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After the Storm

Still coping with the aftermath of a kidney transplant, **David S. Ware** forges ahead with solo saxophone, a new trio and a return to the Vision Festival this summer

By David R. Adler

There were torrential rains, and gusts up to 60 miles per hour, on the night in mid-March when saxophone icon David S. Ware played solo before an intimate crowd in Brooklyn. Seated in the cozy home office of host Garrett Shelton, a music industry consultant, Ware began with an assertive, enveloping improvisation on soprano—a new horn in his arsenal—and followed it with an extended tenor display, rigorously developed, with mounting sonic power.

After he finished, Ware played up the salon-like atmosphere by inviting questions from listeners. Multi-instrumentalist Cooper-Moore, Ware's good friend and one-time roommate, who (like me) nearly missed the show on account of a subway power outage, was among the first to speak. He noted that the weather was also perfectly miserable on Oct. 15, 2009, the night of Ware's previous solo concert. So one had to wonder, "What's goin' on with you, man?" Laughing, Ware pivoted to the subject of his friend and mentor Sonny Rollins, who once told him that severe weather is actually conducive to the playing of adventurous music.

If that is the case, there's probably a parallel between the wind and rain of the external world and the turmoil within. The October concert was Ware's first live appearance since receiving a kidney transplant in May 2009. *Saturnian (solo saxophones, volume 1)*, Ware's newest disc on AUM Fidelity, is the result. The music from the Brooklyn concert will likely see release as *volume 2*. Even if the surgery and its perilous aftermath have exacted a toll on the 60-year-old Ware, drastically slowing his performance schedule, he seems all the more determined to bounce back and push his improvising into new and fresh terrain. But Cooper-Moore's tongue-in-cheek question hinted at concerns widely shared by Ware's fans, friends and admirers.

Three days after the Brooklyn gig, I caught up with Ware at his home in Scotch Plains, N.J.—his childhood home, in fact—where he lives with Setsuko, his wife of 25 years. He walked with a fair amount of difficulty into a small den with roughly nine horn cases, four Indian *shenais*, an upright piano and two large plastic bags stuffed with various medications, most to be taken daily. Settling into a cushiony green chair and keeping his feet elevated, he pondered, "You know where I play my best stuff? Right here in this room."

* * * * *

In the *New York Times* shortly after the October comeback concert, reporter Susan Dominus told the tale of Ware's 10 long years of dialysis, culminating in an urgent e-mail blast from AUM Fidelity's Steven Joerg in search of a kidney donor. Success was relatively quick: Ware was matched with Laura Mehr, a 57-year-old jewelry designer from Florida, whose late husband had been a Ware fan and acquaintance.

This was a fortunate turn, and Ware knows it. But the road since the transplant has been rough, and his frustration is palpable. "I was this close to a wheelchair," he recalls. "Everything was fine; I was going to the gym three times a week. Then the kidney started to reject. They had to give me all these heavy-duty steroids to save the kidney. And it damn near crippled me. I couldn't lift my leg to step up on the curb. ... I've been through motorcycle accidents, taxicab accidents, I had a shattered foot and ankle here in '86, I had a busted knee here, I was born with a bad hip. But never nothing like this. You're supposed to go to them to get a better life and you wind up with more problems."

Ware also developed diabetes. For months he's been making 80-mile round trips to a center that offers infrared therapy for nerve regeneration in his legs and feet. He's pleased so far with the results. "The transplant team couldn't help me with this," he notes. "I had to find the physical therapy people on my own."

One could look at Ware's shift toward solo concerts, after nearly two decades spent leading the famed David S. Ware Quartet, as a gesture of pure determination and self-reliance, a way of saying, "Here I stand." But it's also simply where his ear took him. "I did a solo because I heard saxophone," he told me last winter after the *Saturnian* date. "I didn't hear a quartet, I didn't hear a trio, I didn't hear a duo; I heard saxophone." During the Brooklyn Q&A, he added, "I want to make it clear what I'm doing. I want people to hear the intricacies. And it's a challenge for



I don't wanna play no tunes. ... I can better escape my intellect through the instrument than through the pen."

me." A challenge, it should be noted, that he's embraced at earlier points in his career. "I've done solo tours where I've played 90 minutes on one instrument," he offers. "That was then, this is now."

Even as Ware carves his expression down to a single solo voice, he has broadened his sound palette by including horns other than the tenor sax: the saxello (a B-flat soprano with a more angular shape), the stritch (essentially a straightened alto) and the sopranino (in E-flat, like an alto, but an octave higher). The first two, most often associated with the late Rahsaan Roland Kirk, play a prominent role on *Saturnian*. They'll make an encore appearance on Ware's absorbing, as-yet-untitled trio session with bassist William Parker and percussionist Warren Smith, slated for release in late summer or early fall of 2010. Ware's previous work with the saxello and stritch can be heard on the Silkheart albums *Passage to Music* (1988) and the two-volume *Great Bliss* (1990/1994).

"I've been really on the saxello since the transplant," Ware says, musing on what led him to the alternative horns. "It's so easy to pick up—you just open the case, ain't a lot of fuss, it's not heavy. I've got it right here [*points next to his chair*]. So I was on that, man. On it, on it, on it. And you just start hearing higher. Your ear starts to gravitate toward the higher pitches. I said, 'Wow, maybe I'd like something even higher than this.'" After consulting fellow multi-saxophonist James Carter on the best brand of sopranino, and "listening to examples on YouTube of cats playing it"



ALONE, TOGETHER:
 Here: The David S. Ware
 Quartet at a Vision Festi-
 val concert in June
 2006; Matthew Shipp,
 William Parker, Ware and
 Guillermo E. Brown (from
 left) There: Ware, on the
 stritch, at the New York
 solo performance that
 would become *Saturnian*;
 October 15, 2009

(including Anthony Braxton and Roscoe Mitchell), Ware acquired one of his own.

“I could hear in the mid-’70s that [Ware] was going to go higher,” recalls Cooper-Moore. “And the horns he’s playing now, you can’t play sloppy, you can’t hide behind the horn. You can’t fake anything on the soprano. Nothing. You’re really naked. You’re up there by yourself. You shouldn’t put it in your mouth unless you have some capacity to deal with it. David understands it.”

Ware’s convalescence led him to another decision, which he stated plainly in Brooklyn: “I don’t wanna play no tunes.” After years of mainly compositional focus with the quartet, Ware has rededicated himself to wholly free improvisation, the approach heard on *Saturnian* as well as the forthcoming trio document. “I can better escape my intellect through the instrument than through the pen,” Ware submits. “So I’ve decided in this period I’m going to go with my forte, man. Playing is my forte.” Several times he refers to this modality as “so-called free.” Why? “Because there’s a hell of a lot more to it. If you’re not practicing all the time, you can’t do it. And if you don’t have a wellspring of ideas, you can’t do it. How you gonna do it?”

To reach this state of preparedness, one could do worse than adopt a meditative, reclusive existence such as Ware’s. Here is someone who decided long ago to be his own boss, literally, working always on his own terms and at his own pace. Although he was impacted by early sideman stints with Cecil Taylor, Andrew Cyrille, Milford Graves and others, Ware was never much interested in freelancing, or collaborating restlessly with every likeminded musician under the sun. “David really is about the David S. Ware universe,” says Matthew Shipp, the sole pianist in Ware’s long-lived quartet. “He’s spent his whole life thinking about his own particular, idiosyncratic ways of approaching things, and having a unit that caters to that vision and that worldview.”

Amplifying the point, Cooper-Moore says of Ware, “He’s the same person I met when he was 19. He has not changed. He’s always known who he was, and he’s always known what he wanted to do.”

* * * * *

David Spencer Ware was born in 1949 in Plainfield, N.J., very close to his current residence. He picked up saxophone in 1959, a pivotal year for jazz and American culture in general (as Fred Kaplan argues in his recent book *1959: The Year Everything Changed*). Although Ware’s parents were not musicians, his father had “hundreds and hundreds” of 78-rpm records, he recalls, “and it was mostly tenor players on those records. My father was crazy about the saxophone.” The young Ware absorbed everything from Illinois Jacquet to Fats Domino, Lloyd Price and many more. He started out playing alto, then baritone, in his school bands. Ultimately he ventured north to Boston, where he studied for a time at Berklee. (“They kicked me out and you can write that,” he boasts. “I’m proud of that.”)

It was there in 1967 that he met his fellow student Cooper-Moore, who remembers, “I just finished a class and was going to go practice piano. And I heard a sound; I heard a horn. It’s like when you hear Trane, Monk, Miles—you hear one note and you know who they are. It’s rare that you hear that kind of sound. I searched it out and knocked on [Ware’s] practice room door and introduced myself, and we became friends.”

Ware was driving a cab in Boston and getting ready to buy his dream car, a ’54 big-block Corvette, when Cooper-Moore insisted it was time for them to move to New York instead. They did it in 1973, renting a space at 501 Canal Street that would become central to the budding loft jazz scene. “We had the whole building for \$550 a month,” Ware says. “Can you imagine that?”

TOP LEFT: JOHN ROGERS/COURTESY OF AUM FIDELITY;
 TOP RIGHT: PETER GANNUSHKIN/DOWNTOWNMUSIC.NET

Bassist William Parker met Ware around this time. "501 was like a temple," he recalls. "It was a very creative place. And [Ware and Cooper-Moore] were the founders of it, and made it so. It was the learning ground for a lot of people." The loft laid the groundwork for Parker's crucial role in the Ware Quartet, not to mention the ongoing projects of the present: the new Ware group that released *Shakti* in 2009, and, for that matter, the new trio, which will play the 2010 Vision Festival on June 27.

Already, Ware's first outing as a leader, *Birth of a Being*, offers a representative portrait of the tenor player we know today. It features a trio

known as Apogee, with Cooper-Moore (then performing as Gene Y. Ashton) on piano and Marc Edwards on drums. Recorded for Hat Hut in 1977 and released in 1981, it's a gem of post-Ayler expressionism, leading off with the disarmingly consonant "Prayer," a bright melody in simple B-flat major. The session continues with the 16-minute "Thematic Womb" and finishes with "A Primary Piece" in two parts.

Throughout, the music is gruff and furiously searching. Ware's "bursts of ideas" (in Cooper-Moore's words) reveal an underlying structural soundness and inner grace. Some years later, in his liner notes for *Passage to Music*, Stanley Crouch would assess Ware in terms all the

PREFLIGHT SOUNDCHECK:
Ware gets ready for his intimate
March 13 solo date in Brooklyn



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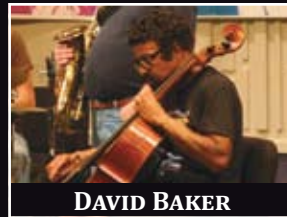
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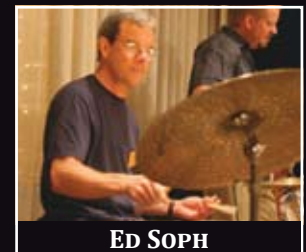
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Apogee had formed during Ware's Boston days, and in 1972 the trio opened for Sonny Rollins at the Village Vanguard. Rollins' impact on Ware remains profound: Intermittently from 1969 until the early '80s, the two would get together to practice, and in 2005 they shared their memories and impressions in a tandem interview for *All About Jazz*. Moreover, the Ware Quartet offered its own extended take on Rollins' classic *Freedom Suite* in 2002. The Rollins connection, for Ware, is about more than the saxophone—it's an anchor of aesthetic continuity in a jazz world too often segmented into camps.

Ware reached clarity on this point during his time with Cecil Taylor—specifically while Taylor was holding marathon rehearsals of music he'd written for Adrienne Kennedy's play *A Rat's Mass*. "Ms. Kennedy said to me one day, 'David, that line you just played reminded me of Ben Webster,'" Ware recalls. "I said, 'Oh yeah?' And it opened my head to something. I'm in my early 20s, I just got to New York, and I'm out to prove something. And sometimes you forget the connection with the past, that you are part of a chain. Also there's the attitude against this music that we play, which makes you think even more, 'OK, y'all don't accept us, you don't understand what we're doing, we gotta hang in our part of town' and so on. Well, for me, Sonny was always a very current cat, he was like one of us, and it made me forget that Sonny, he's about them roots too, man. It made me realize, 'Hey, man, you're part of the tradition too.' Don't believe all this stuff that we're over there in the corner. You're part of this tradition. Just like Cecil and all the rest of them, we're all part of this tradition."

Standing aside from the hustle of the New York scene, Ware drove a cab from 1981 to 1995 even as he pursued his own musical vision. In time another famous fellow saxophonist, Branford Marsalis, then head of jazz A&R at Columbia, brought Ware's quartet onboard as a "prestige signing," which resulted in the albums *Go See the World* in 1998 and *Surrendered* in 2000. Needless to say, Ware's major-label deal entailed no artistic compromises. "I wasn't signed to go out there and do a Kenny G," he quips. "Branford was the key. Take him out and there's nothing there—zilch, zero. And when they took him away, we was out, too."

It was simply one more transition in a life full of them, from the quartet's ultimate dissolution in 2007 to the far graver challenges that followed. As a student of Eastern faith traditions, Ware is perhaps more likely than some to find tranquility through it all, to exist as an independent artist in a time he refers to, during the Brooklyn discussion, as Kali Yuga—the "age of vice" according to the Vedic scriptures.

As he shifts from the pianistic focus of the quartet to the economical guitar-rooted harmony of *Shakti*, from the stark and lonely echoes of the solo concerts to the timpani-enhanced freshness of the trio with Parker and Smith, it's become ever easier to appreciate Ware's honesty, consistency and straight-up musical logic. Of this latest collaborative venture, Parker says, "Things are more refined and more focused in a sense. We trimmed off a lot of the outside rays of the glow, and now we're in the circle inside the light more. A different side of things is showing. There's just something that happens when David plays, something not traceable to any particular source." **JT**