



ROVA/Nels Cline Singers
THE CELESTIAL SEPTET
New World

The last time the guitarist Nels Cline crossed paths with ROVA (along with a bunch of other folks), the result was the mighty *Electric Ascension*, the only Coltrane repertoire album in existence that's actually in the same class as the music it pays tribute to. *The Celestial Septet* is nowhere near as cataclysmic but nonetheless continues these musicians' exploration of 1960s free jazz, taking cues from everything from Aylerian ecstasy/fury to Ornette's prickly lyricism to Sun Ra's cosmic wanderings. (Larry Ochs' "Head Count", an earthy two-minute guitar rave-up whose kicking bari/tenor line has something of a demented Ceilidh flavour, is the disc's sole outlier.)

Members of the Singers (who – just to bring newcomers up to speed – consist of Cline, bassist Devin Hoff and drummer Scott Amendola, but no vocalist) contribute the CD's bookending pieces, both beautifully spacious. Amendola's "Cesar Chávez" is hauntingly simple yet nearly upstages the rest. Aching/caressing sax lines wander across Cline's hushed electronic duststorms and Hoff's soulful pedal point, and after a while Larry Ochs' baleful/tender tenor pushes to the fore. (It's a welcome reminder that he's got one of the greatest, most individual vibratos in the current jazz scene.) Cline's "The Buried Quilt" is jazz as alien visitation: vistas of benign cosmic stillness, the slow mating rituals of planets, *Day the Earth Stood Still* theremin loftily admonishing mankind, touches of Kubrick (i.e. Ligeti)... Via a few compositional curves, it crashes to earth with a densely cross-cut sequence of duets and trios (tenor/drums burnout weaving in and out of cool-blue soprano/guitar), before the flying saucers abandon Earth and benighted humankind and you hear the original theme echoing across the universe.

Steve Adams' "Trouble Ticket" is a burlesque rondo, its gruffly comic theme (saxes bobbing heads like pigeons, then converging on a "wrong answer!" buzzer) gradually revisited/revised across various solos and duos (including a lengthy Cline feature that goes from electronic slide-guitar cutup to tongues-out raving) then emerging somewhat more serenely at the end. Ochs' other piece is "Whose to Know", a 25-minute tribute to Ayler that stands imposingly at the album's centre. Its gradual shift between emotional poles at the start is genuinely impressive, blossoming across 5 minutes or so from Middle Eastern-flavoured melancholy to quickening joy so subtly it's hard to spot the joins. Indeed, though there are certainly passages of ecstasy and lung-tearing fury, as one would expect of an Ayler homage, the piece seems more centrally concerned with how Ayler's music upends one's conventional emotional associations with certain musical styles and modes. Major-key melodies here can seem intensely sorrowful; collective improvisation can nonetheless express profound solitude. As always with Ochs, "Whose to Know" offers genuine food for thought about one's experience of music, even as it itself offers an involving musical experience.

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