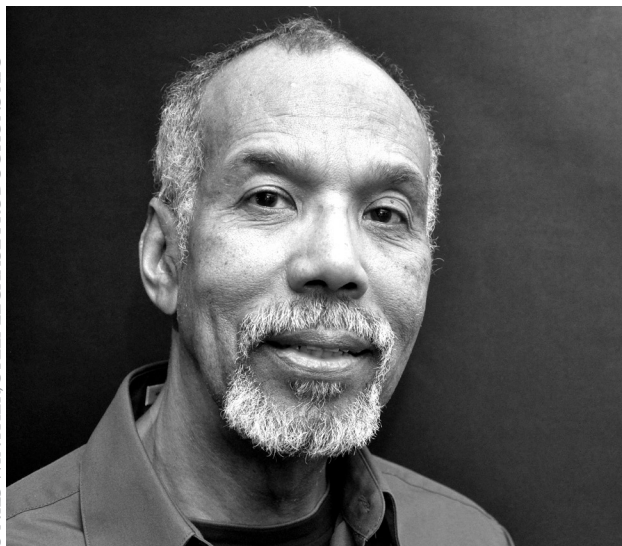


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STANLEY COWELL

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

Pianist Stanley Cowell arrived in New York in 1966 and found work right away with Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln, Marion Brown, Stan Getz and Bobby Hutcherson and went on to work with the Heath Brothers, J.J. Johnson and many jazz greats. In partnership with trumpeter Charles Tolliver, he started the influential Strata-East label in 1971. A prolific composer, Cowell's music is featured on some 30 albums as a leader and his "Equipoise" has been recorded by numerous artists. In 2013, Cowell retired, Professor Emeritus, from the Music Department of the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.

The New York City Jazz Record: Has the orchestral treatment of your *Asian Art Suite* been performed?

Stanley Cowell: It has been done several times: the Toledo Symphony, the Prince George's Philharmonic at the University of Maryland and the Rutgers University Orchestra. Those three orchestras have also done my piano concerto in honor of Art Tatum, a three-movement work commissioned in 1990 by the Toledo Orchestra and Meet The Composer. The last performance was 2003 by the Rutgers Orchestra.

TNYCJR: You encourage composition and orchestration to your students as a way to create more outlets for themselves.

SC: Yes, there are other venues outside of the jazz club that could be written for, even beyond the concert hall. There are male choruses, various community choirs, there are other types of ensembles that you might find associated with academic institutions, like percussion ensembles, brass choirs, that are separate from the flagship orchestras that may be associated with the university or college. So, anything that one can do to create in a different venue and connect with a different performing group would be helpful to expand the music to the public.

TNYCJR: It's at once an artistic encouragement as well as a way to be more active, have more work?

SC: Certainly. You can't sit around and wait to be called, unless you're an old veteran and everybody knows who you are and everybody may want to hear you. But for the younger players, they have to create, not only the music, but they have to create places to play, situations to play. Not everybody wants to compose, but most jazz improvisers are capable of putting stuff on paper, or at least organizing performances with other types of ensembles... all of the arts disciplines, write for plays, write music dramas, get into opera, dance, all of that.

TNYCJR: A lot of people have put forth the opinion that it is more difficult to make a living in music today as compared to the '60s, '70s or '80s; do you think this is true?

SC: I can't really speak to that, but it seems to be [true] because of the number of students studying jazz that want to play. However, I ask my advanced improvisation class, these are Masters level students, "What do you want to do when you leave here, when you graduate?" and only two or three people said they want to perform, the rest said they want to teach. But I still think there's a plethora of performers coming from schools that are not so much academic oriented but more performance oriented, like Berklee, William Paterson and the New School. Another reason Charles Tolliver and I started Strata-East Records was because there were a lot of creative artists that had no outlet and a recording was, of course, a calling card to get hired and to perform.

TNYCJR: Charles Tolliver said that a lot of people have tried to read political and racial motivations into the creation of Strata-East, but he said it had to do with ownership, pure and simple.

SC: That was the starting point, I agree.

TNYCJR: Because elsewhere there's been discussion of artistic independence as a political statement or a break with traditional structures of music industry. Are there aspects of that as well?

SC: That's the post-facto reality of Strata-East. You know, it started out just Charles and myself and gradually involving other artists who were producers of their own masters to affiliate and to assign their product—I think you have information on the nature of that—it was not a cooperative, it was a condominium concept. Charles and I owned the structure, the distribution set up by us over a period with our own recordings and then we began to expand by incorporating other producers and they would assign their product to us to distribute. We reversed the monetary arrangement that companies had; the lion's share went to the producers. Certain artists, though, were focused on the social aspect and racial—these were African-American artists that did want to express cultural feelings, political feelings, coming from their experiences as black artists, as black people. Remember, the inception of Strata-East is following on the urban upheaval of the late '60s—the assassinations of King and Malcolm X and the urban upheaval in black communities across the United States. It was something that was encouraged by Max Roach, to begin to control your destiny. It can be looked at, if you want, as some sort of a racial movement, but that's not how it started.

TNYCJR: How important is it to own your art in order to help insure your financial success?

SC: It's very helpful. [laughs]

TNYCJR: Is that something that's taught or discussed

with music students at Rutgers?

SC: At Rutgers there's no actual music business course that I'm aware of, unless they've instituted that in the last couple years, but I think individual teachers talk to students about that; I certainly did in the advanced improvisation course. I actually spent several classes on contract reading, trying to get them up on how not to be ripped off by contracts, recording contracts, sample licenses, mechanical licenses and just a simple performance contract that they should use, even between their sidemen and the producer or presenter of a performance. They should control that if possible.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 50)

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(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

Contract reading is important. [We also discussed], historically, what has happened to many musicians in all genres of music who basically died very poor.

TNYCJR: You've been working with SteepleChase for quite a while now.

SC: Yes. Some artists on SteepleChase do a sub-publishing agreement with the producer, Nils Winther, but I do not and never have and it does seem to work out fine for me. He's been very open about me composing and using original works, but I usually mix things up because I know people want to hear some things that they are familiar with.

TNYCJR: Your recent album, *Are You Real?*, was meant to be a Freddie Redd date, but you were called when he couldn't make it and worked with the rhythm section of Jay Anderson and Billy Drummond for the first time.

SC: That's correct, I had no plans to record for SteepleChase at that point but Nils called me and I put something together. It worked out great! I never worked with Jay before, but I had played once with Billy in Charles Tolliver's big band.

TNYCJR: They'll be joining you at the Village Vanguard?

SC: Yes. We've got another trio recording with the same rhythm section. We will be debuting some of the music from the forthcoming CD, which will probably not be released until the fall. This will be my debut performance at the Village Vanguard with my own group. I have worked the Vanguard many times with various artists in the '70s, '80s and '90s, but not since. I haven't performed there in a number of years, so this will be great, to come into a most important, prestigious jazz club in New York with my quartet. We will be doing solo, duo, trio and quartet in the course of the set, so there'll be quite a bit of textural variety.

TNYCJR: This June will be the 150th anniversary of Juneteenth [commemorating the ending of slavery in the U.S.] and you have a recording coming out commemorating the festival. How did that come about?

SC: I was visited in 2006 by Philippe Ghielmetti, the producer of the *Juneteenth* recording [solo piano released on Vision Fugitive], and I wasn't too interested at the time, but it turned out that I wrote a concert band work based on the Emancipation Proclamation, as a sabbatical project for Rutgers in 2007. It got expanded to include orchestra, chorus and electronics, but it has not been performed. The producer suggested I make a piano reduction of the larger work, but there are added tracks including a 17-minute improvisation, "Juneteenth Recollections", a gospel/spiritual type number, "Ask Him" and "We Shall 2". There is also the use of melodies of "Strange Fruit" and hints of Civil War-era songs. The main theme of the big work and the *Juneteenth* solo are from one of my earlier vehicles for jazz improv titled "Sienna: Welcome To This New World".

TNYCJR: Are the electronics in the larger piece related to the electronics on the *Welcome to this New World* CD?

SC: Yes, that's a platform by Symbolic Sound called Kyma that I use. It's become very compact and I've even been using it on the road. It processes the piano in real time. If I dared I would process the others too. I'm experimenting with it primarily on my instrument. Some of those processes were used in real time on the *Welcome to this New World* CD. It's like the Swiss army knife of sounds. It used to be pretty large. I acquired one through a grant when I was teaching at Lehman College in '97 when I took over the electronic music

course there. When I came over to Rutgers in 2000 I got the electronic studio there to acquire it and it was a later model, smaller and more powerful. In the last five or six years they have come out with the Pacarana. I use the smaller Paca unit along with a laptop computer. I'm considering using it on certain things at the Vanguard; I haven't fully decided, but I think I will.

TNYCJR: Are there plans to realize that treatment of *Juneteenth* for orchestra?

SC: It's pretty difficult, but I do have an offer in Washington D.C. I don't know whether they can have a concert band available, but perhaps a smaller version is possible. We'll see. It's originally for concert band, that's the orchestra. The concert band conductor at Rutgers was interested and looking into it but, as I said, I retired and didn't pursue it any further. I've gotten involved in some other things like the Strata-East All-Stars tour with Tolliver that we just did. And I recently performed at the solo piano event celebrating the 80th anniversary of the Village Vanguard with four other pianists that Jason Moran put together—Fred Hersch, Ethan Iverson, Kenny Barron and myself. It was really an enjoyable night... So, you know, my life is full enough. ❖

Cowell is at Village Vanguard Jun. 16th-21st. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Stanley Cowell—*Brilliant Circles* (Arista Freedom-Black Lion, 1969)
- Charles Tolliver—*Mosaic Select 20* (Strata-East-Mosaic, 1970/73)
- Stanley Cowell—*Illusion Suite* (ECM, 1972)
- Sonny Fortune/Billy Harper/Stanley Cowell/Reggie Workman/Billy Hart—*Great Friends* (Black & Blue-Evidence, 1986)
- Stanley Cowell—*Live at Maybeck Recital Hall, Vol. 5* (Concord, 1990)
- Stanley Cowell—*Are You Real?* (SteepleChase, 2014)

(LABEL CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

our artists still sell their CDs and we still sell CDs through our distributor, which provides Summit with strong marketing. A fraction of a penny per stream makes it hard to replace CD sales, but we realize that our number one goal is getting the music heard. Although streaming is overtaking the pie charts as the future of the business, I think there will always be at least some portion of the chart for CDs, plus look out for vinyl's comeback! But the push towards downloads/streaming has impacted the way we think and it is one of the main reasons we reworked our website to offer the music directly to our customers. Fans can now buy tunes right off our site, or simply sample them. We've put a lot of energy to make this work and although there are still some bugs, we'll get them worked out. Also of importance is coverage in jazz publications [print and on-line] and social media. Reviews can be very powerful and jazz radio is great exposure, though it's not really a big influence on sales. When everything works in tandem, there is a very powerful synergy that is created." ❖

For more information, visit summitrecords.com. Artists performing this month include Gene Bertocini at Jazz at Kitano Jun. 13th and The Drawing Room Jun. 21st; Randy Brecker at Manhattan School of Music Borden Auditorium Jun. 8th as part of a Lew Soloff Memorial and Tribeca Performing Arts Center Jun. 27th as part of the Made in NY Jazz Gala; Dave Liebman at Mezzrow Jun. 12th-13th and Greenwich House Music School Jun. 19th with Charles Evans; Art Lillard at Spoke the Hub Jun. 6th; New West Guitar Group at SubCulture Jun. 18th; and Charles Pillow at Korzo Jun. 16th with Alan Ferber. See Calendar.