It is sent out by email every two months, and within that newsletter is a column we also call “favorite street.” One of the Rova members writes that column each time, and we tell people of new discoveries in music, the visual arts, books and movies that they might find interesting to buy or look up for free online.

The Celestial Septet: Rova on one hand, the Nels Cline Singers on the other. I was in Saalfelden for Orkestrova performance, but I’ve never seen the Celestial Septet on stage. The New World disc is amazing. Again past/future, tradition/innovation, jazz/nojazz. How did everything started? Tell us something about the project and the musician...

We started Electric Ascension in 2003. We LOVE NELS CLINE, like everyone else. One of the easiest people in the world to work with, and so we wanted to do something else “more practical.” It seemed a natural fit to put Rova together with The Singers. I worked with Scott Amendola, the drummer in “Nels Cline Singers” for

years already in “Larry Ochs Sax & Drumming Core,” and we continue to play together in my newer band called “Kihnoua” with the power-house vocalist Dohee Lee. Over some years we talked about this idea a bunch. Then the bands did a double bill at a club in Berkeley, California, and we played one piece together: an arrangement of another Coltrane piece. It sounded cool. So we made a date to do an entire concert of new septet pieces for a year later, got permission from WILCO to grab Nels for a week, and then proceeded to rehearse and do three performances in Northern California clubs. The live recordings from those shows were great. In fact one of the pieces on the CD is from the concert in San Francisco, at the jazz club called “Yoshis.” (All the rest were recorded in a studio.) And yes: that was another CD that, when I finished the mix, I thought I can now retire and ride off into the sunset. It’s a fantastic mix of composition, improvisation, jazz, the blues, new music ideas, tonal and atonal chords, electronics. It’s all there and it’s totally integrated. And that’s the main thing. The music stands on its own whether you know about the influences or not, whether you appreciate improvised music or not. It is simply great music with soul.

Fred Frith and Nels Cline. Different generations, of course. But so much in common. Two deep explorers of sound. You know very well both of them, and from a long time...

Two of the great guitarists is about all I can say.

Since 1981 with Fred; since late 1990’s with Nels. Of course I knew of Nels before that, but we had not performed together. Fred composed a long piece for Rova in the 1990’s during our commissioning era. Called “Freedom in Fragments,” with a CD on Tzadik. And Fred plays Electric bass with Rova on Electric Ascension. But Rova’s first major performance with Fred was in 1988, a sextet: Rova plus Frith and Henry Kaiser (on synclavier!)

John Zorn. In August 2010, for the 33 and 1/3 anniversary of first Rova Concert, the Rova-Zorn quintet was on stage at Yoshi’s San Francisco. In an interview you said «Zorn is my man». Tell us something about that evening and the friendship with Zorn...

The main thing to say is that 4 of the six pieces played that night are still available on LP only; beautiful long playing vinyl record. Only about 30 copies left! Go to www.rova.org and click on the cover of the Rova-Zorn LP. That takes you to a page where you can order this LP. Also available from Downtown Music Gallery website and others. It is worth having. Beautiful sound. Even though recorded live, it received top ten audiophile LP of 2011 by Absolute Sound Magazine. Yes, it got this award even though the music was a bit difficult for the editors of that magazine!! But if you have read this interview this far you will be blown away by this orchestral sax quintet sound.

I personally have known John since 1974. He is very good friends with my wife, the writer Lyn Hejinian, as well, and they have collaborated on the first edition of *ARCANA*; she was the actual editor. And her press for poetry called Atelos is part of Hips Road, Zorn's non-profit organization. Zorn and Rova first performed together in San Francisco in 1987, but we played together way before that. We did Cobra and quintet music on that 1987 concert. So by the time we recorded live in 2011, he might felt like he was a permanent member of the group. A great set.

You're are going to visit Italy with Donald Robinson, drummer of *What We Live* and *Larry Ochs Sax & Drumming Core*. What are we going to hear?

Don and I also played together in Glenn Spearman Double Trio, so we go back a long ways together, to 1991. We also live 15 minutes apart, so for all that time we have done a lot of playing as a duo. But I was never interested in the duo of sax and drums because it had been done. Not only that, but as soon as you do play as sax and drum duo, the critics compare what you are doing to Coltrane-Ali or Braxton-Roach, and then they say it sounds like one or the other, and that's the end of that. Check that off. But by adding one drummer and performing as "The Sax & Drumming Core", the comment is never made! So people then must come to see what you do. In fact though, I always want to add something to the continuum, and with two drummers, it becomes a trio and the rhythms and colors just seemed to have more possibilities that way, at least in 2000.

But by 2009, The Sax & Drumming Core had become a quintet, and then in 2011 a sextet with three percussionists. In this time period with funding cut and with more conservative tastes in music, I know I cannot book a tour for this size band anymore. So Don and I agreed to work up some duo pieces and play one concert locally. At the end of the set, not one but two different recording engineers came up and volunteered to record us for free. So we took up the invitation from Eric Moffat and recorded three times with him over four months. The music evolved as we did this. And the music from those sessions is part of what we bring to Italy. I will let you describe what you hear to your audience. But it is certainly in some ways in the tradition of the horn-drum duos of the past. From the past to the future. Right?

Do you see yourself as a jazz musician? Speaking of music and jazz, I'm quite enthusiast about our times. I see a lot of opportunities for musicians and improvisers. But unfortunately I find a lot of people looking back, thinking the best is behind us. Where do you think jazz is going these days?

There are so many great young improvisers in the USA now that many Europeans do not know about. I should say "younger players" means: "younger than me." So I am talking about players in their thirties, which makes them old enough to really have a mature voice. The 2012 festival in Novara for example presented a San Francisco sextet led by drummer Vijay Anderson. Ben Goldberg was part of the group, but the

rest of these players are younger fantastic players; unknown over there basically. It is a typical story... This makes me feel very lucky to have come up as a younger player in a time (1979) when there was the will and the money to fly over interesting American musicians. In 2012, Rova would never be able to do what we did in 1979 and later. There's no will for that anymore.

I see myself as an improviser, which encompasses jazz. But as I have always said, I would not personally go out in public and play in a band that only performed jazz standards or even just music in the traditional jazz format of "head-solos-head." But I do not think that's really an issue anymore; do you? There are so many interesting composers in the jazz world, and so many people trying out what might be called hybrids of jazz, I suppose. But ultimately jazz music fed directly to.....look: you do not have "conduction" - thinking of Butch Morris whom we just lost - you do not have his ideas without jazz. You do not have Rova without jazz. You do not have Braxton's music without jazz. So no one needs fear that that their favorite form of music is going away. It is simply evolving. And all along that road of evolution there are practitioners playing the music at each stop of the evolutionary train. So if you love Charlie Parker's music, you can still find players doing that. And if you want to hear the most experimental, you can go find that sometimes. And all the stops in between are now represented at times. Thus there needs not be a battle between the old guard and the new guard. There just needs to be more playing opportunities for the newer end of the spectrum. It should not be the case that everyone has to struggle to get playing opportunities, given the quality of the music being played. But on the other hand, we must accept the fact that "art music" works only for a smaller percentage of the people. So it is, and so it will forever be.

A few recent CDs:

Kihnoua: *The Sybil's Whisper* on Metalanguage (Ochs, Amendola, DeJoode, Dohee Lee)

Rova: *A Short History* on Jazzwerkstatt

The Celestial Septet on New World Records (Rova plus The Nels Cline Singers)

Larry Ochs Sax & Drumming Core: *Stone Shift* on Rogue Art (Ochs, Amendola, Robinson, Fujii, Tamura)

Jones Jones: *We All Feel the Same Way* on SoLyd (Moscow) (Ochs, Dresser, Tarasov)

Ochs, Masaoka, Lee: *Spiller Alley* on Rogue Art

Maybe Monday: *Unsquare* on Intakt (Ochs, Frith, Masaoka, Kihlstedt, Hemingway, Mori, Zeena Parkins)