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DENARDO COLEMAN

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

Denardo Coleman is a producer and drummer best known as the son of musicians Ornette Coleman and Jayne Cortez. He made his first appearance on record with his father in 1966 on The Empty Foxhole (Blue Note) when he was just ten years old. He continued to make music with both of his parents and, after studying political science at City College of New York, began managing his father's music business while still in his 20s.

The New York City Jazz Record: How was rehearsal tonight?

Denardo Coleman: It was good. We're working on the *Naked Lunch* project. It's a little bit intricate because it's performing live to the film itself along with the orchestra. So, particularly for Henry [Threadgill] and Ravi [Coltrane], totally new to performing it, it's a lot to absorb. It was good though. It's a quartet with me, Henry and Ravi and Charnett Moffett on bass, along with the whole orchestra and the film.

TNYCJR: How does familiarity with the film help to make the performance?

DC: You get a better idea of what influenced my father to play what he played. The film experience had a lot to do with it and, of course, Howard Shore's score and the *Naked Lunch* book itself. So it's all in there. If you hear my father playing on that, there's just such a depth to the sound and the way he interpreted the orchestra. It's a masterpiece so, to perform that live, you need as much information as you can get.

TNYCJR: How did you start playing the drums?

DC: From being around [my father] and his rehearsals I just became fascinated with the drums, watching his drummers, and just gravitated toward them.

TNYCJR: Listeners have found the *The Empty Foxhole* at once confounding and beautiful. How did a ten-year-old drummer come to be on that record?

DC: It's kind of like how I got interested in drums—I'm talking about like six, seven years old—and he and I would just play and that's kind of how I learned: with his drummers and just playing with him. It wasn't like I was thinking about becoming a drummer. We just did a lot of playing and then he said, "We're going to go in the studio." He made everything so natural that it wasn't like making a record was that big a deal. It was just do what we'd been doing, but we're going to do it in this space instead of this space and they're going to record it.

TNYCJR: I was wondering how you approached the music at that time or how you learned it, but I think you kind of just answered that: just doing what you'd been doing.

DC: That's right. Since I didn't know any different I just went with him and however he instructed me to play and to listen. He is more about having the conversation with sound. Of course the better you are on your instrument probably the better you are with that. I can't say I was that polished, but in terms of having a conversation, since we had been playing for a few years at that point, there was obviously a musical connection there. I had always just been around him and what he did with his groups was they basically rehearsed and practiced like non-stop, every day all day long. If he wasn't doing that he was writing music and working out stuff. He was just on a constant exploration and you were on that exploration with him. That was probably a different way of being introduced to being a musician.

TNYCJR: I read your words from the *Celebrate Ornette* boxed set where you talk about your father and his people back in the '60s and all the time they spent practicing and rehearsing: "The mission, as it turned out, was a spiritual one. Unlocking the energies in music that included healing and higher awareness." Could you speak some more to those energies?

DC: I don't know if you had the chance to meet and have a conversation with him...

TNYCJR: I never did, but [late saxophonist] Frank Lowe loved him and spoke of his generosity. He and others talked about a kind of unique serenity. It made an impression that people would say he was generous and brought them peace because he had his challenges all the way and had to endure a lot, so to have this to give to people—and maybe I'm beginning to answer my own question a little bit as far as unlocking these energies, but it's still a mystery to me.

DC: No, that's right, you're right there. I mean, I think partially it's just the way he was as a person, but music and everything had taken him to another spiritual level. He liked to be really encouraging to people and he just thought anything is a valid idea. Your idea is just as valid as his. What he liked to encourage was for people to have more and more ideas and he was willing to give you whatever time he had if he could help you along in that process. So, musically, the same thing; I think he was always looking for the properties inside of sound and properties can do a lot emotionally and physically to a person. So, when he talked about music, he talked about some of the nuts and bolts regular ways, but a lot of it was philosophical. So that's what I mean by unlocking that energy. He definitely felt that sound had energy. You could replace the word "sound" with "life" for him. Sound is the way to express life. Life has lots of dimensions and you can definitely be enlightened, that's one of the dimensions that life has. Sound was all connected to that. That's where he was coming from.

TNYCJR: The *Naked Lunch* project is part of a concert series this summer at Lincoln Center. Shirley Clarke's film, *Ornette: Made in America*, is also a part of the series. I believe it's in that film that he says, "expression of all individual imagination is what I call 'harmolodic' and each being's imagination is their own unison and there are as many unisons as there are stars in the sky." What you just said seems to echo that and vice versa. People have struggled with the meaning of "harmolodic". In that instance it's put rather succinctly, but maybe harmolodic isn't one thing.

DC: It becomes an agent to open a person up. It's
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partially theoretical, meaning he has lots of different exercises in terms of musical things, but those musical things end up taking you out of the normal way you've thought about notes and then lead you somewhere else. Then, when you realize you're away from what you know, but where you're at is taking you to some great places and great resolutions, then it's like, "oh, okay, there's a whole other world." So, as soon as you realize there's a whole other world there's no going back. That's what harmolodic does. It just helps you, I'm not gonna say break free but it gets you in a place where you're open. When you're open and you actually get other information, you can absorb it in a way you hadn't before. It's just like going through a door; it's like "Wow! There are lots of other places to go." So, it's a good thing, it's a good thing.

TNYCJR: It sounds like breaking out of certain routines, or maybe not relying on a comfort zone or something, but that would be different for different people.

DC: Yeah, that's right. A person's mind can get so locked in, you know what I mean? It's kind of like if you weren't looking and you picked up what you thought was water and it was root beer. At first you just wouldn't know where you were. Because your mind already has you in a certain place and it takes you a moment. So it's kind of like that, you know? If you can get out of your own space for a moment and then, when you're out of your own space, if you're able then to really look around, I mean to realize you can look around. So yeah it's individual to a certain degree. With this Lincoln Center festival, we've got a lot of the guys who played with him before us and we've been having a lot of talks about harmolodics and how to put it in a form that more people can come in contact with and hopefully that will happen. Because in a certain sense it's complicated but not complicated. The basic thing is just it really helps you to be more open.

TNYCJR: There's also a Prime Time reunion.

DC: There's kind of like two versions, but the original version, the last time they performed was around, about 30 years ago. It could've been '87. It's been that long. A real reunion. The nice thing about the series is these different dimensions of my father. How it came about was they started this thing called the Lincoln Center Festival in 1997 and that first year they decided to do an Ornette Coleman festival. So, they asked him what he wanted to do and we had a four-night run in Avery Fisher Hall. It was kind of like a retrospective. He had the original quartet with Charlie [Haden] and Billy Higgins. Don Cherry was supposed to appear but then he had a health issue and he invited Wallace Roney to step in for Don. So, he had the quartet, we had Prime Time on a night and we had guests, we had Lou Reed and Laurie Anderson. Then we had two nights of his symphony, *Skies of America*, with the New York Philharmonic and Kurt Masur conducting.

TNYCJR: I remember it was right after Billy Higgins had his liver transplant. Everybody wondered how they were going to do and it was just a beautiful experience. Higgins had this brush solo that kind of deconstructed into silence and up above in the balcony at Avery Fisher Hall I heard "Billy". Lowe asked if I heard it and was embarrassed to admit he made that sound.

DC: I think I remember that! Frank was just an incredible person. I was fortunate to play with him quite a few times with my mother. That was special, Frank is something else, positive and encouraging.

TNYCJR: So, what else are you doing with this summer concert series?

DC: So that was in 1997. This being the 20th anniversary they wanted to do something to honor my father. I said, "let's do another Ornette festival" and kind of chose something similar. We have the *Naked Lunch* project with orchestra and it's something different that has not been performed in New York before. The reunion with Prime Time. And that Shirley Clarke film is just such an incredible film. People will have the chance to see my father in the context of what an artist really is. I mean, Shirley Clarke's an artist, he's an artist and both of them are creating art at the moment that filming is taking place. You can't describe it, but for people who want to get some insight into my father, that film is a unique experience. And then, he's written a lot of chamber music, which has not gotten performed that much. So, I think we have a half a dozen pieces from a solo violin up to I think about 18-, 19-piece chamber group. So it's really just a nice panorama of various works. ❖

Denardo Coleman is at Alice Tully Hall Jul. 11th and Jul. 14th as part of Ornette Coleman—Tomorrow is the Question. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Ornette Coleman—*The Empty Foxhole* (Blue Note, 1966)
- James "Blood" Ulmer—*Tales of Captain Black* (Artists House-DIW, 1978)
- Ornette Coleman & Prime Time—*Opening the Caravan of Dreams* (Caravan of Dreams, 1985)
- Ornette Coleman—*Sound Museum: Hidden Man/Three Women* (Harmolodic/Verve, 1996)
- Ornette Coleman—*Sound Grammar* (Sound Grammar, 2005)
- Ornette Coleman—*Celebrate Ornette* (Song X, 2014-15)

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Haarmann takes his job as producer seriously, though it varies from one project to the next. "My role is to make music happen. When I did a session for JazzBaltica, I believed in and trusted the musicians. I was nearly always successful this way. It's also that way with my label. If you look to my last recording, I worked over the years with all of these great musicians: Dave Douglas, Donny McCaslin, Scott Colley and a unique drummer, Johnathan Blake. We were together at Systems Two in Brooklyn and they started to make music. You have to know enough about music, exactly what you could expect. The rest is to trust in artists you really know. I trusted Don Friedman so deeply and not knowing how ill Don was, I called him and told him I was coming to New York in April [2016] to record [saxophonist] Donny McCaslin. I asked what he was doing and he said he was playing an homage to [late Hungarian guitarist] Attila Zoller at Jazz at Kitano with [guitarist] Peter Bernstein. Don played and recorded with Attila for many years. I said, 'Wow! Let's record this live.' The sad fact that it was Don's last recording. It's the real testament of the best Don Friedman. I once did a concert at my JazzBaltica Festival with Don and said that, 'You should be more promoted as one of the best composers I know. I want you to do a concert with only your compositions, do this with a special trio with [bassist] Martin Wind and [drummer] Joe LaBarbera. I have a strong feeling you should add a string quartet.' Don immediately said yes. That's the way I always try to work, I give ideas, but decide upon the reaction of the musician."

Haarmann takes the artwork just as seriously. "I remember the last recording [*Brooklyn 3*, with Blake, Colley, McCaslin and guest Douglas], I wanted an artist from Berlin, Jakob Mattner, to create the cover art. The musicians were 100% enthusiastic about it. They came in touch with each other and the result is just wonderful. The cover for Don's last album was my decision, since he had died. When I started my label, my first LP was a Don Friedman solo concert. I gave

him the idea of this artist and he agreed."

The musicians who have appeared on Edition Longplay LPs speak highly of their relationship with Haarmann. Pianist George Cables remarked, "Rainer Haarmann wasn't able to be present at the date but his fingerprints were all over it. I was approached by [baritone saxophonist] Gary Smulyan and I knew it was all about the music. Being a duet it was very personal. Gary is a great musician and a virtuoso on his instrument so it was a joy to play with him. We'd been talking about playing together for some time. When I did meet Rainer, it was even better than I had expected. He's a real gentleman with a deep love of music and musicians."

Pianist Alan Broadbent is also full of praise in his dealings with the producer, reflecting, "In the times I have worked with Rainer, at the JazzBaltica Festival with Charlie Haden's Quartet West and in his production of my solo album on Edition Longplay, I have known him to be a champion of artistic values in jazz. With this label he has combined his two loves, intense and heartfelt jazz with his eye for beautiful art, so that each of his projects has its own character and connection to the music he wants to present. It's especially gratifying to see him personally involved with his musicians, encouraging them and providing an environment in which they can create to their full potential. These recordings are a testament to superior performances and superb quality of sound reproduction." ❖

For more information, visit editionlongplay.com. Artists performing this month include Alan Broadbent at Mezzrow Jul. 30th. Jonathan Kreisberg at Jazz Standard Jul. 1st-2nd with Dr. Lonnie Smith and Bar Next Door Wednesdays; Romero Lubambo at Jazz Standard Jul. 25th; and Gary Smulyan at 92nd Street Y Jul. 20th as part of Jazz in July. See Calendar and Regular Engagements.

