

the first side of the album. On the second, “Maimon” builds from a plaintive theme to a whirling climax; “Travelin’ Man” overlays Rhodes and thumb pianos to forge a vibey vamp; “Departure, Nos. 1 & 2” twine the twin influences of Tatum and Taylor; and “Sweet Song” infuses rhapsodic balladry with chromatic embellishments. The bonus tracks include “Orientale”, “Dave Chant’s”, both in rolling 6/8 grooves, the first at a faster tempo, and “Akua”, all showing Cowell’s skill with pentatonic melodies and intricate sequences, plus an alternate take of “Travelin’ Man”.

Live at Slugs’ Volume I & II, recorded at the iconic jazz venue on the eastern edge of the East Village, is another time capsule, this one capturing the sound and sensibility of Tolliver’s incredible quartet with Cowell, bassist Cecil McBee and drummer Jimmy Hopps. Performing for a small audience (to judge by the sparse clapping), with less than perfect audio (Hopps’ crash cymbal is barely audible, his ride cymbal even less so), playing music patently influenced by John Coltrane (who had passed three years prior), the recording nevertheless explodes with singular energy. Tolliver is a marvel, unleashing an unrelenting flow of rapid-fire ideas, taking extended solos, both intelligent and soulful, that morph and modulate through various moods without losing momentum. He’s helped enormously in this by Hopps, an inventive, energetic accompanist who often engages the trumpeter in impromptu call-and-response exchanges, and by McBee, whose virtuosic timekeeping is articulated with a beautiful warm tone. The tracks—“Drought”, “Felicite”, “Orientale”, “Spanning”, “Wilpan’s”, “Our Second Father”—are mostly modal swingers, often in dark minor keys, thickened by Cowell’s trilling chords, punctuated by cued intros and codas, with smooth tempo shifts and cohesive group interplay. Cowell

soars on the latter track, fingers gliding, imagination in full flight. The bonus tracks—“On the Nile”, “Ruthie’s Heart”, “Repetition”—especially the first, are welcome supplements.

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Flashing Spirits
Cecil Taylor/Tony Oxley
(Burning Ambulance Music)
by Mike Shanley

This recently unearthed performance by Cecil Taylor and legendary UK drummer-percussionist Tony Oxley (whose two-year deathaversary is Dec. 26) took place at the 1988 Outside In Festival (30 miles south of London). The pianist and drummer played together for the first time just three months before this UK set, but the rapport between the two of them seems like a conversation of deep mutual understanding built over many years and numerous performances.

The 38+ minute title track begins with soft, quick notes barely rising from the lower keyboard, evoking light raindrops. When Taylor lets fly with a fast three-note run, Oxley reacts immediately with a crack on a small drum. The inexhaustible C.T. of *One Too Many*

Salty Swift and Not Goodbye (1978) sounds, at times, more deliberate and pensive a decade later. Yet there are also motifs—if the pianist’s playing can be reduced to such a term—that recall bits of his *Silent Tongues* (1974), where his right hand seems to react to the left with intervallic leaps.

Oxley, who played with Taylor regularly until the pianist’s passing in 2018, proves himself a most attentive duo partner, virtually replicating on percussion what Taylor does at the piano. For the first half of the performance, he creates a sustained wave of sound between cymbals and drums, while the pianist works in short blasts with little to no sustain pedal. Moments come when Taylor produces some manic high-end runs and some heavy stabs that produce clear clusters of tone; it feels like the equivalent of a gale storm ravaging an instrument that refuses to stop producing sounds. So it almost comes as a shock when, after 30 minutes, the dynamics drop to a point where the pianist could almost be called “lyrical.” Oxley responds empathetically with soft clicks, before the two pick up speed as they reach the finish line. Of the two brief “Encore” tracks, the first, a four-minute blast, ironically and arguably is more frantic than the ten-times-longer title track. “Encore 2 (Stone)” is more of a tease: 45 brief seconds of solo piano followed by 20 seconds of enthusiastic applause.

Cecil Taylor was likely not an easy person to record with clarity, but this live release captures his sonic range, in conjunction with an equally multi-layered performance by Oxley, who was one of the pianist’s favorite collaborators over the course of Taylor’s final three decades of playing.

For more info visit burningambulancemusic.com/flashing-spirits

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