

Rova Interview with Jose Francisco Tapiz for the Spanish website "TomaJazz"
Via email from January to March 2011

1. Why have you released your new CD *Planetary* in a Russian label?

Ochs: The short answer is that we are happy to work with any label that wants to work with us and which does a nice, careful job of pressing the CD and packaging the CD. That plus "financial considerations" usually will determine the situation.

Then there's the long answer: Rova toured the former USSR in 1983 and again in 1989. These tours were major events when they happened; a real adventure both times; extremely exciting and gratifying. We made some good friends ourselves, and those trips started other collaborations for other artists who came with us at that time. Then, nineteen years after the 1989 tour (in 2008), I went to play in St. Petersburg with *Jones Jones* which includes the drummer Vladimir Tarasov, one of the musicians Rova met for the first time on the 1983 tour. The *Jones Jones* concert was recorded, and some of that concert was made into a master that Tarasov gave to Andrei Gavrilov. Gavrilov runs the Moscow-based SoLyd recording label; he immediately offered to put that out, and then again he is now getting ready to publish the second *Jones Jones* CD, from a 2009 Moscow concert. *Planetary* was completed in 2009, so it seemed logical to offer him the music to publish, as there was this Rova connection to Russia. Now I am happy to say that as a result of the CD being released, Rova may go back to perform in Russia for the first time since 1989. A nice circle of events.

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2. As you've released some CD between 2003 and 2009 (Juke Box Suite on Not Two), why *Planetary* includes music recorded in 2003 and 2009? Do you have more music recorded waiting to be published?

Ochs: In 2003, I recorded three pieces for a CD that would be entirely Ochs' compositions for Rova. I liked the idea because all three pieces were composed using some similar devices, but ended up being quite different due to the improvised games involved. But after I recorded them, I was not happy with the total package. While each piece taken alone sounded great, the overall CD didn't work musically for me. So I shelved the CD, deciding to save the material for an appropriate Rova CD. On most Rova quartet CDs, there will be more than one composer. Juke Box Suite is seven pieces by Raskin, but in fact it's a suite of pieces that made sense to record together and then, on listening, were deemed to work quite well together. In fact, Rova has had many situations where we recorded a certain number of pieces for a CD, and then after mixing and listening, we decided that one piece or two pieces just didn't work with the others we had recorded. So there's often been "orphan pieces" waiting for a home on a "next Rova CD". In fact, right now, that third piece of mine from the 2003 recordings, entitled *Certain Space*, which is a very, very strong piece both in the playing and the composing, that piece is still sitting on the sidelines waiting.

The other factor is that in recent years Rova has released a whole slew of "collaborative CDs" or large ensemble CDs, so there have been fewer quartet releases in this decade. We have a few other shorter pieces sitting on the sidelines, plus a lot of music that is ready to be recorded but has not been because we don't see the point in releasing too many CDs at this point in time, given the lack of a

market for them.

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1. First of all... Before somebody will call the internet jazz police telling that I'm doing an interview to a non-jazz group in a supposed jazz web-site... Is Rova music Jazz music? What are your feelings about what is and what means jazz today?

Ackley: As jazz critic Francis Davis concluded in his liner notes to our 1993 Black Saint CD, *From the Bureau of Both*, "Is it (Rova's music) jazz? For the sake of jazz, let's hope so." But, between friends, does it matter whether our music is jazz? Certainly in some reactionary music circles it's verboten to extend the boundaries of jazz beyond the blues feeling and swing and to music as far reaching as Rova's, but I assume many readers of your publication don't subscribe to such conservative notions and do (or would) welcome our music into their world of jazz.

Contrary to recently expressed views, there are no objective arbiters of culture who decide how to name art, and who determine which expressions are valuable. Unfortunately, there are appointed 'gatekeepers' who restrict and allow resources to institutions, music groups and individuals based on a particular version of what is valid. But that's all in the realm of the political.

In musical terms I believe Rova's music is jazz, but at the same time it is more than jazz. The same could be said of all innovative work from that tradition, including the musics of Ellington, Taylor, Coleman, Coltrane, Braxton, Zorn, etc. Each artist has embraced the core of the tradition and made their contribution to it from their own vantage. But, each contribution has burst the seams of the contemporary concept of jazz and expanded that world. That is the serious business of the artist which the entertainer or the stylist rarely takes on. We're shaping the jazz to come, to reference Coleman's phrase from over 60 years ago! Why are we still quibbling about the word 'jazz' 6 decades later?

Raskin: The elements of the music that draw on the African American aesthetic are the development of a personal voice on the instrument and the creation of ensemble music combining those voices. This works its way into the compositions as well, highlighting the approaches of the different members. Many of the approaches of improvisation that Rova utilizes are from African-American traditions including the blues, R & B and Jazz. We are more closely aligned with the AACM ideas regarding music of the African Diaspora which (I think) looks at the music more broadly, without cordoning off from the different parts or the greater culture at large. There aren't walls erected saying that certain sounds or ideas can't be in the same room together. As for the marketing of music and the labels associated with that- that is another discussion.

Ochs: You (Tapiz) and I tried talking to this point in the 2010 interview. I think that I'll just leave what these guys have said above is enough said on this topic.

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2. In your new CD there are some pieces that are heavily structured and arranged, and other ones that are heavily destructured or with a free playing. But all pieces are compositions by Larry Ochs or Steve Adams: can you tell us the creative process for a composition since one of you writes it till the moment when you record it for a CD?

Adams: Rova has always had a focus on the many possible relations of composition and

improvisation. We write music both individually and create pieces as a group, as two ways of getting at different ways of thinking about that relationship. The individual pieces can be an exploration of an idea or problem, or a response to a perceived need in the repertoire. For instance, I have two pieces from the *Parallel Construction* series on the new CD, one which is very open in form and the other has a set structure, but both are investigating the idea of using long-form melody as the basis for an improvisational piece, and find different ways of applying the idea. The first was written when I felt there was a need for a more melodic, relaxed piece in the repertoire, while the second was a way of using the idea for a different purpose. While Rova is highly democratic in its basic nature, the composer is usually the director of what happens with a particular piece, though we all have input into the direction of a piece. *Parallel Construction #2* has evolved a lot since I first brought it in, in response to both how I felt about what was working and what wasn't, and what the rest of the band thought. It originally had more sections and an open structure, but it works better in this more limited, set form, though there's still plenty of material and room for improvisation.

Ochs: There are liner notes inside the new Planetary CD for a change where Adams and I speak about some of the ideas behind the music. So I'll leave those clues for you to read there. But this question of composed or improvised has come up in this band very, very often. I mean: musicians and other listeners often come up to us to ask just how much is notated and how much is intuitive. What makes the situation so unclear is that in 90% of the music we play, especially in this later period, there is not – as there is in the conventional jazz form - that distinction between the written head and then the solo improvisations that happen after the head and before the return of written material at the end of piece. Our notation, such as it is, can happen anytime during the pieces. The composer may have an order of events preplanned, or he may have a “set” of possible events that will be cued in as he sees fit during the performance of the piece. As Nels Cline said in an interview about the Celestial Septet music: (I'm paraphrasing:) “The compositions tell us exactly where we're going, but they don't tell us how we're going to get there.” To further elaborate, I'll use the 2 *Parallel Construction* pieces from Planetary that Adams mentions above: PC #1 gives each player a long melodic “song” from which he can quote phrases, or improvise tangentially away from the music; we are also given the option to cue in a notated trio background for a designated soloist; we are given two other options for sound-specific events we can employ within the improvisation whenever we hear it, and we are given some general aesthetic guidelines. But the order in which those things happen is wide open. In PC #2, on the other hand, the order of the events is known in advance, but what each player chooses to play when improvising in the piece is “open” in the sense that “if it works, you can use it.”

And then Rova has always, going all the way back, created pieces as a quartet that are primarily “improvised” but have a lot of sculpting and careful discussion that happen in rehearsal. We also will modify pieces as a quartet to fit a particular environment. For example, on April 1, 2011 we play at Berkeley Art Museum, and there we are performing pieces we have designed for spaces with long sound decay and/or pieces that are performed when we can surround the audience. We've been doing such pieces at least since 1983 although this will be our first opportunity in many years.

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3. You talk about your collaborative projects and large ensemble projects. You played in Yo Miles! by Wadada Leo Smith and Henry Kaiser. You also recorded John Coltrane's Ascension. Do Rova have some idea for a new project based upon the music of another musician?

Ackley: We've discussed the idea of doing a sort of survey of approaches to contemporary improvisational music (including jazz and classical models), allowing us to explore other musical worlds, as well as pay tribute to people and trends that have influenced us. The concept seemed overly broad to really go anywhere with it, but revisiting particular pieces of music is something we're all open to.

Ochs: I'd be interested to tackle Cecil Taylor's great work "Dark to Themselves," but while it's come up a couple of times, there's not any momentum towards producing that event. (Maybe if Glenn Spearman were still alive it might happen sooner.) There are several factors mitigating against another project like "Electric Ascension." First there is the fact that all these special projects are produced initially by Rova:Arts, our non-profit organization. And we have had other ideas in the past few years that seemed more appealing, such as The Celestial Septet. Second, we have produced special projects every year in the past 11, and we would like to export a lot of these to festivals for performances, so adding another like "Electric Ascension, before that piece is played out, is just not that appealing. Third: "Electric Ascension" has not been performed more than about once every year or two.. It is still a lot of fun, it still surprises us, and the form is all worked out. We know it's going to be great; we can guarantee promoters it will be a highlight of their festival. So why compete against that with a new work that we are not sure of (since we have never performed it.) Fourth: the fact that very, very few JAZZ Festivals would be willing to hire Rova to perform John Coltrane's Ascension because of the radical nature of that piece and of Rova's reputation.. . So how many would want us to do a Cecil Taylor piece? Answer: even fewer festivals. And in the current economic / cultural climate, there are not many festivals that can afford to even think about hiring and importing 10 or 12 musicians to play one set. So the reality keeps us from diving in, especially as we have other projects of our own we want to tackle..... So it becomes a combination of the difficulty of producing such a large ensemble show combining with the feeling that – in the end - we're more excited to produce, or try to produce, the shows of, for example, the Celestial Septet, within which we present our own music, because we get to hear our own pieces evolve and have the excitement of finding out where the musicians will take the music *this time*. I guess at our age we prefer to expend our energy more on our own music and original projects we dream up rather than take on music by other musicians. And I guess in that way at least, we can be considered jazz musicians. I must say though that if we had the opportunities; if we got calls all through the year asking us what we wanted to do next, then we would almost certainly take on more projects by EA.

Raskin: I like Larry's idea about Cecil Taylor's music and hope that it comes about. We did a project of Albert Ayler's music with Henry Kaiser, and besides doing a recording of Steve Lacy's music we redid some of his arrangements for Sax Quartet and Electronics. We had an international orchestra with Satako Fujii and Natski Tamura that performed in the US, Japan and Europe. There is an ongoing project with Sax quartet and two drummers and we performed a work for 16 saxophonists in 2010. These projects came about because the opportunity arose that made it possible. The ideas float around until the conditions. We've been trying to fund a project with the music of Vinny Golia and talk about collaborative projects with Chicago and LA musicians and who knows what will come up in the future.

Adams: Another aspect of this is that there is too much emphasis in jazz on these kinds of projects, where people recreate the music of the past. It's an easy way to market the music, but it detracts from its growth. I think in general we'd rather be looking to the future. The Electric Ascension project was conceived in part as a response to the prevalence of the polite tributes to polite music. It was meant to

say "Here's an amazing landmark of jazz that's not even considered for this kind of treatment, done in a way that doesn't try to recreate the original but re-contextualizes it for the sound of today." People have responded enthusiastically to it, so I guess we're not the only ones that feel this way.

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4. You're playing really fine with Celestial Septet. Do you have some plans of some new recording by this group?

Ochs: not at the moment. The first CD only came out in April, 2010. And we've only performed five Celestial Septet concerts since its arrival. So the band is on a long, slow arc, where it might take a few more years for the band to play out the pieces from that first CD, especially as those pieces were taken to amazing places by the ensemble on this recently completed Northeast-USA tour, blew away the audiences in every city in a major kind of way, and are all still really fun to play; and as the tours will be very far apart, the "playing out" of these pieces will take longer than it would if we were on tour consistently... (No idea when we will actually be in Europe for the first time ever with C7; possibly late 2012?) . But - eventually - I think: "yes;" there will be a second CD some day. I think that that is a certainty, given the enthusiasm we all have for playing together.

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5. Apart from your April 1 concert, what are the next Rova concerts? Do you have some plans to premiere your new CD?

Ochs: We're in the USA for quite some time. Struggling to put together a tour in October in Europe, but most likely, as I write this in March, that that will be postponed until late February/March 2012. HEY: We would be HAPPY to come to Spain and Portugal... Anyone reading this who wants to help make that happen, I'm listening. The concept of "touring" is getting harder to realize; main reasons: not enough venues producing shows on week nights anymore, at least for this music; and fewer shows being produced in general...

However, we just played 5 nights on the East Coast with The Celestial Septet.(Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Amherst). The music was incredibly exciting, even more amazing than when we recorded it; in this case (I think) that's really saying something.

On April 1, 2011, Rova plays at Berkeley Art Museum. The museum has a long reverberation time, and we'll be sculpting pieces to sound fantastic in that space. Then "normal" quartet concerts in San Francisco; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Los Angeles in late April and May. In June we perform in San Francisco with 2 guest turntablists DJ Olive and DJ P-Love) for "SF Jazz" summer series.... Yes: "SF Jazz" ...

As far as "premiering the CD" goes, the tracks that were recorded in 2003 are actually not in the book anymore. We do still play Adams' pieces however.

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6. Do you have some plans for a new recording?

Ochs: As always, (or so it seems) we have one set of music in the can waiting for the right moment to release them: a suite of recordings of the graphic scores by Adams and Raskin. There's also the ½-hour piece of mine called "Certain Space" that is waiting for a release. And in July we hope to do a collaborative CD with Vladimir Tarasov, recording here for some future (not known) release. There are other pieces that could be recorded, but what with the uncertainty of the future of CDs, and the current extent of free downloads, releasing music is less of a priority, especially for a band with over 30 CD releases, most of which are still available. Plus, of course, we did just release *Planetary*.

There will, however, be a limited LP release in June, appearing in conjunction with the June 4 concert with the turntablists DJ Olive and DJ P-Love: "The Receiving Surfaces" is a quintet of Rova and John Zorn. Only 300 LPs will be sold; no digital downloads either. It's pretty high-energy, extra-sensory-perceptive music...recorded at Yoshi's San Francisco last August. Highly recommended. Should be available exclusively at the Rova website from May 1 on.

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7. When I asked about those projects, I was thinking about Anthony Braxton (a favourite of mine). Do you have some plans to republish this year your CD with Anthony Braxton, originally on Sound Aspect (Larry Ochs told me about it). I can't wait to listen it when it'll be available! Could it be possible to hear you playing again with Braxton?

Ochs: Love to do it, but there are no plans. No plans to re-release that CD yet. Have not had time to contact AB. But this should happen, because I agree: it's a fine recording.

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8. I want also you to tell about Rova:Arts. Why did you create it and what are the objectives of it?

Raskin: Rova:Arts is a non profit organization; this non-profit status allows us to apply for funding to present local performances, curate special concerts and commission compositions. Some of the projects we have done include the *PreEchoes* series which started in 1987 and included: Rova plus guests (the first "Orkestrova") in a West Coast premiere of John Zorn's *Cobra*, a collaborative concert with the duo of Richard Teitelbaum and David Rosenboom, another with Anthony Braxton added to Rova for a sax quintet, and a fourth with Henry Kaiser and Fred Frith. We also brought the Ganelin Trio to San Francisco in 1986; this was our first funded concert. In 1998 or so we changed the series name to "Rovaté" The series happens virtually every year, the last two Rovatés being a commission for Carla Kihlstedt for saxophone quartet and spoken word, with 2 readers; and *The Sax Cloud*, featuring compositions by Jon Raskin and Steve Adams for 16 saxophonists surrounding the audience.

In addition Rova:Arts has imported Sam Rivers and presented his big band music; worked with *inkBoat*, the inspiring Butoh-influenced dance company started by Shinichi Iova Koga in San Francisco; presented the first live presentation of John Coltrane's *Ascension* exactly thirty years after its release as a recording, later rearranging the piece as *Electric Ascension* for electronic instruments. Rova:Arts has funded local composers in the San Francisco Bay Area to write for Rova and periodically presented an

"Art of the Improviser" series which has featured many different groupings and concepts for expanding the realm of improvisation.

Ochs: definitely a lot more of this history is up at the rova.org website under the tab "Projects." But it's fair to say that just about all the large projects we have done over all these 33 years are thanks to having some funding to make them happen the first time here in San Francisco. After that we have sought to do them again in the normal way: by convincing a venue or festival to produce the concert. In addition to what Jon mentioned above, Rova:Arts did, for about 6 years, produce a series of "informances," as we called them, featuring some of our friends and allies in this small corner of the music universe. Entitled "Improv:21" the series usually focused on one guest composer who works with improvisers and improvisation in his work, although some shows were about the performing of improvised music, and many were about both performance and composition. Almost all the shows featured some amount of performance either live or on recordings... Guests included Zeena Parkins, Miya Masaoka, Carla Kihlstedt, Fred Frith, John Zorn, Rova, Mark Dresser, Wadada Leo Smith and many more. You can see almost any of these shows on video by linking to

http://radiom.org/mno_radiom.cgi?q=Improv%3A21&cmd=Search

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9. I also will be really delighted if some of you (or all of you) do some Favorite Street. I really like it (our last one by Steve Adams is full of some of favorite bands to me; Fieldwork is one of the first international groups I interviewed in Tomajazz).

RASKIN:

Music

1. The Sound of Siam: Leftfield Luk Thung, Jazz and Molam in Thailand 1965-1975
2. Persian Electronic Music: Yesterday and Today 1966-2006
3. Boubacar Traore- Mali Dunhou

Books

1. 2666: A Novel by Roberto Bolaño.
2. You Are Not A Gadget- Jason Lanier
3. Atomik Aztex - Sesshu Foster

Movies

1. Alexandra- Aleksandr Sokurov
2. Winter's Bone- Debra Granik
3. Exit Through the Gift Shop- Banksy

Ackley:

Anthology of American Folk Music

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings (6 CD boxed set)

Edited by Harry Smith

The Anthology of American Folk Music, originally compiled and released on Folkways Records in 3 two-LP sets in 1952, is the work of Harry Smith (29 May 1923, Portland, Oregon – 27 November 1991, New York City). Smith was an American archivist, ethnomusicologist, student of anthropology, record collector, experimental filmmaker, artist, bohemian and mystic. This collection of blues, country, old-timey and jug band tunes, recorded between 1928 and 1932, was carefully curated and sequenced by Smith from his vast archive of '78s. The anthology became the bedrock of the folk and blues revival movement of the '50s and '60s, and revealed a world of American popular music that had long been forgotten.

As Frank Zappa might have asked, "Why do you care?" And, why do I, as a contemporary saxophonist with big ears for jazz and modern art music, care about stuff as arcane and obscure as the tunes on this anthology? Good question. But, there's something in the music's direct, from-the-gut nature that has always spoken to me. Somehow my approach to playing and hearing has been shaped in large part by raw folk musics from many cultures, especially the country and blues of America. And my appetite for Blind Willie Johnson, Son House, Doc Boggs or Charlie Poole doesn't feel at odds with my hunger for Stockhausen, Boulez, Braxton, Trane or Taylor.

Adams:

My main listening focus lately is the box set "Music for Merce" that I picked up recently (New World 80712). It's 10 CDs of John Cage, David Tudor, Maryanne Amacher, Christian Wolff, Morton Feldman and other seminal figures of the avant garde doing really interesting work that perhaps has a different energy than their other pieces. There's way too much there for me to say anything profound about yet, but I'm really enjoying it.

One of my interests in recent years has been electronic music, including learning the Max/MSP program, which is very powerful but not an easy thing to approach. I've been working through the book *Electronic Music and Sound Design* by Allesandro Cipriani and Maurizio Giri over the last few months and it's a great resource. It's clear, systematic, patient and goes from the very beginnings to a pretty sophisticated level..

Ochs:

Book: *The Singing Neanderthals* (Steven Mithen, Harvard Univ Press, 2006) – the origins of music, language, mind and body

DVD: recently seen: *Come and See* (Elem Klimov, 1985); *Black Snake Moan* (Craig Brewer, 2006); *Odds Against Tomorrow* (Robert Wise, 1959)

William Kentridge is a South African artist whom I was not familiar with until I saw his work in 2009 at the Moscow Biennale. It's fantastic work and must be seen in a gallery to really be appreciated. But *K5* or: *William Kentridge Five Themes* (Yale University Press) is a beautiful summary of his work, although I can't honestly say if it will mean as much to you if you have not seen his work in person first. You can though check out some of his animation online at YouTube. 2 of my favorites are "Johannesburg" and "Felix in Exile." You get an even better idea of what he's about by looking at "I Am Not Me, the Horse is

Not Mine” a partial youtube document of that performance he does live.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Radzm-Yo4BA&feature=related>