



This month marks the golden anniversary of *Wildflowers: The New York Loft Jazz Sessions*, the five-volume Casablanca-Douglas anthology series of live performances recorded in the summer of 1976, when NYC's Loft era jazz scene was in its heyday. Having evolved from a '60s cultural statement to a revolutionary extension of the Black Arts Movement that gripped the city's eclectic music culture, the Loft era became a magnet for other musical communities throughout the country. *Wildflowers*—the brainchild of iconoclastic Casablanca label owner and producer Alan Douglas, record producer (Atlantic, Arista, Freedom, Muse, etc.) and Blue Note Records discographer Michael Cuscuna and multi-instrumentalist Sam Rivers—remains the dominant musical artifact that emerged from the concerts held at Studio RivBea, the NoHo loft located in the Bond Street home of Rivers and his wife Bea(trice).

The couple originally opened the loft in 1970 for music lessons and as a rehearsal space. Concert presentations would begin a few years later, in 1972, after a summer festival sponsored by the New York Musicians Association, a group formed to promote New Wave/Black Arts inner-city music, which its members believed was largely ignored by Newport Jazz Festival producer George Wein. Wein had moved his festival to Manhattan that year following a buildup of civil unrest, crowd control problems and issues with the residents of Newport, RI. The Association wanted Wein to include artists from the newly developed jazz scene, but instead his lineups featured mostly nationally-recognized artists, operating within the bourgeois business environment that the music revolutionaries resisted.

Drummer Barry Altschul, a longtime collaborator of Rivers who appears on *Wildflowers 2* as a member of Anthony Braxton's quintet, remembers the evolving jazz environment of this period: "European improvised music was starting to influence the avant garde scene. The people I played with who were considered 'free' were very steeped in the bop tradition." Altschul and the members of the Bill Dixon-founded Jazz Composers Guild were in a dilemma: "The kind of music that [we] wanted to play wasn't getting hired." Trumpeter Ahmed Abdullah—whose ensemble Abdullah (now known as Diaspora), featuring tenor saxophonist Charles Brackeen, is represented on *Wildflowers 3*—refers to the African principles of Kujichagulia (Swahili for "self-determination") and Sankofa, a Ghanaian principle of looking backward to move forward, when he explains what the Musicians Association was trying to do. "We were living in a country that didn't want us to be here after enslavement ended," he says. "So, we had to find a way to determine our own destiny." With the alternative festival, the Black community wanted to prove it was capable of developing, organizing and supporting festival musicians within its own cultural spaces. In *Loft Jazz: Improvising New York in the 1970s*, the book's author Michael C. Heller writes: "...the group established a basic organizational structure, with a governing board...Formal contracts were drafted for every participating musician...Permits were obtained to perform in eight different city parks... Later the musicians were also awarded two grants (one from the Parks Department)...which allowed them to offer guaranteed payments to each artist (instead of a percentage of ticket sales)."

While the Loft culture was already active, the

Wildflowers festival invigorated it and fostered a creative incubation. Music of the Loft era renaissance was recorded and self-released, according to Jim Eigo, president of Jazz Promo Services, who, during that time was the manager of the jazz department at noted Village record shop Happy Tunes. "The artists would stop in with their flyers and self-produced recordings," he relates. One can only speculate how much archival material exists in the private vaults of musicians and producers from that time. Heller notes that "Loft artists were prolific self-archivists." The five-album *Wildflowers* was remastered and reissued as a multi-CD set and released in 1999 (Knit Classics), initiated by Eigo, who had joined Michael Dorff's Knitting Factory record label. The process included gathering masters, which Douglas reported he'd given back to the various artists. Eigo recalls: "So we had to go out and get releases from everybody. In some cases, the artists themselves didn't have them...a fringing logistics nightmare."

Abdullah and his cohorts were artistically ambitious musicians, inspired by the environment of that time. "It never felt uncomfortable, I guess because we were young and it was so exciting. [The *Wildflowers* recording] was my first as a leader." *Wildflowers* presented several other such firsts. Bassist Alex Blake's first-ever performance with Randy Weston (in trio with the pianist's son, and a close friend of Blake's, percussionist Azzedin Weston) is documented on *Wildflowers 3*; it would be almost two decades later, in the '90s, when Blake would become Weston's regular bassist up until the pianist's passing in 2018. (On Apr. 25, Blake's Westonia Trio fêtes the Weston *Wildflowers* trio and his former employer's centennial, at Sistas' Place, featuring longtime Weston percussionist Chief Baba Neil Clarke and Weston protégé Sharp Radway.) Another *Wildflowers* premiere came via guitarist Michael (Gregory) Jackson, whose "Clarity 2" (with Oliver Lake, David Murray and Wadada Leo Smith) previewed his leader debut, *Clarity* (Bija, 1976), recorded just a few months after his *Wildflowers* session, which this month receives a 50th anniversary remastered release by UK label Moved by Sound.

Even with the elementary technology and homey sound environment of Studio RivBea, the recordings from those five volumes still hold up after all these years. RivBea was close quarters, beginning in Rivers' basement and eventually moving to an upper floor. Eigo describes the original scene: "You'd walk in and Bea would be in the kitchen, kids at the table, and the music was downstairs. They threw some rugs and pillows and [created] a little stage...If you got 100 people in there, you were basically shoulder-to-shoulder. If someone like Braxton played there, [it was] packed to the gills!" Part of the reason, perhaps, for the collegiate feel was the sense of community. Trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith (whose New Delta Ahkri appears on *Wildflowers 2*) basked in that vibe too, thinking of its cultural authenticity: "For one time, artists and the audience had a really sincere relationship with each other. There was no bar, none of the traffic that goes on in [conventional] entertainment places. It was more personalized, people who wanted to just be together, rather than just art and business." Alto saxophonist Lake traveled from St. Louis to immerse himself in the scene. "I was in my prime and having a great time," he remembers. "The experience let me know that the music

would take care of me. I learned the art of survival and the art of collaboration. The Loft scene was a continuation of practices of musician cooperatives, the same practices I did with BAG (the Black Artist Group) in St. Louis. We were self-determined and in control of our destiny."

The *Wildflowers* festival received attention in publications such as *DownBeat* and *The Village Voice*, yet for many there were cracks in the cultural masterpiece that eventually began to fray the idyllic sentiment—inevitable perhaps, with so many musicians looking for gigs. Smith says what was "revolutionary" at the beginning moved to an "improved but corrupted" phase where places "had an extremely consistent budget and could pay everybody who played there [but] it moved the Loft scene away from self-reliance back into the old system," where product, instead of community art, pushed the output. Jazz writer Howard Mandel, who wrote the liner notes for the *Wildflowers* re-release, points out that the artists involved were ambitious: "They all wanted to hone their work and get hired for something else...they were fighting creatively to get some place good, hoping they were going to get record contracts, tours, festival performances..."

Nevertheless, the Loft community spirit continues with the help of Abdullah, who became an important advocate of its cultural legacy when the owners of Brooklyn's Sistas' Place, including founder Viola Plummer (1937-2024), hired him to be music director. "John Coltrane's and Amiri Baraka's dream was to have the [Loft community] in Harlem," he says. "Something got lost in the translation. Fast forward to 1995...I'm asked to be the curator of it, and (so) curated it around the Loft movement." And so, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the *Wildflowers* festival and recordings, a series of Saturday concerts at Sistas' Place will be presented this month, featuring and fêting Loft period musicians and, in keeping with Sankofa, new musicians who carry the torch.

For more info visit sistasplace.org. Tributes to the *Wildflowers*' 50th anniversary are at *The Word Is Change May 1* (with authors Ed Hazell and Ahmed Abdullah) and *Sistas' Place Saturdays in May* (co-presented by Abdullah and Monique Ngozi-Nri's Melchizedek Music Productions and Central Brooklyn Jazz Consortium): Abdullah's *Diaspora May 9*, "A Celebration of Charles Brackeen, Olu Dara, Fred Hopkins and Andrew Cyrille" with Andrew Cyrille solo May 16, Pheoan akLaff May 23 and Mike Monford and *The Afrofuturistic Ether* featuring Alex Blake May 30 (African Liberation Day). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Julius Hemphill — *'Coon Bid'ness* (Arista-Freedom, 1972/75)
- Air (Henry Threadgill, Fred Hopkins, Steve McCall) — *Air Song* (Trio/Whynot - India Navigation, 1975)
- Michael Gregory Jackson, Oliver Lake, Leo Smith, David Murray — *Clarity* (Bija-ESP-Disk', 1976)
- Andrew Cyrille & Māōnō — *Junction* (IPS, 1976)
- Hamiet Bluiett — *Endangered Species* (India Navigation, 1976)
- Various — *Wildflowers (The New York Loft Jazz Sessions)* (Douglas/Casablanca, 1976)
- Sam Rivers — *Paragon* (Fluid, 1977)