

Rova Jazz Quartet

Because jazz isn't already experimental enough

By Andrew Gilbert



Photograph by Sharon Beals

Square Pegs: Rova's experimental edge has led it to innovations like improvising onstage based on a system of hand gestures.

The concept seems so simple: a group of musicians coming together to play their own pieces and commission works by noted composers, developing a vast repertoire reflecting the cutting edge in jazz and new music. Over the past three decades, however, the San Francisco-based Rova Saxophone Quartet has become a singular musical institution by pursuing just such a path. Grounded in the chance-taking aesthetic of free jazz, avant rock and 20th-century new music, as well as various popular and traditional musical forms from Africa, Asia and the United States, the cooperative group has created a spellbinding universe of sound.

While serving as a laboratory for the compositional voices of its members, the quartet has also collaborated extensively with the most unfettered composers and improvisers, from Muhal Richard Abrams, Henry Threadgill, Jack DeJohnette and John Carter to Terry Riley, Alvin Curran, Fred Frith and Pauline Oliveros. In applying their finely honed sense of musical adventure to the work of these disparate composers, Rova creates a seamless fabric melding composition and improvisation.

"I don't know of any other group that has really done that explicitly, playing the works of other composers and making that an integral part of what they do," says trombonist/composer and MacArthur "Genius" grant recipient George Lewis, who wrote "Ring Shout Ramble" for the band. "You can think about a group like Kronos Quartet that took a similar path in terms of notated or composed music. But nobody has been doing it for as long as Rova and with their particular range of interests."

Founded in 1977 by Jon Raskin (baritone and alto sax), Larry Ochs (tenor sax), Andrew Voigt (alto and soprano sax) and Bruce Ackley (soprano and tenor sax), Rova took its name from the first letter of each musician's given name. In 1988, Voigt left the band and was replaced by Steve Adams, who had been a member of the Boston-based Your Neighborhood Saxophone Quartet.

Through prolific recordings and regular performances, Rova has nurtured a distinctive yet highly flexible group sound full of subtle textural shadings, thrilling group interplay and intense passages.

For Rova's performance on Sunday at the Attic, the group will be exploring material based on graphic scores, which requires the band to interpret illustrations, symbols and images that aren't part of any traditional notation system.

"Another piece we're going to do is 'Radar,' a piece based on hand cues," Ochs says. "We've been doing hand cue-based pieces for a long time. This is the latest step in its evolution, where there's no pre-notated music, just a series of games and strategies, and we take turns cuing each other. The results have really fooled a lot of people. If you hear a tape of it, it sounds really composed even though it isn't."

Part of what makes Rova such a seminal ensemble is the way the group has turned itself into an independent arts institution. Inspired by the Kronos Quartet, Rova became an incorporated nonprofit organization in the mid-'80s and has received regular funding from the NEA, California Arts Council and other prestigious funders. A series of joint performances with the Ganelin Trio, the Soviet jazz group, heightened Rova's national profile. But it was the band's collaborations with a number of avant-garde icons, especially reed player and composer Anthony Braxton, that allowed the band to apply the same probing intelligence to other artists' pieces.

"I remember when we first got together with Braxton we were wondering, 'Would this work?'" Ochs says. "There was definitely a question of whether our music is so idiosyncratic that only we can deal with it. But it became clear as we went through all these collaborations that really the opposite is true. Working with other composers has broadened our individual palettes as far as writing goes. It's been really liberating."

THE ROVA QUARTET plays Sunday, Sept. 23, at 7pm at the Attic, 931 Pacific Ave., Santa Cruz. Tickets are \$13 adv/\$15 door; 831.460.1800.

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