

Rova + Nels Cline Singers □ **The Celestial Septet** □ New World Records 80708-2

By Troy Collins, *Point of Departure*

A veritable West Coast summit meeting, *The Celestial Septet* is the first recorded encounter between the legendary Rova Saxophone Quartet and The Nels Cline Singers. Though each ensemble is renowned in their own right, together they form a unique aggregation, seamlessly integrating acoustic and electric tonalities. Sharing aesthetic viewpoints, their mutual appreciation of the jazz tradition extends from the New Thing to early fusion and modern composition. Free from stylistic restraints, they fuse elements of primal free jazz, visceral rock conventions, aleatoric meditations and austere classicism into a series of unorthodox compositions that balance formal structure with unfettered improvisation.

The origin of this collaboration can be traced to 1998, when guitarist Nels Cline and ROVA first recorded together on Henry Kaiser and Wadada Leo Smith's *Yo Miles!* (Shanachie). Cline later played on Rova's *Electric Ascension* (Atavistic) in 2003, an electro-acoustic re-interpretation of John Coltrane's *Ascension* (Impulse!). By 2006, all three members of the Singers joined Rova in a performance of *Electric Ascension* at the Vancouver International Jazz Festival. Regular practices ensued on arrangements of Coltrane tunes like "Living Space," followed by original works written specifically for this line-up. Though not limited by Coltrane's concepts, the master's passionate marathon improvisations and reliance on extended modal forms continues to provide the collective with a surfeit of inspiration.

The septet's debt to Coltrane is most evident on drummer Scott Amendola's atmospheric opener, "Cesar Chavez." Imbued with the same spiritual serenity as many of Coltrane's later works, the piece unfolds glacially, underscored by a plaintive motif. Amendola's spare accents, Devin Hoff's modal bass pedal tones and the saxophones' lush underpinning support a lyrical conversation between Larry Ochs' plangent tenor cries and Cline's delicate filigrees, building to a rousing but controlled finale. Alto saxophonist Steve Adams' jittery "Trouble Ticket" ups the ante of the preceding work, careening through a series of contrapuntal horn charts, fragmented rock rhythms, quicksilver call-and-response dialogues and a climactic focus on Cline's coruscating fretwork. But these pieces are merely prologues to the main event. Recorded live at Yoshi's, in San Francisco, (musicians' note: actually

was recorded in studio) the 25 minute "Whose to Know (for Albert Ayler)" is the album's majestic centerpiece. Devoid of any obvious patterns, the tribute develops episodically, featuring a variety of instrumental configurations and individual solos; Cline's blistering excursion with the Singers and Hoff's sinewy bass cadenza are notable highlights. The cumulative effect of Rova's buzzing saxophones at the work's fervid conclusion attains that rare hypnotic quality reserved for transcendental music like Ayler's. Serving as an epilogue of sorts, baritone saxophonist Jon Raskin's brief "Head Count" follows, clocking in at just over two minutes. Arranged as a vehicle for Cline, celebratory fanfares and scattershot downbeats fuel his unrelenting six string assault, spotlighting his more extreme tendencies.

Cline's own offering, "The Buried Quilt" ends the session with high drama. Evolving through a spectral opening to a riotous midsection, the extended work offers a recapitulation of the album's primary themes. Lush horn chorales, scintillating gongs and ethereal electronic washes modulate into altissimo saxophone drones, frenetic percussion and sonorous arco glisses, before the tune suddenly explodes. Ochs' tenor heads the charge, surging through a thicket of caterwauling horns and manic stop-start tempos, punctuated at intervals by introspective duets between a rotating roster of participants. Cline's pithy interjections spar with Bruce Ackley's probing soprano during an early interlude, while Raskin's gruff baritone sputters alongside Hoff's churning double-stops later, inverting pitch and mood simultaneously. Eventually subsiding in a regal denouement, the album comes to a close, ending as it began. □—*Troy Collins, Point of Departure*