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Soundcheck A-Z

This month's selected CDs, vinyl and downloads

Rova & Nels Cline Singers

The Celestial Septet

New World CD

I've admired Rova since they formed in San Francisco in the late 1970s, but I find a certain frame of mind is needed to listen at length to a saxophone quartet. That's been the case with Rova despite their extremely varied investigation of the four horn format, and memorable collaborations with composers including Terry Riley, Fred Frith and Alvin Curran. On *The Celestial Septet* they join forces with the versatile Nels Cline Singers, that perversely named trio of electric guitarist Cline, double bassist Devin Hoff and drummer Scott Amendola. It's a vigorous and stimulating combination that needs no special frame of mind.

The adaptable Cline, also lead guitarist with Wilco, worked with Rova on their John Coltrane project, *Electric Ascension*, and the opener here – Amendola's "Cesar Chávez" – unfolds like one of Coltrane's steadily intensifying group meditations. The closing track, Cline's own "The Buried Quilt", is a mood piece with uneasy saxophone chords and electronic noodling, fracturing in places to release frenzied blowing.

In between there's Steve Adams's "Trouble Ticket", which veers neurotically between twitchy pointillism and cathartic fierceness. Larry Ochs's pithy "Head Count" is infectiously melodic and drenched in Cline's squally excess. "Whose To Know (For Albert Ayler)", an absorbing 25 minute Ochs composition, explores spaces opened up by the music's dedicatee, informed by Ayler rather than merely imitative. Rova maintain their undiluted and instantly recognisable sound. Not just four individualised voices projecting personality, but a matter of preferences and priorities while articulating as a group. Nels Cline Singers work with that integrity and bring their own exhilarating dimension to the music.

Julian Cowley