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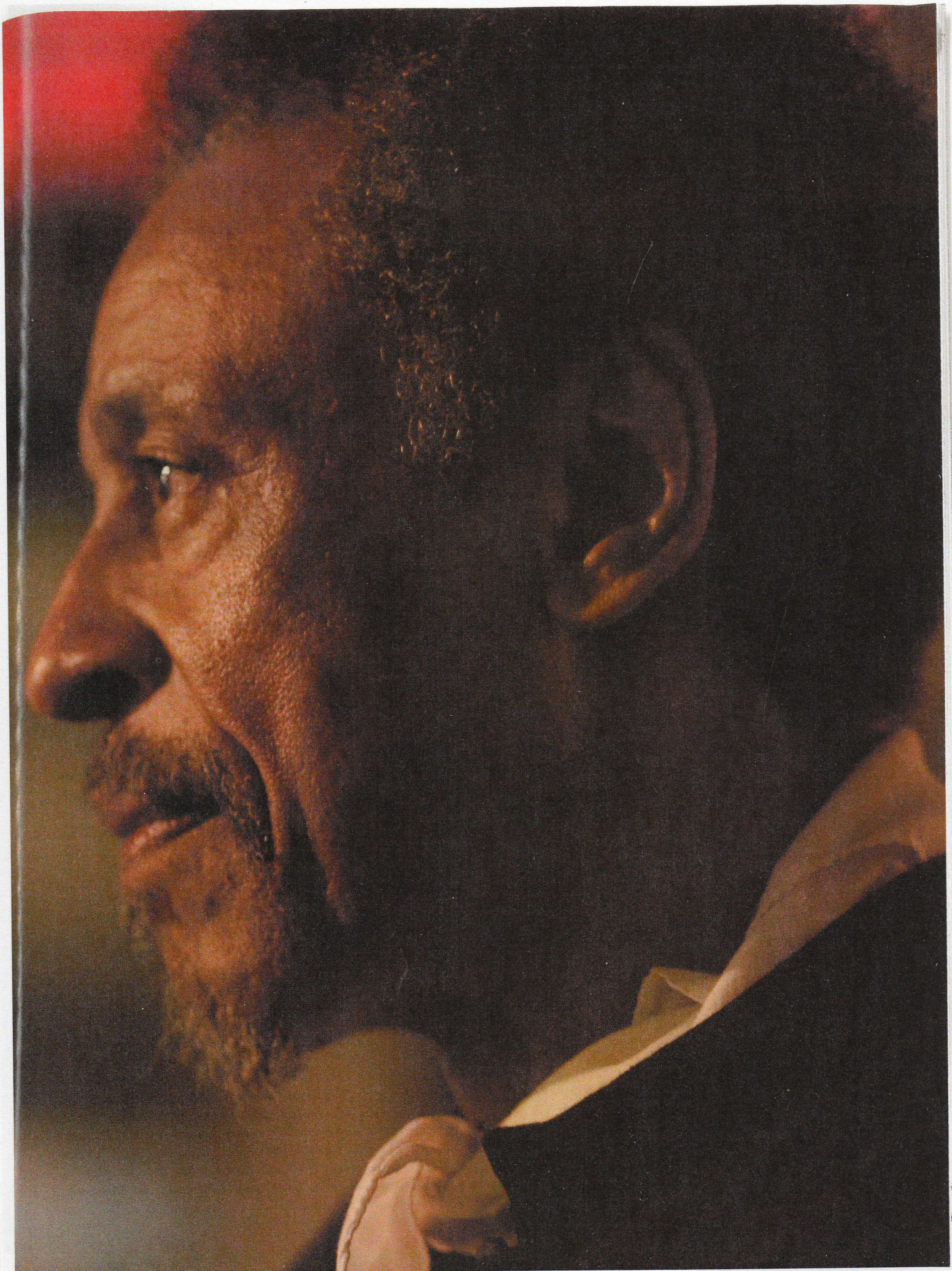
Be Ever OUT

Stunning recent recordings and two weighty box sets help tell the story of **Henry Threadgill**, an unstoppable American original.

By David R. Adler | Photographs by Robert Wright

Henry Threadgill can breathe easier now. It's mid-November, and having just finished a tough three-night series at Roulette in lower Manhattan, he's settling down to coffee at De Robertis, a pastry shop near his East Village home. The staff knows him well; a female proprietor calls him "sweetheart." Another server, an older man, welcomes him by putting on

This Brings Us To, Volume II, Threadgill's latest Pi release with Zooid, his working band. Threadgill stops mid-sentence as soon the music starts, makes eye contact with the waiter over his shoulder and shares a laugh. Turning back around, he comments: "They've become my fans." For the next 40 minutes, the sound of Threadgill's knotty, challenging music fills the café.



And why not? Threadgill, born in 1944, is one of the most intriguing composers of our time, a saxophonist and flutist with a history that stretches back to the early days of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) in 1960s Chicago. Along with the current Zooid title, we now have *The Complete Novus & Columbia Records of Henry Threadgill & Air*, an eight-CD box set from Mosaic, to put Threadgill's achievements into perspective. Another comprehensive, remastered seven-disc set from Black Saint (now owned by CAM Jazz) fills out yet more of the picture—although Threadgill is miffed, to put it mildly, that he wasn't consulted on the Black Saint packaging or release.

Far from slowing down, Threadgill is “on a composing tear,” according to Liberty Ellman, Zooid's guitarist. The first night at Roulette saw the premiere of “In Frontispiece,” an extended work for Zooid and strings funded by Harvard's Fromm Music Foundation. Threadgill is also preparing a commission for the American Composers Orchestra titled “No Gates, No White Trenches, Butterfly Effect,” to be performed on March 4, 2011 at Zankel Hall. “I'd never played that much different, demanding music in three nights,” Threadgill says of the Roulette residency. “Even on tour it's not like that.” Apart from “In Frontispiece,” Threadgill and Zooid devoted a night to the music from the new Pi disc, and another to revisiting “All the Way Light Touch,” a long-form work first heard at Roulette in 2009. (Search the archive at www.roulette.org/rtv.php for full footage of the premiere.)

There's a lingering oversimplified view of avant-garde jazz as wholly off-the-cuff, by definition unrehearsed. Yet “In Frontispiece” alone required some 17 rehearsals. The culture of Zooid is distinctly

labor-intensive, even if the band has achieved a marked fluency and transparency after a decade together. Bringing a string quartet into Zooid's arcane process added another layer of challenges. “A premiere is never the best we can do,” Threadgill offers. “I'm trying to find a place where I can perform [‘In Frontispiece’] again. But I'd have to rehearse it just as much or more. You know why? Because I wouldn't play it that way. The way that you heard it, I would never do that again. We did that.”

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One of the most instantly identifiable bands working today, Zooid has always traded on a subtle, predominantly acoustic sound. Its lineup has shifted some over the years, but from the start it has featured Ellman on acoustic guitar and Jose Davila on tuba and trombone. Drummer Elliot Kavee did not appear on *Up Popped the Two Lips*, Zooid's 2001 Pi debut, but he took over from Dafnis Prieto soon after. Stomu Takeishi, on acoustic bass guitar, was a member of Threadgill's previous band, Make a Move.

Cellist Christopher Hoffman, though a full-fledged Zooid member, does not appear on either volume of *This Brings Us To*—the first of which was released to fervent critical acclaim in 2009. On Ellman's urging, Zooid recorded the discs back-to-back after a three-week tour that the band happened to do as a quintet. The idea was to strike while the iron was hot. Ellman produced both albums and mixed them in his Brooklyn home studio. (A skilled engineer, he's also done work for Butch Morris, Wadada Leo Smith and others.)

Maintaining a steady lineup is key, because it takes time even for the initiated to grapple with Threadgill's music. First, the compositions employ a unique and rigorous intervallic language, informally dubbed “The System,” which Threadgill has developed over the last 15 years. Second, Threadgill's ceaseless reshuffling of structural elements can mean that a given piece becomes a different animal with every performance. “The way I bring it in doesn't mean a thing,” Threadgill states. “I had to bring it in some kind of way! So once we read it, let's go further than that. Let's forget about any order. In jazz the form has been treated as sacred. The form is not sacred with me.”

Band members can expect Threadgill not just to swap the sequence of sections in a piece. He might ask for a series of three bars to be isolated and looped, even played backwards. Seated in the café, Threadgill demonstrates with objects near at hand, moving around the coffee cup, the spoon, the milk container. His point? “Everything that's on this table,” he says, “it never left the table, did it? So nothing has changed. That's what Picasso and them were doing, when they would take a thumb and make it come out your knee. ... My hand is still my hand.”

As Kavee puts it, “[Henry] composes with his compositions. Whenever you think you've got it, he'll come up with something and you're right at the precipice again. This is my 10th year with him and there's still a buzz in the room at rehearsal.”

The System gives Zooid a sound far removed from any major/minor tonality, and it foregrounds a contrapuntal web rather than the sounding of full chords by any one instrument. In that sense, Threadgill departs from jazz norms codified by Don Redman and other big-band arrangers as long ago as the 1920s: chord below, melody above, instruments moving together. You could cite New Orleans polyphony as one of Threadgill's models, though his inspiration reaches further back, and farther away. “It's African-based, to me,” he says. “Independence of parts.” “Zooid” is in fact a term from biology: a cell structure that moves independently within a living organism.





FULLY COMMITTED:
Threadgill and Zooid at Roulette in NYC, 2009

“My music comes with a voice. I don’t want you sounding like that guy next to you; that’s the European way. I want to know when I go blind that I can tell those are my cows, cow number one and cow number two.”

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So how does it work? Ellman’s guitar chart for “Lying Eyes,” the leadoff track from *Volume II*, is written in two staves. The top shows a melody line with complex syncopation and meters changing as often as every bar. The bottom staff shows a row of three-note chords stacked like an inverted pyramid: for instance, G and D over C-sharp, or A-sharp and B over G-sharp, or D-flat and A-flat over F. Typically, each bar contains four of these chord forms, all related by virtue of intervallic relationships. “There’s a male and there’s a female,” Threadgill explains. “And each one of them produces, let’s say, children. So with this male and female I can have 14, 15, 16 pieces of harmony. ... Everything that happens is as a result of those intervals. That creates all the order. So all the voice leading is perfect.” He pauses, a gleam in his eye. “Absolutely perfect.”

Below the families of chords, each bar includes a set of intervals to be used as a guide for improvisation. An interval set might look like this: -2, -2, +4, 5, 6, 6. Or this: 2, 2, 3, 3, 4, 5, -7. And below these

sets, still another row of digits indicates the number of beats for each set. Those values can be doubled when the soloist wishes to stretch out in “long meter.” “Just like in traditional four-part counterpoint,” Ellman observes, “in Henry’s system you have certain rules about motion. I use that to inform the melodic shapes in my solos, but it’s more important when you’re providing accompaniment, moving from one chord to the next.” To be clear, Ellman doesn’t mean “comping” in the ordinary sense: “Imagine you have a guitar or piano playing the harmony, all the notes together. Now imagine if each note in the harmony was a different person, and they’re all playing one note out of the chord. That’s what we’re doing. I might be playing a funky single-note guitar line [*sings ‘dit-dit-dit-dit’*], Jose might just go ‘wah-hhh’ on the tuba, but within a few beats we’re all playing that chord.”

Rehearsal is where these elements get picked apart and patiently put together. “When we work on a new piece,” Ellman offers, “we’ll start playing it in sections. You want to hear everyone else’s part so you know where you fit into the framework. Then, once we’ve got our parts down, we’ll spend time on the harmony, playing the numbers as an accompaniment section without the soloing. Like playing the changes.”

The drums are another matter. According to Kavee, “The drum part is in a different time signature than the rest of the band, almost always.” And it’s not about adding difficulty for its own sake, as Threadgill explains. “If five or six of us are playing in one time,” he says, “I don’t need the drums to play in the same time. That doesn’t make any sense at all to me.”

Kavee elaborates: “You have these downbeats hitting at different places, and the interval sets change at different rates than my bars change.” The result is often an asymmetric lilt that anchors the music and lends it accessibility. “Henry writes funky music,” says Ellman,

"and he likes to groove. When we rehearse, he's dancing, and we're all bobbing our heads. He's got history back in the day from the military and marching bands and his music is informed by that."

For the music to flow, however, the band must also break down the rhythmic elements and practice looping them in smaller units. "These loops are just ridiculously cool," Ellman says. Half-jokingly, he voices interest in a remix project that would allow people "to hear the music the way we hear it when we're rehearsing."

Learning to operate in Threadgill's demanding environment while sounding like oneself—this is the journey that his associates must undertake. "In the beginning it was hard," recalls Takeishi. "With the first piece it took us maybe six months to make music with it. Henry's always challenging you, and you're not always able to use your strengths. He's always asking you to do something you're not that good at [*laughs*]. But he told me that whenever things get comfortable, it's time to get out. And that woke me up. Your weakness could be your strength, if you focus on it."

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Alternate notation, serial techniques, experimental form: These have a long history in both the jazz and classical avant-gardes, but Threadgill has put them to distinctly personal use. As much as he respects and studies the classical tradition, he flatly states, "I don't play European music. I write instrumental music, not orchestral music or chamber music. I don't use those forms. I don't imitate anything, and I don't use any of those processes. I have another way of advancing my information."

Even his string-quartet writing for "In Frontispiece" bears little relation to the standard idiom. For one thing, he wants little to no vibrato from the strings. He also wants an expansive rhythmic approach: "In classical music they have a very strict idea of the size of the beat, and it's very small, like the metronome, 'tick tick tick'. My music has a wide beat, so you can lay things in; you have a different amount of space."

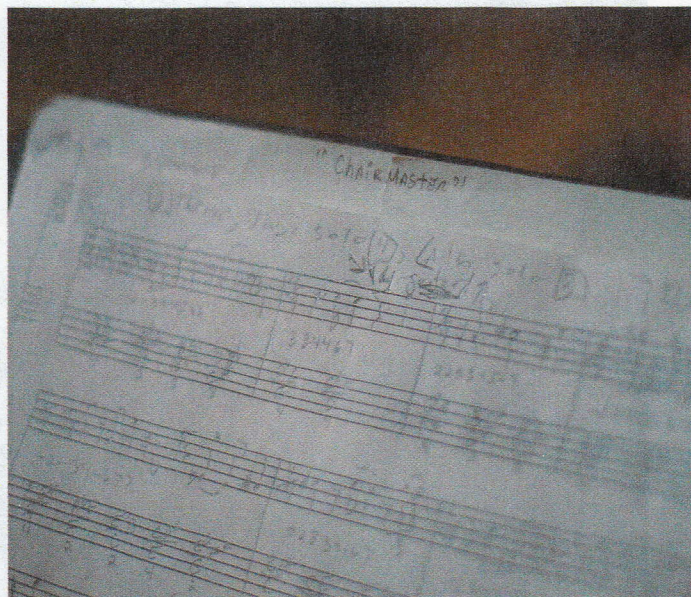
Describing "In Frontispiece" as "a piece for 10 instruments," Threadgill clarifies that the string players—violinists Tom Chiu and Curtis Stewart, violist Jessica Pavone, cellist Will Martina—were asked to play independently, not as a section with an undifferentiated sound. "My music comes with a voice," Threadgill asserts. "I don't want you sounding like that guy next to you; that's the European way. I want to know when I go blind that I can tell those are my cows: cow number one and cow number two."

These are aesthetic issues Threadgill must confront when he workshops and rehearses "No Gates" with the American Composers Orchestra. The watchword of the ACO's "Playing it UNSafe" series is "testing the limits of orchestra music." Threadgill will test them, no doubt.

Noting that his forays into string writing date back many years, Threadgill recalls the accomplishments of his Windstring Ensemble, a group with tuba (Bob Stewart) and three strings (including AACM stalwart Leroy Jenkins), which performed extensively but never recorded. Alas, we can't hear this group on the Mosaic or Black Saint collections. But what we do hear speaks volumes about Threadgill's mastery of timbral nuance and color, as scholar Brent Hayes Edwards observed during a recent public interview with Threadgill at Columbia University.

In addition to several albums by Threadgill's historic trio Air with bassist Fred Hopkins and drummer Steve McCall (later Pheeroan akLaff), we get vital music from Very Very Circus, Make a Move and the unorthodox Sextett (which had seven members). From Black

"In jazz the form has been treated as sacred. The form is not sacred with me."



Saint we get the 1994 release *Song Out of My Trees*, buoyed by the three-guitar textures of Ed Cherry, James Emery and Brandon Ross. (Emery and Ross play soprano and alto guitar, respectively.)

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It's notable that in between Threadgill's early AACM days and his '70s output, there came his period of military service in Vietnam, from 1967 to 1969. In a sense, Threadgill's Mosaic recordings—from 1978 and onward—have added significance as snapshots of avant-jazz expression in post-Vietnam America. (Not for nothing does Threadgill appear on violinist Billy Bang's 2005 disc, *Vietnam: Reflections*, the second of Bang's Vietnam-related projects with fellow vets Michael Carvin, Ted Daniel and more.)

Just as strikingly, the Mosaic set captures a period when artists as adventurous as Threadgill were given the time of day by major labels—or at least could get smuggled in by sympathetic industry reps like Michael Cuscuna and Steve Backer. Threadgill's Arista and RCA Novus titles of the '70s and '80s, and his Columbia discs of the '90s, are not the only examples. David S. Ware undertook his short-lived stint on Columbia not long after Threadgill's ended. And Anthony Braxton had his own productive run with Arista during the '70s, as *The Complete Arista Recordings of Anthony Braxton* (Mosaic, 2008) makes clear. Threadgill appears on the Braxton set, in fact, in a reeds trio with Braxton and Douglas Ewart on "Opus 76 (version one)."

With Air, Threadgill played a fair amount of tenor and baritone sax; today he's heard strictly on alto. Several of the Mosaic sessions feature him on bass flute, an instrument he employed at Roulette on the piece "Merry Up, Merry Down." Some of the strangest and most remarkable music appears on the third Mosaic CD, devoted to X-75, an ensemble with four basses and four reeds. Four of the seven tracks come from *X-75 Volume 1* (1979) and feature Amina Claudine Myers on vocals, sounding very much like a forebear of Jen Shyu on "Sir Simpleton." Three instrumentals are from *X-75 Volume 2*, recorded two days later and never before released. Particularly haunt-

By a Threadgill

In 2010, avant-garde composer and multireedist Henry Threadgill finally got the recognition he deserves, with the reissue of many out-of-print titles in two box sets, *The Complete Novus & Columbia Recordings of Henry Threadgill & Air* (Mosaic) and *The Complete Remastered Recordings on Black Saint & Soul Note* (CAM Jazz/Black Saint). But for the uninitiated, here, in chronological order, is a list of five Threadgill essentials that brings us to his most recent release, *This Brings Us To, Volume II* (Pi). **AIDAN LEVY**

AIR

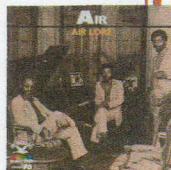
Air Song (Why Not, 1975)



Emerging from the 1970s Chicago free-jazz scene that sprang up around the AACM, Air's groundbreaking debut showcases the airtight interplay of bassist Fred Hopkins, drummer Steve McCall and Threadgill on flute, alto, tenor and baritone. Threadgill soars on the plaintive "Great Body of the Riddle or Where Were the Dodge Boys When My Clay Started to Slide," his baritone floating effortlessly over ethereal cymbals and gliding bass, never rising too far above the ground.

AIR

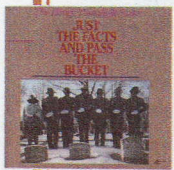
Air Lore (Arista/Novus, 1979)



Best known for its piano-less updates of Jelly Roll Morton and Scott Joplin, *Air Lore* unapologetically plants free jazz on the jazz family tree without sacrificing edginess. It's brash and fun, showing how iconoclastic their forebears truly were, as Threadgill makes it new with his ironic wit and freewheeling irreverence. The trio's jaunty take on "King Porter Stomp" is a classic, and it doesn't get more soulful than Threadgill's behind-the-beat tenor drawl on "Buddy Bolden's Blues."

HENRY THREADGILL SEXTET

Just the Facts and Pass the Bucket (About Time, 1983)



Always more than the sum of its parts, Threadgill's "Sextett" was a key group of the 1980s avant-garde. Bolstering the frontline with cornet, trombone and cello, and adding a second drummer (playing one "percussion part"), Threadgill threads the needle between classical and jazz, favoring minimalist development of a harmonic motif over technical virtuosity. The lyrical "Black Blues" recalls his gospel roots, with the melancholic title track containing echoes of Varèse, Mingus and Ellington's "Harlem."

HENRY THREADGILL VERY VERY CIRCUS

Carry the Day (Columbia, 1995)



In the aptly named *Very Very Circus*, two electric guitars, two tubas, French horn, violin, accordion, drums and the Chinese pipa mesh seamlessly, with Threadgill's cry cutting over the raucous group improvisation. Accordion plays counterpoint to the Latin rhythms and Spanish chant on "Come Carry the Day," with Dadaist vocals punctuating the haunting "Hyla Crucifer ... Silence Of." Threadgill enters an alternate-dimension New Orleans on the kaleidoscopic "Between Orchids, Lilies, Blind Eyes and Cricket."

HENRY THREADGILL ZOOID

This Brings Us To, Volume II (Pi, 2010)



Taken from 2008 sessions that followed a European tour, Threadgill returns with the sequel to the much-lauded *Volume I* (Pi, 2009), revamping his unique brand of controlled chaos. Named after a cell that operates independently of its parent organism, the quintet employs a complex system of note groupings for collective improvisation, dispensing with chord progressions or scales. Between the polyrhythmic shuffle on "Lying Eyes" and the pulsing tuba on the bass-heavy "Polymorph," Zooid's recent recordings play like the thinking man's garage rock.

ing is a flute-quartet work called "Luap Nosebor" ("Paul Robeson" backwards). A contrasting version appears on the Black Saint title *Flutistry*, by Threadgill's Flute Force 4 featuring James Newton.

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At the Columbia talk, Edwards spoke of the diversity of Threadgill's earliest influences, from James Cleveland and Sister Rosetta Tharpe to Tchaikovsky. That expressive range comes through especially in the Mosaic set, as journalist Hank Shreiner discusses in his perceptive liner notes. From unrestrained party vibes to intimate and mysterious chorale-like settings, from Threadgill's defiant saxophone bark to his bass flute's resonant whisper, somehow a unified story emerges. And as Edwards noted in a paper some years ago, Threadgill's confounding song titles—"Dirty in the Right Places," "Let's All Go Down to the Footwash," "Those Who Eat Cookies"—have a way of underlining his wry sensibility.

But as singular as Threadgill's work can seem, it's always had a context: not only the AACM but also the Loft and Downtown scenes. In 1984, *New York Times* pop critic Jon Pareles floated the term "avant-gutbucket" to describe an "axis of groups" that included the Sextett, David Murray's big band, Craig Harris' Aqua Band, Ronald Shannon Jackson's Decoding Society and others.

Journalist and author Ashley Kahn, in a previous career as a road manager, accompanied *Very Very Circus* on a "guerrilla" bus tour through the U.S. and Canada in 1991. Threadgill and the band have a solid but little-noted album (*Live at Koncepts*) to show for it. "Being on the bus with someone as consistently creative as Henry was mindboggling," says Kahn. "He always had music playing in the back—one moment it would be Ravel and then it would be some African music. I'd go back there and he'd have music spread around him. Now and again he would vacate the rear lounge and come to the front, and if he did that, it usually meant he had achieved something. He'd be in a really good mood."

At Roulette, Kahn and Threadgill exchanged a hug and reminisced. "[The bus tour experience] is like getting on a wild horse," said Threadgill, who first hit the road with Philadelphia-based evangelist Horace Shepherd in the early-to-mid-1960s. "But you don't know it's wild," he continued. "You get on and you think it's tame!"

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The players and methodologies may have changed, and the music industry as he once knew it may have collapsed, but Threadgill has only grown. And the varied sounds he wrings from Zooid—the hectic mood of "Sap," the grainy interplay of "Mirror mirror the verb," the hiccupping beat of "It Never Moved" (based on one unchanging interval set, hence the title)—reveal both a boundless imagination and a rapport built on years of sweat. "I'd read about the way Ellington would use the road, and his band on the road, as a sort of mobile laboratory," Kahn offers, "and it hit me, that's exactly what Henry was doing." He's still doing it. **JT**