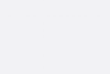




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# Live Review: Fresh Cut Orchestra Plays the *Freedom Now Suite* in North Carolina

Nearly 50 years after the Greensboro, N.C., sit-ins, Max Roach's *We Insist!* gets a powerful new rendition in the state that inspired it

UPDATED APRIL 25, 2019 — DAVID R. ADLER



Left to right: Stacy Dillard, Josh Lawrence, Jason Fraticelli, and Melanie Charles at the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, Feb. 23, 2019 (Photo: Matt Zeher / NC Natural & Cultural Resources)

Black Mountain College was a noble experiment in progressive education that existed from 1933 until 1957. Its legacy is preserved in downtown Asheville, N.C., by the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, based in a new and roomy gallery space with clear sightlines to the street outside.

Downstairs on a wall display you can see the redacted file the FBI kept on R. Buckminster Fuller, the futurist architect and onetime BMC faculty member.

Timed to coincide with the exhibit "Politics at Black Mountain College" and an initiative from the North Carolina Arts Council called Come Hear NC, the Fresh Cut Orchestra arrived in Asheville for a two-night stand (Feb. 22 and 23) at the center, playing the 1960 epic *We Insist! Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite* in its entirety. Based mainly in Philadelphia and New York, the band traveled light, paring down from 10 to six members and adding Melanie Charles on vocals and flute. But far from offering a simple rundown of the album's five tracks, the Fresh Cut co-leaders—trumpeter Josh Lawrence, bassist Jason Fraticelli, and drummer Anwar Marshall—gave them a panoramic interpretation, venturing stylistically far afield yet remaining grounded in a sober appreciation of the album's meaning, then and now.

*We Insist!* was recorded just months after the first lunch counter sit-ins in Greensboro, N.C., leading Roach to choose a stark and powerful sit-in photograph for the album cover. (Roach was born in North Carolina; he left for New York with his family at age four.) Abbey Lincoln's rendering of Oscar Brown, Jr.'s lyrics made the album the visceral experience that it was, steeped in the scarring memory of slavery from the very first notes of "Driva' Man."

Charles approached the material on her own terms, singing with guts and impeccable timing, even putting across new original lyrics by Fraticelli to end the work on a note of meditative and hopeful calm. She then managed to coax a sizable audience to sing along, rather beautifully, with the band's encore, the Pharoah Sanders/Leon Thomas classic "The Creator Has a Master Plan." Charles' flute, too, was excellent, and essential to the finely woven three-horn texture that the band relied on at every step. (The third horn on *We Insist!* was Julian Priest's trombone.)

There's no chordal instrument on *We Insist!*, and yet guitarist Tim Conley laid down warm chords, slide-guitar atmospherics, a wailing solo or two, and additional laptop electronics. He wove the elements together organically with insight and imagination, capturing the dissonance and minor-blues tonalities at the root of much of the suite. And given the important role of percussion in the Fresh Cut sound, it was no leap of logic to have Arturo Stable there to evoke the African and Afro-Cuban rhythms and timbres laid down so vividly on the original by Babatunde Olatunji, Ray Mantilla, and Tomas du Vall.

Lawrence could not but think of his trumpet forebear Booker Little while dealing with this music, and there were moments when his stone postbop soloing chops came to the fore in that tradition. Stacy Dillard, playing tenor and soprano saxophone, had Coleman Hawkins' legacy (or Walter Benton's) to contend with, but seemed to treat it as a spark of inspiration rather than a weight on his shoulders. Individually, the horns generated heat, and together with Charles on flute they completed a broad ensemble palette.

In the end, the Fresh Cut approach to *We Insist!* was remarkably true to the band's own evolving aesthetic as presented on its two Ropeadope releases to date, *From the Vine* (2014) and *Mind Behind Closed Doors* (2016). While following the arc of the *Freedom Now Suite* and its movements, they nonetheless brought up the music to another place, trusting their instincts and sensibilities. The group's principals divided things up: Marshall arranged "Driva' Man" and "Freedom Day"; Lawrence undertook an expansive reinvention of "Triptych: Prayer/Protest/Peace"; Fraticelli brought the evening to its apex with his arrangements of "All Africa" and "Tears for Johannesburg." It swung, it vamped, it got funky, even psychedelic (via Fraticelli's upright bass echo and wah). But the distinctive blues forms and harmonic outlines of the original were there, as were the continually resurfacing iterations of 5/4 time.

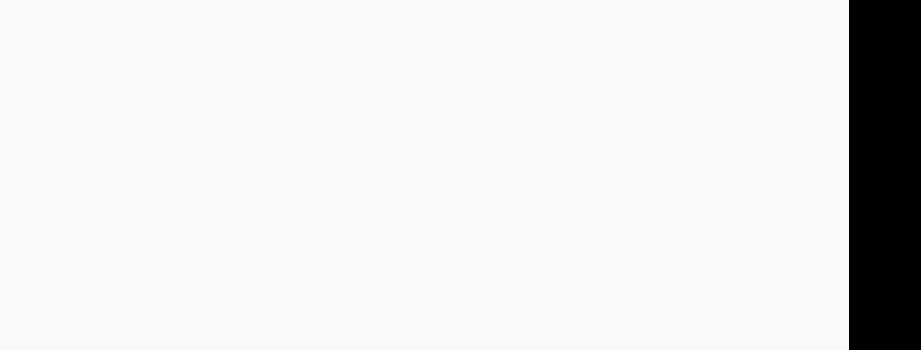
"Freedom Day" began in a dusky neo-soul vein and only later ramped up to Roach's lightning double-time swing. "Triptych" became something else entirely, with rich harmony and motivic material—whole new song passages, in effect—springing to life from Lawrence's pen, based solely on the wordless improvised melodic lines that Lincoln sang with Roach in duet. And "Tears for Johannesburg" contained interspersed voiceovers: newscasters reporting on the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre (the event that spurred the song's creation) as well as the death of Sandra Bland and the massacre at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, both of which occurred in 2015.

Would that we could regard the subject matter of *We Insist!* as yesterday's battle, a bygone concern. Evidence to the contrary is all around, not least in North Carolina, where an illegal ballot harvesting operation in the Ninth Congressional District has necessitated a new election. Just to the south in my adopted home state of Georgia, Governor Brian Kemp has taken office amid widespread charges of voter suppression; the night before the election he retweeted a race-baiting article from Breitbart about Stacey Abrams, his African-American opponent. The need for political engagement has never been greater, and it's heartening that many artists of today are doing as Roach once did.

Hearing the Fresh Cut Orchestra wrestle with *We Insist!* should inspire a deeper dig into Roach's discography, to Abbey Lincoln's vocal features on *Percussion Bitter Sweet*, to Roach's work with choirs on *It's Time and Lift Every Voice and Sing*, to Andy Bey's indelible 1968 appearance on *Members, Don't Git Weary*. The Roach legacy of music for voice runs deep, making Melanie Charles' authoritative handling of *We Insist!* all the more fulfilling and praiseworthy.

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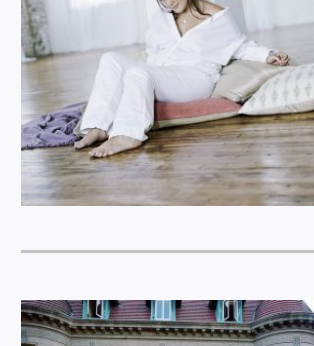
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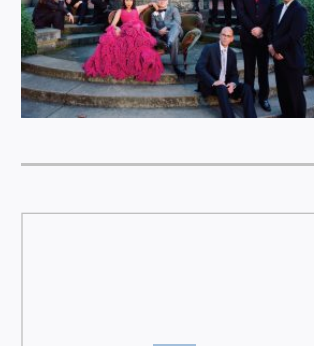
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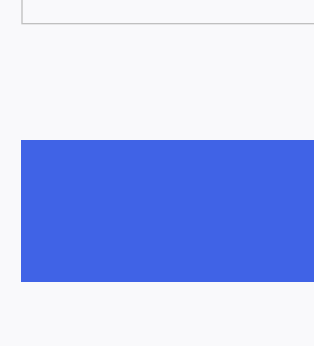
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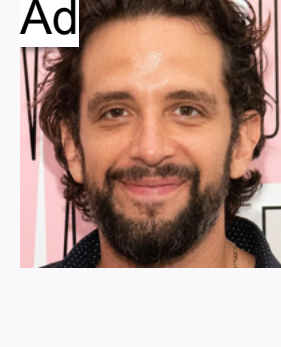
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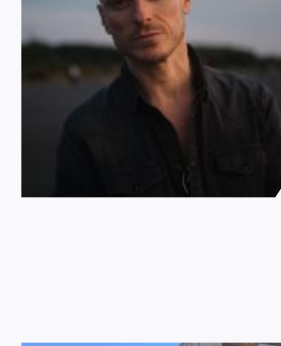
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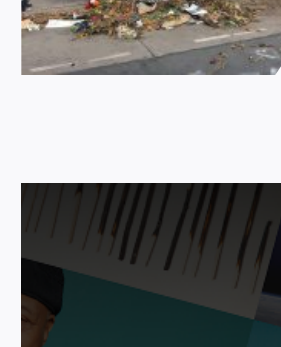
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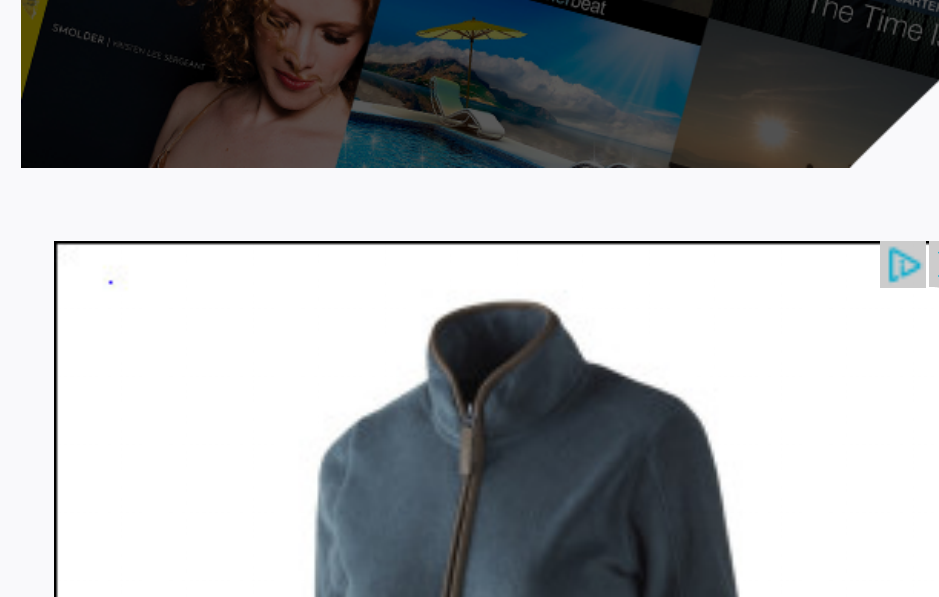
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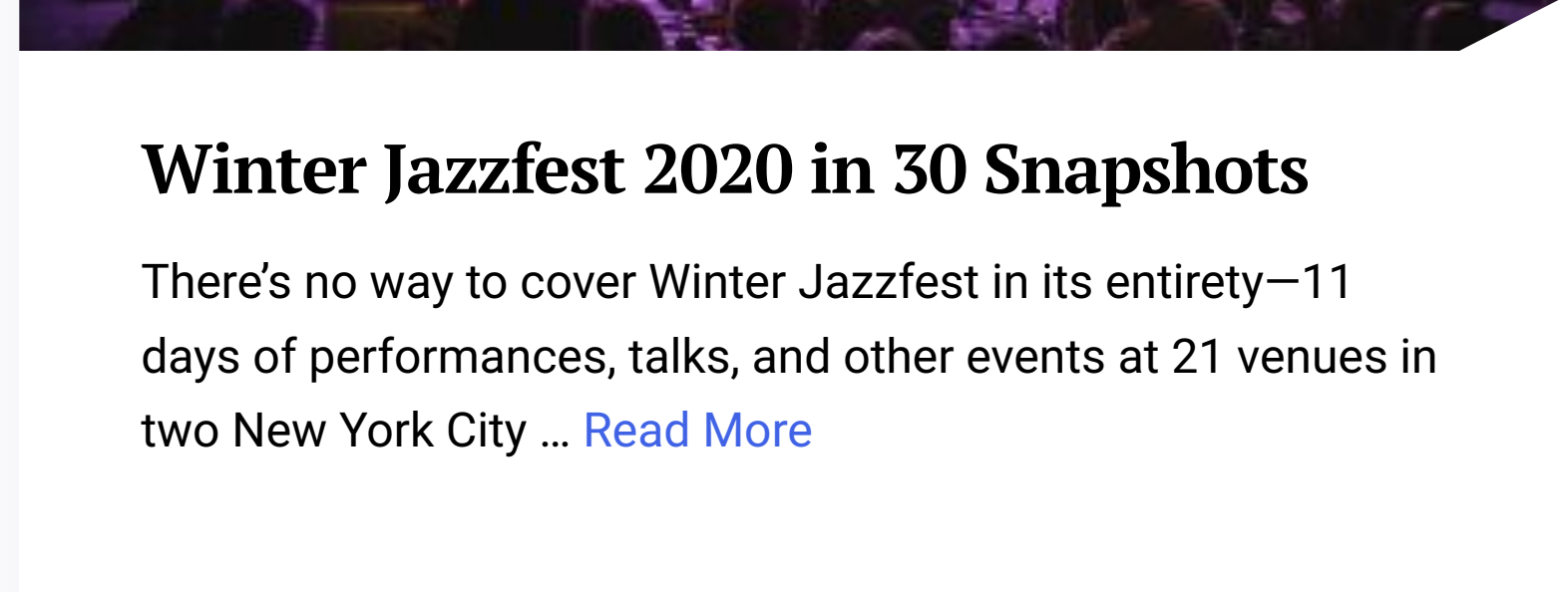
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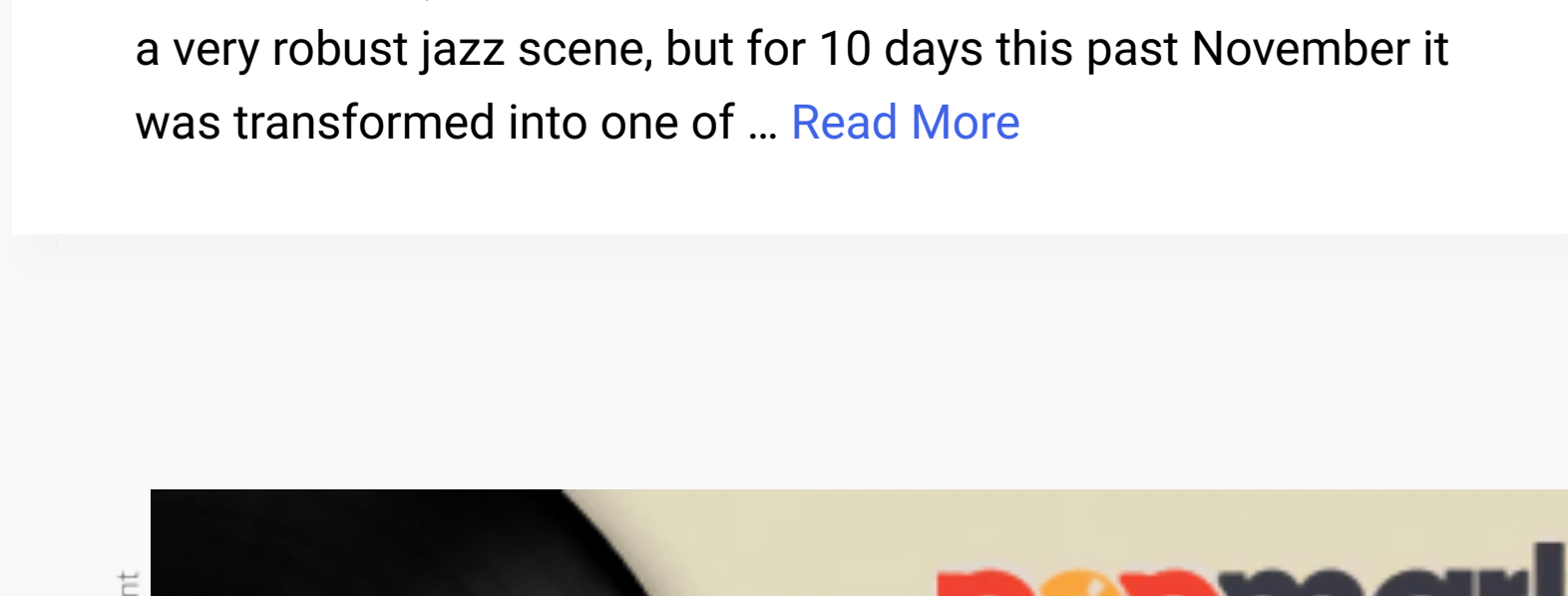
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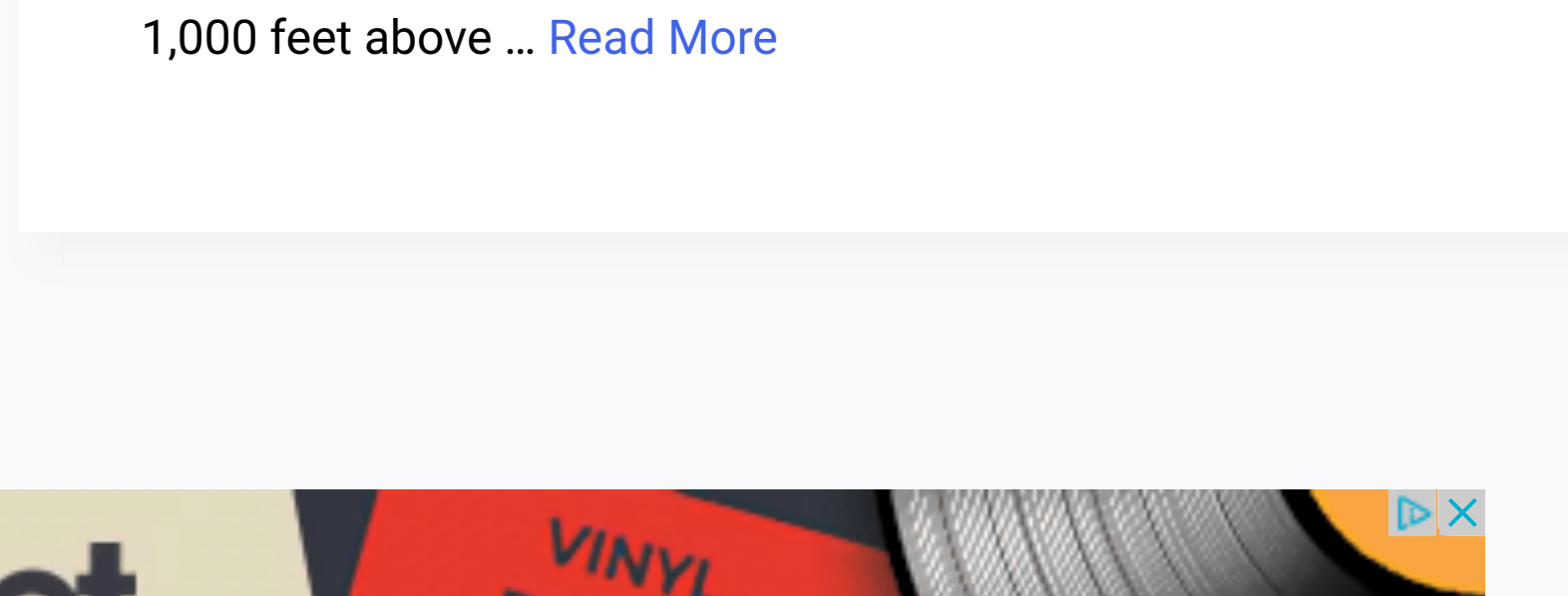
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