



ELLERY ESKELIN
Mirage

Ellery Eskelin, tenor saxophone; Susan Alcorn, pedal steel guitar; Michael Formanek, double bass
Clean Feed CF 271 (CD). 2013. Ellery Eskelin, prod.;
Ed Tetreault, eng.; Jon Rosenberg, mix. DDD? TT:
66:52

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★★

For years, tenor saxophonist Ellery Eskelin has worked in a vibrant trio with Jim Black on drums, and Andrea Parkins on accordion, sampler, and other instruments. In *Mirage* he takes a wholly different route, putting aside drums and pursuing open expanses of sound with sought-after improviser Michael Formanek on bass and Baltimore's Susan Alcorn on pedal steel guitar. The album is wholly improvised; each track is from three to six minutes long, save for "Downburst," which balloons to nearly half an hour.

Hearing pedal steel in a harmonic context this abstract is striking: Alcorn's portamento and microtonal abilities with the slide lend the music a probing, ebb-and-flow character. But Alcorn's harmony has a spookiness, a "what on Earth is that?" factor that belongs to no genre.

Eskelin's horn and Formanek's mostly pizzicato bass are forcefully present, while Alcorn tends toward a sound that's more blanketed, at a slight remove. Eskelin's back-to-back duos with her ("Refraction") and Formanek ("Occlusion") bring out the instruments' varied shadings remarkably well.

Several of Eskelin's endings on *Mirage* have a legato, breathy, trailing-off quality that comes from the heart of the jazz ballad tradition, from late-era Lester Young to Dexter Gordon and onward. Though this music sounds nothing like the well-known jazz standards that Eskelin dissects at length with his superb Trio New York, his tenor has a laid-back intensity that makes all the different languages cohere. —David R. Adler



WADADA LEO SMITH & TUMO
Occupy the World

Wadada Leo Smith, trumpet, composer, conductor;
21-piece orchestra
TUM CD 037-2 (2 CDs). 2013. Petri Haussila, prod.;
Nikopetri Paakkunainen, Esa Santonen, engs.
DDD? TT: 112:53

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★★

Wadada Leo Smith, now 71, has only recently become widely recognized as a major figure of avant-garde jazz. He is suddenly a hot property. He just won the *Downbeat* Critics' Poll as composer, and finished second on trumpet.

Occupy the World is a vast two-hour document, in five tracks, of Smith's unique vision. Tumo, a 21-piece orchestra, comprises mostly musicians from Finland's free-jazz scene. (The TUM label is based in Helsinki.) Smith's compositions are open narratives, volatile orchestral performance concepts. "Queen Hatshepsut" is representative. A unison line for the ensemble evolves into a solemn thematic ritual, then the orchestra becomes a quietly seething background for explosive individual and collective improvisation. The Finns are fearless. They include accomplished, fiercely creative players like flutist Juhani Aaltonen and pianist Seppo Kantonen.

Smith's music requires patience and faith. There are lulls here, and raw noise, and irrational transitions from uproar to silence. Notation and improvisation overlay in unfamiliar relationships. Throughout, this material is simultaneously disturbing and exhilarating in its disparate colors, its outbursts, its complex moods, its spontaneous forms. As soloist, Smith picks his spots. No other trumpet player alive could have put together the rasping, splintered, soaring free sequences in the 33-minute title track.

Smith's challenging art could not be better presented than in this comprehensively documented, photographically lavish, sonically top-notch package. —Thomas Conrad

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