

Reviewed at “Memory Select: Avant Jazz radio” <http://wedgeradio.wordpress.com/>

ROVA Meets Nels Cline

March 7, 2010

ROVA & Nels Cline Singers — The Celestial Septet (New World, 2010)

One perk of the **Other Minds** festival was the healthy selection of CDs at the merch table — from the composers, the performers, and Other Minds’ own stacks. Amid those on Thursday night was a surprise: the **about-to-be-released CD** of the **ROVA/Nels Cline Celestial Septet**.

The band combines the ROVA Saxophone Quartet with the guitar/bass/drums trio called the Nels Cline Singers. A 2007 show at the **Freight & Salvage** in Berkeley was the band’s debut, I think, followed by a show at **Yoshi’s** in May 2008.

These shows were a real treat, providing lots of free-jazz fireworks and healthy doses of Nels freakouts. One song that stood out in memory was “Trouble Ticket,” a crackling Steve Adams composition that had the kind of dynamism that seemed suited for radio; it’s why I chose to play that track **last Friday**. But the song I really wanted to hear was a memorable Cline composition that was a standout of the live performances. Its middle part involves the four ROVA players wandering offstage and out of the auditorium altogether. Gradually, they work their way back, each playing small, relatively quiet phrases. They work their way back to the stage and surround Amendola, like space rocks drawn to a gravitational center, and they continue to play in snippets while Amendola records and processes the sounds into an electronics stew.

The piece was untitled at the time and I’m guessing it’s the same piece that goes by “The Buried Quilt” on this record. Lacking the live-performance aspects, the studio version settles for a pause in the dark intro, after a segment of clamorous drums by **Scott Amendola** backed by dissonant sax parts. From there, tiny sax sounds start to dart and swirl, then give way to an explosion of sound. From there, it alternates: loud brazen sax, then a bluesy-quiet sax/guitar duet, then more bombast, eventually ending with grand, sweeping gestures. It’s a fitting way to end an album, and the piece presents a wide enough canvas to be a worthy listen on its own — but it’s still a particular treat live.

The album opens with a daring choice: Amendola’s powerful composition “Cesar Chavez.” It’s got the emotional weight of a great song but not the feel of an opener: crawling, atmospherizing. Its combination of sorrow and hopefulness made for a strong closing to Amendola’s 2005 album, *Believe*. As an opener, it’s not the obvious pick, but it brings a sense of gravitas that serves the rest of the album well.

Albert Ayler-like passages pop up like guideposts during the 25-minute “Whose To Know,” written by [Larry Ochs](#). That track includes plenty of exciting stretches including a killer bass solo from [Devin Hoff](#). Ayler also figures into the formula of the 2.5-minute “Head Count,” another Ochs track that includes prodigious Cline feedback.

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