

# dusted



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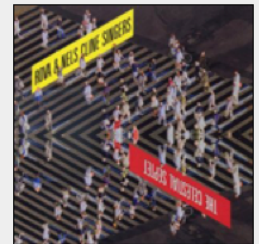
## Dusted Reviews

**Artist:** ROVA & The Nels Cline Singers

**Album:** The Celestial Septet

**Label:** New World

**Review date:** May. 5, 2010



ROVA & The Nels Cline Singers - "Cesar Chavez (excerpt)" (The Celestial Septet)

Though their collaborations haven't always been as well documented as their standalone recordings, ROVA (saxophonists Bruce Ackley, Steve Adams, Larry Ochs and Jon Raskin) have been worked beautifully with Anthony Braxton, the Ganelin Trio and Satoko Fujii, among many others. Guitarist Nels Cline has worked with them on several occasions – in some of the quartet's regular Rovate gatherings and on their 2003 *Electric Ascension* – and here he brings his regular Singers partners, bassist Devin Hoff and drummer Scott Amendola.

Much ink has been spilled describing ROVA's long-standing investment in various expressions of "new music" and this has often generated sloppy descriptions of a sound that is "arch" and "clinical." Leaving aside the fact that they can play very complicated charts with great fluidity, and that their use of hand signals and sometimes graphic scores is always subtle, people seem to talk too rarely about how simply moving ROVA's music is. Every time I listen to one of their records, I'm reminded of that great old Archie Shepp quote: *"I'm worse than a romantic; I'm a sentimentalist."* ROVA isn't exactly gushy or a troupe of balladeers (nor are the NCS, for that matter). But for all their energies, for all their playfulness with extended techniques and formal mischief, their music returns regularly to a hymnal quality that appears as often as their spare Lacy-an excursions or Braxtonian metaphysical riots.

It's no surprise, then, that they make such lovely work of Amendola's stirring "Cesar Chavez," which opens the set with a slow and mournful throb, some funeral dirge staring down loss and passing. The septet constructs from the most basic intervals an absolutely riveting emotional statement, free and utterly focused, committed to the harmonic basics in the way of, say, Paul Motian's "Folk Song for Rosie" or Lindsay Cooper's "Face in the Crowd" (ROVA's played the latter, but I wish they would consider the former, as they could do it superbly). Raskin and Ochs sound especially simpatico, with Cline's obbligatos quite tasteful throughout. Adams' "Trouble Ticket" is more knotty, with rapid phrases pulling in opposite directions to establish tense exchanges and volleys. At the middle, noise blossoms suddenly and leaves tons of space behind for seemingly tranquil saxophones with a bad case of nerves and occasional overblowing.

Ochs' "Whose to Know (for Albert Ayler)" is wondrously contrapuntal, an exultant shout worthy of its dedicatee and rousingly lyrical in the manner of Cline's tribute to Horace Tapscott. After Cline and Amendola solo, the 25-minute piece moves into a different kind of rhythmic articulation, first with stuttering descending lines and then climbing into a glorious nebula of sound. Ochs' "Head Count" is the briefest of piece, almost a nod in the direction of Braxton marches. And the disc closes with Cline's "The Buried Quilt," which moves patiently from hush through a slow coalescence of voices that swell sevenfold for yet another emotionally resonant moment.

Never given to dull displays of fireworks, and always bound by committed listening and deep empathy, *The Celestial Septet* is a disc I expected to enjoy. But not this much.