



DAVID LASKOWSKI

أحمد [Ahmed]

abdul-malik's conceptions of sound

BY KURT GOTTSCHALK

This could prove to be the year of أحمد [Ahmed], at least stateside. At home in the UK, and through much of Europe, the quartet has built a reputation for energetic, euphoric performances. Concerts last spring at Roulette in Brooklyn and at the Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, TN, started the building of an American fan base. Two new albums might well serve to make their ecstatic music a bit more approachable, and three nights at Shapeshifter Lab in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn this month will add considerably to their US concert history. The group is named for the Brooklyn-born bassist, oudist Ahmed Abdul-Malik (Jonathan Tim, Jr. at the time of his birth in 1927), who despite playing with Art Blakey, Thelonious Monk and Randy Weston, is hardly a household name today. [Ahmed] the band plays long-form improvisations on Abdul-Malik's compositions—a sort of thematic free jazz—that can last up to an hour. At face value, it can be a bit daunting, but for those willing to listen with abandon it can lead to an unusually intense trance and leave them (to borrow a phrase from Ornette Coleman) dancing in their heads.

After five albums released between 2017 and 2024 (including the massive five-disc boxed set *Giant Beauty*), [Ahmed] released *Sama'a (Audition)* last October on Otoroku—their first studio recording—following the track list and sequence of Abdul-Malik's 1958 leader debut *Jazz Sahara* (Riverside) but covering two LPs, with each piece running 15-20 minutes. This April, Otoroku will issue *Play Monk*, the group's first time recording material not penned by Abdul-Malik, and with immediately more recognizable themes. It's all making [Ahmed] a bit easier to take in. "We wanted to try more concise versions of our usual long-form pieces, which often run 40 minutes to an hour or more," says drummer Antonin Gerbal. "As improvisers, we like giving ourselves constraints—individually and collectively—because it forces different decisions. On *Sama'a (Audition)*, the idea was to build a long suite out of shorter movements, so there's continuity but also sharp contrasts, like a kaleidoscope."

[Ahmed] takes tunes that are nearly 70 years old and makes them sound new and like their own, with all the energy and inventiveness of free improvisation. They play written pieces without a script, reworking their namesake's output without a net, save for a common commitment to purpose. It's a singular group endeavor. "I think we all bring different, interconnected, shared ideas, imaginations, investigations, and interests to the improvisation, every time," saxophonist Seymour Wright adds. "What we do has to do with the (still under-appreciated) ideas, philosophy, work and music of Abdul-Malik, but also, equally, many other ideas in and beyond music. It really is group, improvised music." Wright explains that the group discusses what they might investigate and work with in a piece before playing, but that it's realized in the moment through collective improvisation. "Visiting *Jazz Sahara* in this way for our first studio recording," Wright continues, "felt conceptually correct. We played two of these tunes ('El Haris' and 'Isma'a') the very first time we played together in 2014. But the other two we had only ever played once ('Ya Annas') or perhaps twice ('Farah' Alaiyna')."

An opportunity for unpacking the band's enigmatic approach to music-making can be found in "El Haris". The

original recording on *Jazz Sahara* (the cover bears the subtitle "Ahmed Abdul Malik's Middle-Eastern Music") lasts eleven and a half minutes. It opens with the leader's oud, Naim Karacand's violin and several percussionists stating the elongated theme from the outset. About a minute in, the warm saxophone of Johnny Griffin (better known for stints with Blakey and in a Monk group with Abdul-Malik) pulls the tune into jazz territory. [Ahmed]'s take on *Sama'a* lasts about five minutes longer, and is the shortest take they've released. It begins with a solid bass note from the piano and then some fluttering between piano and saxophone, some scraped strings, and then makes its way into a lovely ballad abstraction before a gradual unveiling of the theme.

The tune comprises both sides of their 2017 debut (*New Jazz Imagination*, on band bassist Joel Grip's Umlaut record label) under the translated title "Anxious". Wright gives a fairly straight-forward reading of the theme, accompanied by Grip's arco undertones, and Gerbal pushes them into a strut. It's pianist Pat Thomas (recently selected as one of NYCJR's "Musicians of the Year" for 2025)—who first intones moments of dissonance, but still adhering to the marching rhythm. The 42-minute take on *Super Majnoon (East Meets West)*—the title incorporates a suggestion in Arabic from Master Musicians of Jajouka leader Bachir Attar that their music is "super crazy"—was recorded live in 2018 at London's Cafe OTO. It hews more closely to Abdul-Malik's recording, but inverted in a sense, with Wright's fierce, insistent unaccompanied saxophone stating the theme at the outset—closer to Albert Ayler's wail than Griffin's embrace—and leading the group into a swirling, psychedelic exploration. The 44-minute take on *Giant Beauty* recalls the bowed bass intro on *New Jazz Imagination* but feels more assured. They step into the march together, Thomas introducing counterpoint figures and Wright shifting away from the theme more readily. It's a confident and resplendent rendering, benefiting no doubt from playing five consecutive nights in the same room. "El Haras" was also the backbone of last year's Roulette set, which lasted just under an hour (and can be streamed on the venue's website), beginning with tongue slaps and a pounded bass note from the piano, repeated, growing emphatic until Wright and Thomas, as if by telepathy, fly into a two-part statement of the theme.

"We're deeply inspired by Abdul-Malik, but what you hear is also our collective work as improvisers and composers—and as people," according to Gerbal. "We're very different individually, but closely connected. This music can only happen with this group, in this format, with these players. Otherwise, it wouldn't be recognizable as our band. It's about absorbing the music and a set of feelings, and trying—humbly—to make something in the present. I feel close to Abdul-Malik's conceptions of sound: swing, rhythm, experimentation, and also an ethics; alterity and radical equality. His work inspired us to connect different elements and push our imaginations." Within the group dynamic interplay, Abdul-Malik always remains at center. "[Ahmed] musically would not exist if not for Ahmed Abdul-Malik's compositions," says Thomas. "It forced us to develop an approach that was respectful to his music and at the same time incorporated our improvisational essence. We all love swing and we all love free improvisation; this is the key element in being

true to Ahmed Abdul-Malik and ourselves."

The five-disc *Giant Beauty* set was a gamble of love for the small Swedish label Fönstret, documenting five nights in Stockholm in 2022. Nobody got rich from it, but it did break even, and with enough demand that a third pressing will be released this year. "I wanted to make something that was like the 'complete' recordings boxed sets you see for the now-canonical jazz artists, but rather than after-the-fact-already-proven greatness; I wanted to release it 'in-real-time,'" according to John Chantler, artistic director of Ideel Edition, the parent organization of Fönstret, who produced the five concerts. "I like the CD as a format even if solo CD sales are indeed beyond dire, but I think a CD boxed set gets a special pass. I'm super lucky to have seen maybe 20 live sets now and they are still capable of surprise." He adds, "The basic thrill of it is still just a known, reliable quantity on the surface—there is so much detail and nuance to absorb. It's also exciting to be listening with others new to what they do. The energy in the room during their recent OTO residency was extraordinary and it's impossible to separate that from the music."

January 2027 will mark Abdul-Malik's centenary and perhaps a chance for an even greater celebration of his musical and cultural exchange. "What we do is something that is very much connected to each one of us in the band, but it's also very much connected to history and to how musicians have been making music for 50,000 years," Grip says. "It's really direct in that way. We bring in a lot of different tools and ways of doing and histories." He adds: "And it's quite amazing how we connect with these differences. And that also connects to Ahmed Abdul-Malik, how he did it, how he actually managed to get these, let's say, very different sounding people." More than that, Grip explains that in a way, the group is very close because they are impelled to want to share and discover the differences. "It's a very important aspect of Ahmed's (Abdul-Malik) music. The improvisational part is very important, that we are connecting through our improvisation, our way of improvisation with Ahmed Abdul-Malik's way of improvising. This dialog is there." Coming to New York allows [Ahmed] a geographical dialogue with Abdul-Malik as well. "It's an incredible privilege and pleasure to come and play in New York, where Ahmed Abdul-Malik is from, where he made this music," says Grip. "Last time, we were walking on Atlantic Avenue, where he lived, and to enter that space where this music was made possible, it's this very special feeling, and very exciting."

For more info visit ahmed.band/en. أحمد [Ahmed] is at Shapeshifter Lab Feb. 19-21 and Solar Myth (Philadelphia, PA) Feb. 23. See *Calendar* and *100 Miles Out*.

Recommended Listening:

- [Ahmed]—*New Jazz Imagination* (Umlaut, 2016)
- [Ahmed]—*Super Majnoon (East Meets West)* (Otoroku, 2018)
- [Ahmed]—*Nights on Saturn (Communication)* (Astral Spirits, 2019)
- [Ahmed]—*Giant Beauty* (Fönstret, 2022)
- [Ahmed]—*Wood Blues* (Astral Spirits, 2022)
- [Ahmed]—*Sama'a (Audition)* (Otoroku, 2025)