



Louis Armstrong's America Volume 1 and 2
Allen Lowe & The Constant Sorrow Orchestra
 (ESP-Disk')
 by Jim Motavalli

Connecticut-based Allen Lowe is prolific, both as a highly opinionated writer (now on Substack) and as a saxophonist. Despite daunting health issues, he's entered a particularly creative period, as he begins his eighth decade. *Louis Armstrong's America*, in two volumes, but united on this package of four CDs, is a sprawling work—all Lowe's compositions take in not just the world Armstrong knew, but the technicolor sweep of jazz history.

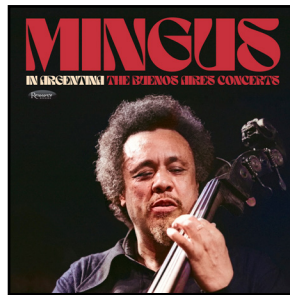
Lowe says that Armstrong may have been "the first true post-modernist," and that gives him free rein across a wide spectrum. "Mr. Jenkins' Lonely Orphan Band" references an actual orphanage orchestra that played ragtime on the streets of Charleston, SC. It evokes not only New Orleans street parades, but in Frank Lacy's trumpet also evokes Albert Ayler's martial melodies. Lowe assembled an especially strong band for this romp through musical history, and why not? This music is catnip for historically-minded jazz musicians (and, from personal experience at least, that means most of them). Lowe's tenor and piano are complemented by a big, big band of fellow travelers, recording a highly ambitious program that's like an aural (but much wider focused) complement to Ken Burns' *Jazz* documentary. It's hard not to agree with Lowe's opinion, expressed copiously, that if he were not a virtual outcast in the circles where awards and recognition are doled out, his work would be widely rewarded with gigs and grants.

None of that would matter if his music wasn't worth the trouble, but it definitely is. The two double-disc volumes offer a brilliant and always surprising synthesis of styles. It's a loving tribute to the vast cornucopia of American music, much of it still obscure. In all, there are 69 compositions, which neatly dovetails with the Magnetic Fields' seminal 1999 *69 Love Songs*. The listener might be tempted to keep some jazz reference books handy. Speckled Red, of "Speckled Red's Revenge", for instance (and name-checked here), was the brother of famed blues pianist Piano Red (aka "Dr. Feelgood"). "Calling All Freaks" is a sly reference to Luis Russell's "The Call of the Freaks" (1929) and additionally has some of Sun Ra's mastodon stomp. "The Last Bebop Tune" surely isn't, but it's a fair representative of the breed at least until Ray Suhy's shredding guitar solo. "Utah Smith Visits MOMA" starts out as an electric blues in the vein of Elmore James or Buddy Guy. Utah Smith led his church's gospel group with a Gibson electric guitar—a male Rosetta Tharpe, if you will. Suhy then steers it into Jimi Hendrix freakout territory before a wailing saxophone actually calms things down. "When Dave Schildkraut Goes Marching In" references Lowe's nominee for the undeservedly neglected alto player Hall of Fame, a modernist who also played Dixieland on occasion. "Love is a Memory" features velvety vocalist Huntley McSwain (a discovery) and it sounds like a standard left off an Etta Jones album; she also shines on "I'm a Woman Again".

It's impossible to do full justice to this protean full-screen, double-volume masterpiece in a short review. Suffice to say, Allen Lowe & The Constant Sorrow Orchestra's *Louis Armstrong's America Volume 1 and 2* is like a *Time-Life* anthology from one man's head. And though his writing may sometimes get bitter,

Lowe's music as heard throughout this ambitious project certainly does not.

For more info visit espdisk.com. Lowe is at Smalls Apr. 9. See Calendar.



In Argentina: The Buenos Aires Concerts
Charles Mingus (Resonance)
 by George Kanzler

It was always an adventure attending a Charles Mingus performance. Trumpeter Jack Walrath gets to the heart of why in his extensive notes for this rare, unearthed gem, *In Argentina: The Buenos Aires Concerts*; one night on the job, Mingus told him, "Boy, you really played some great stuff." Elated, Walrath played "kind of the same thing" the next night. "Why'd you play that again?" said Mingus, and that's the way it was, Walrath explains—always the need for something different.

This album (available as a limited edition 3-LP "Record Store Day" special this month, also available as a double-CD set) was recorded live at two concerts in Buenos Aires in early June 1977. It is something not only different but something rare: the last working band (a quintet) Mingus toured with before ALS led to his death 18 months later. The program was thus never captured in a studio for a commercial recording (and at that time, Mingus' released recordings were by much larger ensembles). The quintet was anchored by the bassist and his longest-serving band member, drummer Dannie Richmond, plus Walrath, tenor saxophonist Ricky Ford and pianist Robert (Bob) Neloms.

Most impressive here is the 22+ minute version of "Cumbia and Jazz Fusion", an epically wide-ranging and adventurous rendition replete with multiple tempo changes, weaving tandem solos from the horns, accelerations and decelerations, and even some vocal choruses of "Shortnin' Bread" from the bandleader. "Three or Four Shades of Blue" is also kaleidoscopic in range and includes Neloms segueing from rubato to swing by quoting "Cheek to Cheek". Walrath shifts from Harmon mute to open horn during tandem solos with Ford, and Mingus makes a walking bass solo convincingly sing. Other indelible highlights include the tenor saxophonist's tour-de-force extended cadenza on (the incompletely recorded) "Sue's Changes", with a virtuosic turn reminiscent of Sonny Rollins, as well as in-the-pocket blues soloing on the surprisingly straight-ahead "Noddin' Ya Head Blues". But the "something different" prize of this recording is the 13+ minute version of Sy Johnson's "For Harry Carney". Anchored by a bass-piano ostinato and theme from Walrath's Harmon-muted trumpet, along with Ford's tenor, the tune proceeds through a series of instrumental solos, all backed by Richmond's unique mallets on toms and other drum heads, always building. He eases back the volume during Mingus' bass solo, but never the hypnotic momentum.

As we commemorate the 103rd year marking Mingus' birth this month, *In Argentina: The Buenos Aires Concerts* offers a rare glimpse into the sounds and dynamics of the last band he would ever tour with. A gem indeed.

For more info visit resonancerecords.org. *Mingus Dynasty* is at Zinc Bar Apr. 18 and *Mingus Big Band* is at Birdland Apr. 29-30. See Calendar.

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