

BARRY ALTSCHUL

RAG TIME TO NO TIME

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The history of “free” or avant garde jazz is littered with notable artists and giants such as John Coltrane, Charles Mingus, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Eric Dolphy and Sam Rivers, with references to their “sidemen.” One name that isn’t often mentioned, as leader or “sideman,” but should be, as he has certainly been prominent in the music’s development (including extensively with Rivers), is drummer Barry Altschul. And at 83 years old Altschul still remains an active participant. Of drumming icons, he credits Zutty Singleton, Big Sid Catlett, Papa Jo Jones, Art Blakey, Max Roach, Philly Joe Jones, Roy Haynes, Charli Persip, Tony Williams and Elvin Jones. “After that, I stopped listening to drummers for influences!”

One good example of his individualism and enduring stage presence is Altschul’s 3dom Factor, with new generation saxophonist Jon Irabagon and veteran bassist and longtime collaborator, Joe Fonda. The group’s live recording from a decade ago, *Live in Kraków* (Not Two) opens with a three-and-a-half minute drum solo on “Martin’s Stew”. The drummer’s heft can additionally be felt during the trio’s hard swinger “For Papa Jo, Klook, and Philly too”, in homage to drummers Papa Jo Jones, Kenny “Klook” Clarke and Philly Joe Jones. And like those iconic drum predecessors, says Fonda, “Barry is (also) an innovator, one of the individuals who helped create and invent the music that has influence on all of us who are involved with some aspect of creative music today. He is a musician of the highest order and a man whose swing is so deep that you can’t sit still when he hits that groove!”

In 1965-66, when Altschul’s name and playing first graced the albums of pianist Paul Bley (the drummer’s earliest albums included Bley’s *Touching* and *Blood* on Fontana as well as *Closer* on ESP-Disk’), Bley was in the early years of his transition from post-bop to the new “free jazz” world. Up to that point, the South Bronx native had worked his way into Bley’s orbit after a largely self-taught period that ended with lessons from veteran bop era drummer Persip at age 18, followed by stints with alto saxophonists Lee Konitz and Art Pepper, pianist Hampton Hawes and others. That Altschul became associated with the free jazz movement was not that ironic; as a young man, he, in his terms, “cancelled from academia” when his parents would not let him attend the city’s vaunted Music and Art High School. With a disciplined approach (as he says, “my true love was bebop”) and the rigor of accompaniment, Altschul quickly became known as a good listener who adapted his style to whomever he played with. So, when Bley asked him to join his trio, Altschul was able and willing to follow the leader into unexplored territory: “When Paul Bley got me, I had no idea about free music whatsoever. And I’m very fortunate, actually, because with Bley, Rivers, Chick Corea and Anthony Braxton, they’re all very schooled in the language of bop and had careers playing that kind of music. And so their influence on me was great.”

Thinking back to those days, Altschul remembers the challenges of the material Bley championed as, across the spectrum, Bill Evans himself was reimagining standards and roles with his trio of bassist Scott LaFaro and drummer Paul Motian. For Altschul, the difference was that “there was a motion, a speed, rather than a delineated time. The approach was to take time to the next place. There were ballads that we learned that I had to learn to play freely... it’s like there’s a clock, and the hands of the clock are

swinging freely, but they always pass the 12 at the same time...the dynamics are very important, especially playing with piano trios.” Bley recorded many compositions by his then wife Carla Bley, as well as the enigmatic Annette Peacock, who “was writing this music that’s very airy, very different than what I was used to playing,” Altschul says. “I didn’t know how to approach the music.” Then came an acid trip on a beach in Rhode Island. Listening to the waves coming in and droplets of water splashing off the rocks, Altschul had an awakening. “It was the motion of the waves that was exactly the kind of rhythm that was needed for Annette’s music, which we eventually called ‘wave music.’”

In the next two years, Altschul accompanied Bley on eight albums, including the drummer’s first as a leader—*Virtuosi* (Improving Artists Inc.), a trio with bassist Gary Peacock, which was released in 1976 though recorded a decade prior in 1967. He would then land with rising pianist Corea and the Miles Davis-fusion educated bassist Dave Holland, forming A.R.C., which released its eponymous debut on ECM in 1971. While the album was unconventional, Corea’s similar bop background was a connective tissue for Altschul: “Chick was an incredible musician, composer, great drummer. He had that whole background of playing time and changes, and so I really enjoyed what we played.” Holland, who was “quite knowledgeable of the whole history of the music” also became a very compatible rhythm partner. In 1972, the wildly-talented and unconstrained saxophonist-composer Braxton joined the trio, thus creating the quartet Circle, whose live recording *Circle: Paris-Concert* became an early ECM classic. Braxton, says Altschul, “wanted to be consciously different as a player. Dolphy came before him and took that space, but then [Braxton’s] compositional skills emerged.” Another aspect of the freer collective paradigm that Altschul dealt with was his accompanying relationship with the individual members: “Everyone [in Circle] played very busy. Whoever was the leader at the moment determined what direction you were going in. If the creative energy of that person fell, someone else took it. Now, in order for me not to drown out all the subtleties that were going on, for me to keep playing as busy as I was, we started experimenting with drum sound and realized that the best way for everything to be heard was to tune my drums very high and not have so much overtone running into the other notes of the people who were playing.” Holland, Braxton and Altschul continued their partnership on another ECM classic, *Conference of the Birds* (1973), which eschewed the piano and included Rivers. Altschul explains, “Playing with people like Rivers, where there was also no pianist, gave me another sense of freedom.”

With his reputation solidified, the drummer moved to leading his own albums in the late ’70s and early ’80s that mixed bop and free modes, but were largely melodic and rhythmic, pointing back to his early bop roots. Two of them are among the drummer’s personal favorites: *You Can’t Name Your Own Tune* (Muse, 1977), with Holland, Rivers, pianist Muhal Richard Adams and trombonist George Lewis; and *Irina* (Soul Note, 1983), an underappreciated piano-less quartet with Enrico Rava (trumpet, flugelhorn), John Surman (baritone) and Mark Helias (bass).

Since that time, Altschul has been sporadically active on stage and in the recording studio, accompanying a wide

assortment of people including bassist John Lindberg, trombonist Lewis, keyboardist Steve Cohn, pianists Denis Levaillant and, more recently, Álvaro Torres and veteran tenor saxophonist Ricky Ford. In 2007, Rivers, Holland and Altschul joined one last time on the momentous *Reunion: Live in New York* (Pi Recordings) at Columbia University’s Miller Theatre. He was also a featured artist on the live presentation *The Art of Percussion* with Andrew Cyrille and Andrea Centazzo (Ictus, 2020). A large swath of his work since 2010 has been with Irabagon, either on the saxophonist’s albums or with 3dom Factor. Says Irabagon of Altschul’s significance: “His contributions in the breadth and command of all the branches of the jazz tree are, in my estimation, unmatched. He encompasses the full jazz history and lineage and did it at a time where the music was experiencing exponential growth and change. Barry has gone unnoticed for way too long.”

While Altschul’s main identity is with left-of-center jazz, he is grateful that the younger generation has not jettisoned the American songbook. “But what I don’t feel good about,” he muses, “and I had discussed this with Jimmy Heath, who felt the same way, is that swing is gone. It’s now groovin’ or rockin’, but the energy and swing is not really getting used, and I miss that.” Among his current favorite drummers are Nasheet Waits and Marcus Gilmore: “They have the whole thing that a lot of cats attain, but they still are able to deal with the whole, as Beaver Harris once said, ‘from ragtime to no time.’ They’re able to play in all the different jazz styles plus more contemporary styles.” Another appreciative and appreciated drummer regarding Altschul is Tomas Fujiwara, who without hesitation says, “Barry means so much to me (and) he has treated me like family since I moved to NYC.”

Currently, Altschul (who recently weathered a hospital stay after a European tour) has an undiminished focus on playing and still plans to travel to distant parts to perform and serve as a purveyor of his bop-based roots. “Barry deserves a Lifetime Achievement Award (and) I hope one day he receives it for all that he’s given to the music,” says Fonda, as a pointed reminder to the jazz community at large. With three local dates this month—at Jazz Genius, the National Jazz Museum in Harlem, Smalls, plus upstate at Bop Shop Records—and with the grace of good care and his rhythm instincts intact, Altschul hopes to carry on as an ambassador of the age when time and no time merged to form modern jazz’ free expression.

For more info visit pirecordings.com/artists/barry-altschul. Altschul’s Quartet is at Jazz Genius Jul. 9, his 3dom Factor is at National Jazz Museum in Harlem Jul. 23 and he is also at Smalls Jul. 30 - Aug.1 (with Ricky Ford). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Paul Bley—*Closer* (ESP-Disk’, 1965)
- Chick Corea, Dave Holland, Barry Altschul—*A.R.C.* (ECM, 1971)
- Barry Altschul—*You Can’t Name Your Own Tune* (Muse, 1977)
- Barry Altschul Quartet—*Irina* (Soul Note, 1983)
- Sam Rivers, Dave Holland, Barry Altschul—*Reunion: Live in New York* (Pi Recordings, 2007)
- Barry Altschul—*The 3dom Factor: Live in Krakow* (Not Two, 2016)