

## Algerian Odyssey

In the seventies Britain's Arts Council rarely subsidised jazz projects – most of its funding went to composers of so-called straight music. One eminent critic defined jazz in Britain during that decade as “a music outside, a perpetual Cinderella of the arts.” Such neglect had caused many of the country's foremost jazz musicians to seek work on the Continent, where jazz enjoyed far higher status than it did in the UK. Yet Frank North's *Algerian Odyssey*, written in the summer of 1975, was an exception. It completed a trilogy of suites which continued the thread initiated by Duke Ellington and subsequently Gil Evans, whose long-form pieces had done much to move jazz out of the nightclub and into the concert hall.

*Algerian Odyssey* combined jazz and rock with elements of Arabic music, being based on one of the seven-note maqam scales. And it had been performed at the Barbican and the Royal Festival Hall to rapturous applause and glowing reviews, hence the Arts Council's grant towards the recording of the suite. The sessions, then, would be a big deal, both for British jazz and for Frank, who knew that the resulting album could lead to offers of work in the States.

Central to the suite was the trumpet of Pete Sandwell. In the Ellington tradition, Frank had composed the part specifically for his soloist, leaving space for Pete's brilliant improvisations while shaping the written lines to his way of playing across the time instead of within it. Among Pete's failings, however, was an endless need for ready cash – a drug habit and two avaricious ex-wives had all but decimated his finances.

On the day of the recording everyone showed up to the studio except Pete. Frank could scarcely believe it. As the tension mounted, he saw the engineer beckoning him to the control room where there was a phone call for him. He raced up the stairs, his thoughts a morass of anger and concern. Why wasn't Pete here? He knew how vital he was to the music. Had he been in some sort of accident?

Frank hardly said a word throughout the brief call. He was by now furious; indeed, never had he experienced such a profound wave of rage as this. He slammed down the receiver so forcefully that its plastic base cracked. But he was a professional composer and a jazz musician, which meant staying calm under pressure and being able to quickly adapt to new circumstances. Regaining his equilibrium, Frank left the control room, descended the stairs into the studio, and stepped up to the rostrum.

“Gentlemen,” he announced, “we've been let down. Pete has ditched us for a better-paid session. Advertising jingles, would you believe? Rather than waste precious studio time and all the remarkable talent I see before me, I'll lead you in a collective improvisation on the theme of betrayal.”

The engineer flicked on the recording light, Frank counted in the band – two bars for nothing – and they started to play ...