



Interview | Larry Ochs (Celestial Septet)

On Tuesday, February 22, [Ars Nova Workshop](#) presents the [Celestial Septet](#), featuring Rova and the Nels Cline Singers, who kick off their 5 date tour at International House Philadelphia. For those living outside the city who would like to experience this special concert, be sure to sign up for the free live webcast at [this link](#). We'll see everyone else on Tuesday! ANW was able to catch up with Larry Ochs, a founding member of Rova, for a few questions about the quartet's past collaborations, their history with the Nels Cline Singers, and the last time they were in Philadelphia, when ANW presented Electric Ascension.

Rova has worked with an overwhelming number of artists since forming in 1977. What's one of the critical collaborations that really pushed ROVA in a new creative direction?

I'll start by saying that it has been an incredible privilege to have a means for inviting all these great artists to work with us. If not for the non-profit status and the foundation support we were able to get, none of this, well, most of it, could not have happened. I'm sure that John Zorn and Henry Kaiser and Fred Frith, Alvin Curran, a few others along the way, would have done projects with us ultimately, but in the end you want to honor the art by paying for the artists' time and work. Back to your question.

I don't think there has been one collaboration that pushed Rova in a brand new creative direction. Rova was born pushing the limits in many different directions and we tended then and continue now to invite performers who work similarly and who will be open to pushing and being pushed. But I would say that over time many of these collaborators and collaborations accreted information, purpose, ideas, new ways of organizing music for improvisers, and an air of confidence in what they did that built up our own confidence, our own abilities, and our own projects, if that all makes sense. You can go right back to the shows with Margaret Jenkins Dance Company in 1980 or 1981, or to Kronos in 1984, where we wrote the music and got them to be a little bit comfortable with improvisation. But probably the first shows that really ratified what we were up to were those with Anthony Braxton in 1986, and then again in 1988. We thought that these shows would be a real challenge, but instead Braxton's music and Braxton as the fifth member of the quintet felt completely "right" immediately from the first rehearsal. His positive energy, legendary in improvised music circles, his playing on our pieces, and our playing in his was a real shot in the arm that absolutely confirmed what we were up to. Certainly I could also point to later compositions from Alvin Curran, Wadada Leo Smith, and Barry Guy as pieces that really had a fresh form that we were intrigued by, too. But there were many others, and all taught us something, in one way or another, so it's almost unfair to single certain ones out.

Are there any artists with whom you haven't yet collaborated but would like to?

Way too many to name. The thing is that "real time" and the reality of our music universe are real limiters on all these collaborations happening. The reality is that you just can't do a big project unless there's some money for that to happen, and finding sponsors gets harder all the time, given the cultural climate and the fact that "there is no money" for the arts anymore, not to mention that there is no money for education, infrastructure, and for anything else that might benefit the average person. Oh sorry, there is money for "security" and for making sure you don't do anything wrong in your own home. Forgot about those.

How did the Celestial Septet initially come together? Does the group lineage extend beyond Rova: Orkestrova's *Electric Ascension* project?

Rova met Nels a long, long time ago. I think the people in Wilco don't want us to tell you how long ago because then their fans might figure out that he's not such a young rocker, though absolutely rocking. Steve Adams has been playing with Nels in Vinny Golia projects since the 1990s, at least. Scott Amendola and Trevor Dunn first worked with me and Rova in 1998 on a long work of mine called "Pleistocene," a concert that included pieces by Adams and Raskin working with an eleven piece ensemble including Kaiser, John Schott, Lisle Ellis, Mike Patton, and Willie Winant. Scott has played with me for ten years in Larry Ochs Sax & Drumming Core and with my band Kihnoua since 2007. He's also part of Steve Adams' trio with bassist Ken Filiano. Nels of course really hooked up with us in a big way in 2003 for *Electric Ascension* which continues to occur more or less biannually in festival performance somewhere on the planet. I forget that Devin Hoff was the bassist for the Singers until just last summer. Devin actually had a shorter history with Rova than Trevor, playing with us in Vancouver on Electric Ascension in 2007, and then in the septet until this series of shows. Trevor has played Electric Ascension two or three times including the Philly show, and he and I have also worked in a band called ODE with Lisle Ellis and Mike Sarin. And Mr Bungle, with Trevor on electric bass, did a collaborative performance with Rova in the 1990s.

Given all this intermixing, and given the nature of the two bands playing for you in the Celestial Septet, it was almost "natural" for this collaboration to happen. And it happened in a very relaxed way when, in 2006, we performed on a double bill together in Berkeley, CA. Steve Adams arranged a piece by John Coltrane as an encore to the concert. That music was so cool that we determined that night to compose music specifically for this septet and then reconvene "someday," a day that turned out to be May 28, 2008.

What can audiences who have never previously experienced the Celestial Septet expect?

Nice writing, strong compositional forms, great playing, and both beauty and rocking energy. There's also some real magic in the fact that 5 different people, working independently of each other, brought in compositions for the band to play prior to the 2008 show, and that these pieces all seemed to fit together so well in the sets played. One thing they have in common is that all the composers (except Nels himself!) wanted to hear Nels do some shredding somewhere in their piece, so you will get a lot of electric guitar in the shows. This is not a free jazz band nor a free improvisation band. It's more conventional in a certain way. We have themes and melodies, and compositions that seem to tell stories.

When was the last time you played Philadelphia? Any fond memories?

The last time for Rova was Electric Ascension in 2007. That zoo is always a great scene in which to hang. The Philly show was the first for Andrew Cyrille and Trevor Dunn, and I love having the privilege of being on any stage with Cyrille. I always learn something. And I enjoyed Trevor telling me after the concert that right in the middle of his bass-drum duo with Cyrille, he thought, "Holy shit, I'm playing a duo with Andrew Cyrille!!" It was early February 2007 and the weather wasn't bad. We're bringing sunshine this time, both to the inside and outside of the International House.

The Celestial Septet plays on Tuesday, February 22 at International House (3701 Chestnut Street).

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