

Incantation
Caleb Wheeler Curtis/Jason Moran (Imani)
by Ken Waxman

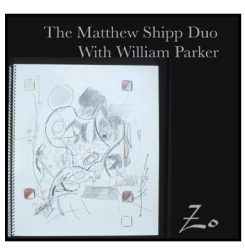
Taking a break from more elaborate projects, multi-instrumentalist Caleb Wheeler Curtis and pianist Jason Moran experiment on a first-time meeting as a duo. It's an unusual setting for the horn player, who has been consistently found in larger groups, and the pianist, who has experimented with multimedia, electronics and various-sized bands.

Switching among stritch (straight alto saxophone), soprano and a surprising, confident, rare trumpet performance (on "Archaeology"), Curtis digs out echoing smears and grace notes backed by Moran's measured comping. His reeds' breathy tones are elaborated on balladic tracks such as "Ain't No Storm" and "Big Small". On the former, stopped piano keys provide the rhythm around which saxophone currents curve, with Curtis' notes ranging from spiky to smooth. "Big Small" is a blues that allows Moran to shake and shudder, summoning his inner Albert Ammons, while Curtis adds near-shrieking variations.

Nevertheless, it's the more pressurized and mercurial tracks that show the duo's mettle. Arthur Blythe's "Miss Nancy" is a perfect example. Introduced by jagged reed squeaks that gradually ascend in pitch, that challenge is met with ringing piano stops as the head is revealed. Blending the mordant and melodic, Moran's semi-raggy key stabs rumble as Curtis' stop-start slurps expand the interface until the head returns in a speedier variation. Low-pitched snorts and tongue stops and high-pitched keyboard ringing characterize the improvisations on "One Hundred Years". Yet parts eventually meet up for a fluid open horn flutter mixed with lower-pitched keyboard clanging.

This is only the second time (following an eight-year gap) that Curtis and Moran have recorded together, and the first time as a duo. The intimate environment should probably be revived again—and hopefully before 2034.

For more info visit imanirecords.bandcamp.com. The album release concert is at National Sawdust Dec. 12. See Calendar.





***Zo* (Rise - ESP-Disk')**
***A Whole System Of* (TAO Forms)**
Matthew Shipp/William Parker
by Bill Meyer

Pianist Matthew Shipp has been talking about the end of his recording career for so long that it would seem weird if he didn't say something terminal upon the release of *A Whole System Of,* his fourth and latest duo release with bassist William Parker. Turning 66 this month has not turned the pianist into a retiring sort, but the explanation he gave to *The Wire*'s Phil Freeman for the reunion is disarmingly practical: Parker's getting older and dealing with health issues, and he wanted to catch their playing at a mature peak while he could. Conveniently, their first recording, *Zo,* has simultaneously returned to the retail shelves, informing *A Whole System Of*, and inviting consideration of what maturity really means.

First released in 1994, *Zo* was both a consummation and a transition. Shipp had come to NYC a decade earlier determined to play with Parker; after they finally met, the already-established bassist quickly introduced the young pianist to tenor saxophonist David S. Ware. The sound they hatched on *Zo* may have been incubated in the fire of Ware's quartet, but it was its own thing. For most of "Zo #1", Shipp and Parker do not lock in, accommodate or even seem to influence one another. They exist together, each creating on their own hurtling track, Shipp reaching for boulder-cracking lows and Parker pounding a non-repeating beat. Their performance of Gershwin's "Summertime" has a pitiless lack of sentiment that resonated strongly with punk and rock fans at the time; the record's second issue was on hardcore punk icon Henry Rollins' imprint, 2.13.61. Shipp drags the melody to a desolate place and stays there, disassembling it and pondering the fragments' implications, while Parker's slashing arco bass jabs holes in the fabric of time.

Three decades hence, on *A Whole System Of*, the duo has not fallen into foreground and background roles. On "Deeper Fields", they're still simultaneously hoeing their own rows. Shipp marches inexorably forward, his playing changing shape from moment to moment without wavering in its determined advance. He has not lightened up, but he does allow illuminating elements of classical form that coexist with Parker's seething bowing. On the title track, Shipp references pre-free piano form more overtly than he ever did on *Zo*, but he doesn't stay there; he quickly shifts velocity and direction, building up an abstract edifice made from brutal angles, lyrical asides and quickly-flowing streams. But Parker's fleet pizzicato seems more heedful of Shipp's content. The pair go further on "The Essential Blue Note", trundling forth in zig-zagging counterpoint. "Wave Light non Form" starts with a dark flicker, but turns quiet and delicate.

Maturity, it seems, involves working with possibilities that their younger selves might not have considered, but there's still plenty of abstract vigor in the results. Shipp and Parker's evolution is not so much a linear progression as a flower that opens ever more broadly.

For more info visit espdisk.com and taoforms.bandcamp.com. The Shipp/Parker Duo is at Roulette Dec. 4. Parker is also at Close Up Dec. 21 (with Kayvon Gordon). See Calendar.



Episodes
Andrew Rathbun/Gary Versace (SteepleChase)
by Ken Dryden

From early in his career, Andrew Rathbun has shown immense gifts as a tenor and soprano saxophonist, composer and arranger. After several decades on the NYC jazz scene, he has staked his claim as a major talent, especially with his numerous recordings for SteepleChase. Veteran keyboardist Gary Versace has been part of several of the saxophonist's albums for the Danish label, and for this 2025 session, it's just the two of them, exploring Rathbun's striking originals, which allow plenty of room for individual expression.

Much of the music from this recording could at first be mistaken for 20th-century classical music, although the mood constantly evolves as the players detour from the predicted routes, challenging the listener to keep up. Versace's solo introduction to Rathbun's "Nine" sets the mood. The composer's lyrical soprano playing initially mimics a vocalist, which leads into increasingly complex lines that showcase the spontaneous interaction between the two. The three-part suite "Into the Void" grows with intensity with each movement; Rathbun takes the first two on soprano, before switching to tenor for the dramatic finale. His twisting "Invisible Maps" is a glistening conversation between soprano and piano, unfolding new avenues throughout its journey. Another three-part suite, "Episodes" (where again, tenor is reserved for the last part) begins pensively, as if tragedy awaits around the next corner. The second movement is more wistful, as if recalling a past loss. Emotion comes to the forefront in the finale, Rathbun's searing tenor buoyed by his partner's engaging accompaniment.

Their explorations of jazz standards are just as enjoyable. Rathbun's effusive tenor takes a roundabout path into Thelonious Monk's "Boo Boo's Birthday", getting into more familiar territory as Versace enters, bringing out the composer's playfulness in this less-frequently performed gem. Two different interpretations of Charlie Parker's "Red Cross" are added bonuses. The pianist's intriguing counter-line to Rathbun's straight-ahead tenor delivery takes this bop classic into fresh territory. Despite some similarities between takes, both merit inclusion in what is an outstanding album.

For more info visit steeplechase.dk. Rathbun is at Shapeshifter Lab Dec. 17. Versace is at Jazzcultural Dec. 3 (with John Schneider), Mezzrow Dec. 9 (with Melissa Stylianou) and Dec. 10 (with Tyler Blanton), and Smalls Dec. 21 (with Rob Garcia). See Calendar.

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- London Jazz News

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