

JORGE SYLVESTER ACE COLLECTIVE

SPIRIT DRIVEN CD RELEASE

Spirit Driven – a fitting title for this musical *Pleiades*, this constellation of nine shining beacons of musical creativity. Here is music that, like the hot blue stars of the Pleiades, is ablaze with mysteriously evocative beauty. Like the mythical Seven Sisters and their Parents, for which the nine stars of the celestial Pleiades are named, these nine compositions are a Family: a Mother, a Father, and seven Sisters, each with a distinct personality. “Construction No. 2”, the fecund and knowing Mother, embraces seeming disparities with oceanic expansiveness. “Masouc”, the passionately seductive Sister, dances with an exquisitely primal elegance. “Paulina’s Prayer”, the introspective oldest Sister, unflinchingly confronts the unanswered questions of life’s slow dance until a sunlit epiphany illuminates her entire being with a knowing smile. “The Light of Truth’s High Noon Is Not For Tender Leaves”, the visionary Sister, gazes, half-dreaming, beyond the light of day into the heart of a vast cosmic drama. “Obeahman”, the smiling extrovert Sister, whose private inner world has yielded the secret of true acceptance, freely shares her abiding happiness with gentle humor and grace. “Construction No. 1”, the skillfully resolute Father, toiling with a vigorous grace honed through intensely focused effort, working towards a grand design, taps finally into a wellspring of limitless possibility. “To Be With You”, the sensuously romantic Sister, loves with tender passion and boundless longing. “Remember Haiti”, the existential realist Sister, never willing to accept the barriers of language and culture that neutralize compassionate action, relentlessly braves catastrophic circumstances to bear witness to human suffering. “Cycle of Life”, the wryly philosophical Sister, acutely sensitive to the limits of human logic, ironically imagines a succession of baffling topologies beyond logical comprehension. Just as the Family of nine stars of the celestial Pleiades symbolizes a deep interrelatedness, so too this Spirit Driven Family of nine musical works bespeaks a powerful synergy – a Caribbean inspired connectedness.

As much a landmark in the human adventure as is the stellar Pleiades – among the stars the closest to Earth and the most visible to the naked eye -- is the terrestrial constellation of islands gleaming brightly in the Caribbean sea. On a cosmological scale the Pleiades are relatively new, having formed within the past 100 million years, and likewise the Caribbean region in its present form, contiguous with the Atlantic Ocean, is new on a terrestrial scale, transformed from a landlocked sea basin only in the past 12,000 years. The silent stars, prevailing winds, and powerful surface currents that have together pointed the way to the Caribbean for untold generations have set into motion a uniquely layered and nuanced human adventure, admixing myriad populations, languages, and cultures. From this crossroads and crucible of identity and diversity that so profoundly invalidates crude notions of nationalistic “Exceptionalism”, emerges the core inspiration for this music and the evolving DNA of its connectedness. It has

been the life work of Jorge Sylvester, the creative visionary and mastermind of this music to give full expression to the breath and pulse of the Caribbean, to bring to life a truly Spirit Driven music. What is the value of such an endeavor? – Only the musicians who create the music and each person who hears the music can make that value judgment. The “animal spirits” of the marketplace that drive waves of breathless demand for the latest “must have” commodity are not the spirits that drive this music. And consequently, these six musicians who comprise the Afro-Caribbean Experimental Collective are not in the commodity music business.

Just as the cosmologically new Pleiades is a result of billions of years of galactic evolution, and the terrestrially new Caribbean region is a result of millions of years of geological activity, the new Spirit Driven music recorded here is the result of a lifetime of Spirit Driven preparation by each musician – Jorge Sylvester: brilliant composer and arranger, virtuoso Alto Saxophonist; Nora McCarthy: daringly original, versatile, and fearlessly honest singer/songwriter, composer, and poet; Waldron Mahdi Ricks: impeccably artful trumpet player, a jazz master in his own right; Pablo Vergara: astoundingly imaginative pianist, musically fluent on an encyclopedic, global scale; Donald Nicks: journeyman artisan of the bass, unfailingly, and always tastefully, providing the musical foundation; Kenny Grohowski: uncannily precise and inventive drummer and percussionist, equally adept at sight reading the most complex compositions and fully engaging in sustained improvisational interplay, all with seemingly effortless grace. This is a veritable star cluster of musicians, and – as the music attests – a classic jazz band that daringly extends the possibilities of swing.

There is no better proof of concept of the foregoing assertions than “Construction No. 2”. The opening introduction is a high-wire rhythmic duo for saxophone and drums, precisely notated, repeatedly coming to rest on harmonic pillars of piano sound. This introduction turns out to be an extended upbeat and leading tone to the first core rhythmic/melodic-theme, announced by the saxophone, then joined in turn by the drums and voice, with the bass playing a counter theme, setting up a round-robin development of rhythmic-melodic counterpoint to which all the players contribute in various groupings. Underlying all these contrapuntal layers is a 3/4 meter basis that is entirely masked by the rhythmic-melodic phrasing. Many listeners will count 4 beats for that first theme following the introduction, only to discover that this music is not structured according to obvious beat patterns. Why? – Because before there was the Beat, there *is* the Pulse; and the Pulse is what all the myriad Caribbean sources have in common at heart. It’s no problem to tap one’s foot, throughout “Construction No. 2”, to an underlying pulse. What is absent, entirely by intention, is any expression of the familiar beat patterns of Western music. To be sure, the music is designed within an abstract framework of metrical patterns; in fact “Construction No. 2” is written in sections of 3/4 and 5/4 meter, and early on in the composition both meters are superimposed to support the organic emergence of new rhythmic-

melodic variations. Yet these metrical patterns are just compositional frames needed to define the various replicating and linking structural “molecules” that interact and evolve to create this living music. Trying to hear this music in terms of metrical beats would be like traveling along Arizona’s magnificent Red Rock Scenic Road and only counting the mile markers rather than taking in the breathtaking scenery.

Jorge Sylvester’s rhythmic language in “Construction No. 2”, so brilliantly brought to life by the ACE Collective, is his covenant with a heritage deep and rich beyond imagination. In his poetic masterpiece “Omeros”, Derek Walcott writes, “And God said to Achille, “Look, I giving you permission / to come home.” The way home is in the deep memory of these intricate rhythms that unfold the infinite meanings of an eternal Pulse. Remarkably, current research in mathematical neuroscience affirms that layers of precise polyrhythmic patterns are mapped to synapse locations in the treelike structure of our neurons. Therefore this intricate rhythmic language is built into each and every one of us. The ever shifting polyrhythms of Africa, the grand cyclic time sense of the indigenous Amerindian cultures, the formal abstractions of Europe – all this and much more are alloyed in the Caribbean crucible – all are counterparts to aspects of our human nature, physiology, and consciousness – all are given grand expression in the rhythmic language at the heart of this music.

In the context of all that has been said here, it must be emphasized that above all, this Family of nine musical works is eminently listenable, danceable music. The music continuously flows and develops with a lithe bodily grace and expressive range, transfiguring its structural complexity and technical virtuosity into an intimate and honest gesture of oneness with each listener, only possible by virtue of consummate musicianship. The creative collaboration of Nora McCarthy and Jorge Sylvester during the past 12 years is central to the expressive range of this music, particularly in terms of Nora’s magically transformative singing, her contribution of an original composition and an artfully reworked Latin American classic song, and of course her provocatively dynamic and assertive poetry. Waldron Mahdi Ricks brings to the front line an exquisitely fluid lyrical elegance that perfectly balances Jorge’s dazzling intricacy and Nora’s imaginative flights of fancy. The rhythm section is a planet unto itself, a planet in exquisite ecological balance, whose rolling ocean is named Pablo Vergara, whose swift jet stream is named Kenny Grohowski, and whose solid terra firma is named Donald Nicks. After all is said and done, this is an all-star jazz band that knows how to swing, to improvise with spontaneity and poise, and to respond to one another with telepathic immediacy and profound respect. What these musicians have achieved here, so significant, so beautiful is truly and authentically *Spirit Driven*.

- Ramsey Ameen.