



COURTESY OF ARTIST

VISHNU WOOD

INTO THE MYSTIC

BY DANIEL A. BROWN

Vishnu Wood is a born seeker who has lived a life of musical, intellectual and spiritual discovery. A creative and educational polymath, over the course of more than seven decades, Wood has toured the globe, performing on the bass, the Middle-Eastern oud and Indian bowed dilruba, while also pursuing his calling as a music educator-activist. A mercurial talent and sideman, over the course of a truly storied career, he has performed with a stunningly diverse roster of jazz artists, including Dorothy Ashby, Alice Coltrane, Kenny Dorham, Barry Harris, Roy Haynes, Joe Henderson, Yusef Lateef, Thelonious Monk, Sam Rivers, Max Roach, Archie Shepp, Alberta Hunter and Nina Simone. Wood's most famous association, however, is his 15-year tenure as bassist for pianist-composer Randy Weston, with notable recording sessions including *Randy!* (1964, re-released as *African Cookbook*), *Berkshire Blues* (1965), *Blues* (1964-65), *Monterey '66* (1966), *Blue Moses* (1972) and the Weston-Wood duo, *Perspective* (1976).

This month at the National Jazz Museum in Harlem, Wood joins the African Rhythms Alumni Quintet, featuring fellow Weston alumni, including nominal leader/musical director T.K. (Talib Kibwe) Blue (flute, alto and soprano saxophones), Ku-umba Frank Lacy (trombone), Sharp Radway (piano), Alex Blake (bass) and Chief Baba Neil Clarke (percussion). The celebration and concert will include an interview, Q&A and performance with Wood. "I talked to Talib last week, and he wanted to interview me about my residency in Morocco with Randy," says Wood from his New York home. That residency was part of a 1967 tour, in conjunction with the US State Department, which found Wood, Weston, Ray Copeland, Clifford Jordan, Chief Bey and drummer Ed Blackwell performing in fourteen countries in West Africa. "We toured throughout Morocco and Tunisia. Then we worked for the Moroccans with a government contract-plan in their hotels throughout Morocco. We played from the Rif Mountains all the way down south to the mighty Atlas Mountains and into the desert," he remembers.

Blue, who considers Wood to be his "big brother," is excited about the forthcoming event and appearance.

"I am quite fortunate having performed with Vishnu and his band, so we will be able to speak in depth about the influence of the musical rhythms from Africa and its influence throughout the African Diaspora," says Blue, who plans to highlight Wood's association with the Gnawa musical culture of Morocco and his musical connection with Randy and the pianist's son, percussionist Azzedin.

"Randy had a solid foundation, so whether we played duet, trio, or quintet or sextet, I was the right-hand person because I had the bottom," says Wood of his unique dynamic with Weston. "And I was the mediator in the rhythm section. I kept the guys together," he laughs. "You know, sometimes they didn't want to play together—so I'd make them play together!"

Bill "Vishnu" Wood, who turns 89 this month, was born on Nov. 7, 1937, in Wilkesboro, NC, into a troubled life. "I grew up with a lot of disfunction and domestic violence," explains Wood. At age 10, he moved with family to Detroit, then a thriving metropolis with an equally potent musical community. Initially he played trumpet, due to his older brother's example, but Wood then quickly shifted to the bass. While still in his teens, by day Wood studied formally at the Detroit Institute of Musical Arts; at night he gigged at a "bucket of blood joints" with rock-house groups. "You have to rock the house because you have to make the cash register ring so people drink, and then the joint makes money—that's why they call it rock house." Detroit was a fertile jazz scene, with Wood citing lesser-heralded players including pianist Terry Pollard as some of the best. "Terry played with trombonist Curtis Fuller and she could play any man down. She played just as well as Alice Coltrane."

Before the genre of spiritual jazz was codified, Wood was injecting the jazz life with the ineffable realm of the Spirit. "I am someone who needed religion," says Wood, explaining that his restless nature and depression-prone personality have found solace in the spiritual path. While still in Detroit, he began a daily yoga discipline. After a childhood spent growing up in the sanctified church, he explored Eastern religions, Science of Mind and martial arts. He has been practicing Buddhism for 40 years (prior to being interviewed, he meditated for two hours). "When I was in New York in the '60s and '70s, I was telling dudes to be vegetarian and not drink or shoot dope and they thought I was insane," says Wood.

He would spend a decade as a devotee of guru Swami Satchidananda, who gave Wood the title of Vishnu. "Swami named me 'Vishnu' because he really thought I would sit beside him and take over his seat after he

passed, but that didn't happen [laughs]." It was Wood who introduced Alice Coltrane to Satchidananda, which in turn led to her deepening her practice of Vedanta and also her iconic release, *Journey in Satchidananda* (Impulse!, 1971). That album's closing live track, "Isis and Osiris," includes Wood performing on oud.

Concurrent with his musical career, Wood has been an ardent educator and music activist. In 1973, he formed the nonprofit organization Safari East Cultural Presentations, which brought multimedia musical awareness programs and education to public schools, colleges, community groups and concert stages for 35 years. Safari East offered such programs and events in NYC, Massachusetts, Chicago, London and Brazil. "We were in the toughest schools in The Bronx and those kids loved it." Through Wood's tutelage, savvy and spirit of service, Safari East blossomed. Wood helped foster programs that highlighted African music and culture, from the motherland to the Atlantic slave trade, from New Orleans to the New Music.

"The programs flourished because I had great musicians, and I knew how to interact with the kids. I did special education for 35 years in New York. When I started out, my first budget through Safari East was \$250 in Staten Island. When I ended up years later, my budget was \$200,000, sponsored by the City of New York United Way." In recent years, Wood has spent his winters living and performing in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. By his own estimation, he has enough material for "several books" and has a library of unreleased live recordings. He also maintains his own website, which includes his most recent release, *Vishnu Wood in Concert*.

Wood's philosophy and takeaway of a seeker's life is succinct and on point: "I've worked my ass off my whole life. And I have lived, and still live, an amazing life."

For more info visit vishnuwood-safari-east.com. Wood is at National Jazz Museum in Harlem Nov. 19. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Randy Weston Sextet—*Randy!/African Cookbook* (Bakton/Atlantic, 1964)
- Bob James—*Once Upon A Time: The Lost 1965 New York Studio Sessions* (Resonance, 1965)
- Randy Weston Sextet—*Monterey '66* (Verve, 1966)
- Randy Weston/Vishnu Wood—*Perspective* (Denon Jazz, 1976)
- The Detroit Four (Barry Harris, Charles Greenlee, Vishnu Wood, Roy Brooks)—*Cadillac and Mack* (Eastworld, 1977)
- Vishnu Wood—*Vishnu Wood in Concert* (Safari East, c. 1990s)

LEST WE FORGET



VINCIANE VERGUEHEN

PAULINE OLIVEROS

DEEP LISTENING RENEWED

BY KURT GOTTSCHALK

In the ten years since her death, composer and philosopher Pauline Oliveros has become a cultural touchstone. Just as John Cage came to represent silence, Oliveros' name and koans (e.g. "Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears") are nearly synonymous with the act of listening. Her term "deep listening" is now used far beyond reference to her musical practice. As with Cage, that thumbnail philosophy fails to reflect much of her lifetime of work. And again like Cage, she might have been happy to

be remembered with such a simple and meaningful epithet.

Flutist-composer and International Contemporary Ensemble founder Claire Chase has herself made a lifetime of deep listening. Her mother, with Claire in utero, participated in extended vocal workshops led by Oliveros at the University of California San Diego (UCSD). "Pauline always joked with me that I was one of the original deep listening babies," says Chase, who grew up aware of Oliveros' work but only immersed herself in it as a student at Oberlin. "I asked her if she would write a piece for my little undergraduate trio. I can't believe I had the audacity to do this. And she said 'yes' to this group of kids. She wrote this piece called 'Elemental Gallop'. That piece, and the experience of putting it together, was the real catalyst for putting together the International Contemporary Ensemble. It was a good opportunity to put forward what 21st-century music could be."

For Chase, Pauline Oliveros is all around us today.

She speaks excitedly and quickly about the lasting influence and impact of the woman she calls a mentor. "One of her most beautiful teachings, one of the huge gifts that she gave us, is to give attention to how we listen," Chase says. "This society, this geopolitical moment for healing, for the restoration of peace in our world and the experiences of life that her teachings have opened up, that grandiosity—it's time, it's grounded, it's real. She felt a hands-on urgency about taking real steps no matter how small toward that goal, that listening is transformational."

Oliveros was born May 30, 1932, in Houston, TX, and passed away November 24, 2016, in Kingston, NY. She was a founding member of the San Francisco Tape Center in the '60s and advanced her thoughts on attentive listening through several books, as well as university positions. She released more than 60 albums and appeared on many more, and she was

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Angélica Beener) spinning cross-genre tunes during breaks and as an antecedent to the start of the program, which featured Nicole Glover and three scions of jazz: GRAMMY-winner Catherine Russell (daughter of Luis Russell and Carline Ray), Nat Adderley Jr. (son of Nat Adderley and nephew of Cannonball Adderley) and Joshua Redman (son of Dewey Redman). **Nicole Glover**, a member of Christian McBride's Ursa Major and supergroup ARTEMIS, continues to create the illusion that playing the tenor is an effortless exercise. Her confident, smooth-as-silk playing, with forays into dynamic fingering and assertive statements, plus low-note squonks, were taken at a similar mid-tempo pace over seven boppish tunes. Mystically, Glover's saxophone emulated a flute on one piece. Closer was finally an acknowledgement of Parker with "Perhaps".

Catherine Russell's ensemble featured pianist Miki Yamanaka and music director-guitarist Matt Munisteri. Over eight tunes, Russell exhibited confidence, musical chops and supreme, yet organic polish. Typically, her setlists feature songs that are little-performed but acutely worthy. Highlights were a blues, "Take the Hand Off the Clock", as well as "Never Too Old to Swing" and a keenly semi-satirical and humorous "Women Be Wise". Songbook standards arrived with "Alone Together" (with a ripping guitar solo) and "Exactly Like You". Closer was a burner of a Latinized "Unchain My Heart", ending a perfect set of music.

Showman pianist, the uber-charming **Nat Adderley, Jr.**, with his trio, offered about a half dozen tunes executed in dynamic pop, rhythm and blues and boppish style. From his longtime collaboration with Luther Vandross he presented "Superstar", and a Stylistics hit, "People Make the World Go Round", plus the bluesy Carole King number, "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman". To say Adderley was a hit would be an understatement. A vigorous standing ovation led to a jazz-arranged encore of "Theme from Fiddler on the Roof", leading to yet another vehement standing O—a tough act for **Joshua Redman** to follow. Redman emanated cool, playing both tenor and soprano. From a hymn-like "A Message to Unsend" and "Borrowed Eyes" to "Amica" and the closer of Parker's "Big Foot", he displayed impeccable, stylish chops, consistently giving his band ample space to stretch out and shine.

Closing day in Tompkins Square Park opened with the loquacious, Betty Carter-influenced **Vanisha Gould** (an acquired taste). She presented about a half-dozen originals; the most intriguing was a tune written for her cat, with the expected lyric of "meow" dotted in with frequency, much to the amusement of the packed park. Drummer-rapper **Kassa Overall** followed with a percussion-heavy group, exploding with a set of funk, hip-hop and otherwise ultra-high energy tunes. Given that in the '60s, Tompkins Square was a hippie hangout, many of the grey heads in the audience went wild over the jazz equivalent of acid rock, and a standing ovation followed the group's closer.

Drummer-magician and 2022 NEA Jazz Master **Billy Hart's** quartet began with an original by longtime Hart pianist, Ethan Iverson, "Hampton Hawes", a tribute to the West Coast pianist and bebop pioneer. The tremendously charming Hart provided a backstory for each number, including a composition for his daughter, "Song for Balkis", and an homage to John Coltrane via "Ohnedaruth", which he declared was Trane's "spiritual name." Closer was another dedication, the dramatic "Lorca", for the anti-fascist Spanish poet Federico García Lorca. The tune's Iberian forms and rhythmic intensity could well make it a revolution's anthem.

In this centenary year of John Coltrane and his immense talent, festival closer was the quartet of **Ravi Coltrane**, the saxophonist son of John and Alice. Brightly engaging, he played a classic bop set celebrating his father, playing both tenor and soprano in long expositions of each piece. Particularly stirring in musicianship and

emotional evocation of the author were "Naima" and the latter-period composition "Expression". A hat tip to Parker, "Segment", taken at burner tempo, closed the festival, putting a button on another year of supreme musical enjoyment and excellence.

For more info visit cityparksfoundation.org/charlieparker

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deeply committed to the act of intuitive improvisation, including on her electronically-adapted accordion. She developed techniques and software that allowed individuals with physical or cognitive disabilities to make music and participate in group improvisation. Oliveros was also an avid practitioner of t'ai chi.

Two archival recordings released by Important Records this year show something of Oliveros' creative output beyond, but very much involving, listening: *Triple Point*, with saxophonists Jonas Braasch and Doug Van Nort, and *Two Days in Dreamland*, with Miya Masaoka (koto) and Issui Minegishi (ichigenkin). Masaoka remembers the 2014 *Dreamland* sessions as being permeated with "a sense that life is transitory, everything is transitory, you have to create the moment because you don't know if it's going to come back—a lot of that is compatible with Pauline's spirit."

According to Masaoka, the Oliveros sphere of influence stretched even to the later work of Miles Davis and the free-flow of the Grateful Dead. "She was a major figure in contemporary music," Masaoka says. Oliveros' role in the tape center at Mills College changed the face of electronic music. "She brought it to another level with her term 'deep listening.' She was always very early, a pioneer in electronics and sound, and always unafraid of doing new things. She had a foot in academics and a foot outside, and she was free to ramble in that way."

The Oliveros archives are spread through several institutions, including the New York Public Library, UCSD and, until this year, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in Troy, NY. Chase hopes for a day when the archives can be housed in a central location with dedicated staff. "The CDL [Center for Deep Listening] and all Deep Listening courses are being eliminated from RPI due to budget cuts," according to sound and media artist Stephanie Loveless, who served as director of the CDL. She also edited *A Year of Deep Listening: 365 Text Scores for Pauline Oliveros* (Terra Nova Press, 1996), a collection of scores by more than 300 composers dedicated to the deep listening practice.

Oliveros' work "has been deeply influential in ways that aren't necessarily named but have been important in the current art movement," Loveless says. "She was so playful but always reverent. Listening itself is such a buzzword, not only in contemporary art but in the wellness world, and she occupied a space between the two...I think it's important and very much in tune with Pauline's ethos and spirit that deep listening doesn't become a fossilized practice but that it's always renewing itself through all of the practitioners."

For more info visit paulineoliveros.us

Recommended Listening:

- Pauline Oliveros — *Reverberations: Tape & Electronic Music* (Important, 1960-70)
- Pauline Oliveros — *The Wanderer* (Lovely Music-Important, 1983)
- Pauline Oliveros, Stuart Dempster, Panaiotis — *Deep Listening* (New Albion, 1988)
- Deep Listening Band — *Then & Now Now & Then: Celebrating 20 Years* (Taiga, 1990-2006)
- The Space Between (Philip Gelb, Pauline Oliveros, Dana Reason) — *With Barre Phillips* (482 Music, 1998)
- Pauline Oliveros, Roscoe Mitchell, John Tilbury, Wadada Leo Smith — *Nessuno* (I Dischi Di Angelica, 2011)



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