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REVIEW

The State Of Black America

[The Mark Lomax Trio](#)

Sunday, August 22, 2010

Reviewed by: Ian Mann

ALBUM

4 out of 5



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A bold title for a bold album that offers more variation than its title and instrumental line up might suggest.

The Mark Lomax Trio

“The Spirit Of Black America”

(Inarhyme Records Inarhyme 1005)

A bold title for a bold album. This release by drummer/leader/composer Mark Lomax might be an uncompromising record with its origins in the issues of racial and artistic politics but it is also a thoroughly absorbing, convincing and, on its own terms, enjoyable musical work in its own right

Lomax’s saxophone trio with tenor man Edwin Bayard and bassist Dean Hulett is a well integrated unit that covers an impressively wide stylistic and dynamic range on an album that offers more variation than its title and instrumental line up might suggest. Yes, there’s plenty of powerful, often confrontational blowing but there’s a good deal of subtlety too, particularly on the ballad “The Unknown Self”.

The album’s cover notes include liners by the guitarist, composer and academic Bill Banfield which namecheck author James Baldwin and a whole panoply of jazz luminaries, but it is perhaps Lomax’s own comments that are the most illuminating. The drummer/percussionist is classically trained and writes of his difficulties in gaining acceptance as a black man within the white artistic community and its European classical traditions. Unhappy with the way that black musical forms were considered to be inherently

inferior to their European counterparts Lomax threw himself deeper into the black artistic tradition- in his words; “Blues and jazz, spirituals and gospel, all shades of Blackness being spoken through the musical language of Europe!”

Lomax declares that “The State Of Black America” is a “means of dealing with these complex issues of race and (cultural) identity in America”. The resultant music is thus highly personal but also pays homage to many of the key developments in jazz and radical black politics of the last fifty years or so. The album contains echoes of Coleman, Ayler, Roach, Mingus, Coltrane, Dolphy, Rollins and many more but it still stands up well in a contemporary context and has a strong enough personal identity to defuse any charges of mere copying. Lomax, Bayard and Hulett play with an urgency, skill and musicality that demands that this music be accepted on it’s own terms, in the here and now.

Based in the Mid West, Lomax is an unfamiliar name to UK audiences but he has worked with many big names in America including Clark Terry, Bennie Maupin, Nicholas Payton, Donald Harrison and members of the Marsalis family. His jazz credentials are matched by his knowledge of gospel music. He currently teaches at the Center for the Gospel Arts. “The State Of Black America” appears on the new Philadelphia based Inarhyme record label founded by pianist/composer/producer Keith Javors and it is to be hoped that the release brings his work to wider attention.

Turning to the music itself the album comprises of five lengthy Lomax compositions, all clocking in at nine minutes plus. The pieces provide the framework for some empathic improvising by the three members of the group. Although Lomax is obviously the leader his domination of the trio is subtle, and this is very much a meeting of like musical minds with the level of interaction between the three musicians consistently excellent throughout.

The album kicks off with the turbo charged “Stuck In A Rut”. The title is something of a misnomer as the music is anything but. Lomax’s volcanic, polyrhythmic storm drives the piece and is matched by Hulett’s busy bass pulse and Bayard’s impassioned tenor improvising. Initially the drummer pushes things along like an even more hyperactive Art Blakey but there are subtler moments too as bassist Hulett takes the lead, his playing both agile and muscular, hinting at both Mingus and Charlie Haden.

However the trio really demonstrate their more sophisticated side on the ballad “The Unknown Self”, a piece that recalls the dark, subtle sonorities of Mingus, Dolphy and Henry Threadgill. Lomax introduces the piece with a carefully constructed solo drum feature but it’s the main theme of the composition that is really beautiful with Bayard now the epitome of taste and restraint. Hulett’s bass feature is wholly different in character this time, his tone rich, dark and woody as he explores gently above Lomax’s delicately brushed undertow. Taken as a whole the piece is both moving and thoroughly absorbing.

“The Power Of Knowing” is equally fine with Bayard’s tenor probing astringently above bass and drums, tentatively at first but then with greater power and assertiveness as Lomax begins to stoke the fires. The rhythms and dynamics of the piece ebb and flow constantly and the interaction between the three musicians is empathic and instinctive with the responsibility for the lead changing hand several times. Sometimes the three musicians lock into a steady groove or riff, at other moments the playing is more free and impressionistic. Appropriately the piece concludes with Lomax alone, and apparently resolved, at the drums.

“To Know God Is To Know Thyself” is another weighty title and one that is matched by the intensity and gravitas of the music. The trio sound here is immediately big and full on and draws heavily on the spiritualistic “sheets of sound” approach of John Coltrane at his most powerful. Lomax unleashes yet another storm from the drums as Bayard’s sax roars and wails and Hulett’s bass provides the anchor.

Hulett's solo provides dynamic contrast, a moment of quite contemplation before Lomax erupts again, later joined by Bayard, the saxophonist now even more impassioned than before.

The closing "Blues For Charles (Who Split B4 The Butterfly Flew In)" is the most conventionally structured track on the record. A real blues, dedicated to Mingus I assume although the notes do not make this clear, it is played with genuine feeling by the excellent Bayard who seems to capture the entire history of the tenor saxophone in his playing. Hulett, who excels throughout, is once again featured as a soloist. So often bass solos can be a necessary evil, played as of rote, but Hulett's solo contributions throughout this album are a constant delight. He has a huge, resonant tone, a strong melodic sense and boundless fluency, inventiveness and imagination. Listening to his numerous features never becomes a chore, he consistently engages the attention of the listener throughout.

As for Lomax, his drumming is the linchpin of the band, technically accomplished and always just right for the mood he is trying to create. Thunderous, complex polyrhythmic passages contrast well with moments of sublime tastefulness and restraint. Although this is in many ways a meeting of equals Lomax's concept still sets the tone for the album as a whole.

"The State Of Black America" is an impressive document and a strong artistic statement. Although challenging at times the music is still eminently accessible with a good balance between freedom and structure, and most adventurous jazz listeners should find something to enjoy here. Lomax, Hulett and Bayard are all superb technicians and this confident, well executed album deserves to bring all three players to greater attention both within the US and beyond.

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