



RICHARD TEITELBAUM

BY KURT GOTTSCHALK

Richard Teitelbaum puts it quite plainly. “I don’t consider myself to be a jazz musician, really,” he said, speaking from his upstate New York home, where he is a professor of music at Bard College. “I never play changes.” But, by his own admission, he’s a lifelong listener of jazz. “I have this vague memory of walking into a theater in Times Square and hearing Louis Armstrong when I was young, sitting in the back row of the balcony and thinking it was the loudest music I’d ever heard,” he explained. “I listened to Dave Brubeck when I was in high school and college and Paul Desmond and I liked that. I heard John Coltrane live in 1960 or so and then I heard him on the same concert as Ornette Coleman.”

Teitelbaum’s unique place straddling jazz, new music and free improvisation is just as informed by classical studies and jazz listening. He gave piano recitals of Brahms, Mendelssohn and Mozart as a youth and in his 20s studied with the composer Luigi Nono in Italy on a Fulbright scholarship. While in Rome, he began performing with Alvin Curran, Frederic Rzewski and an assemblage of other soundmakers under the name *Musica Elettronica Viva* (MEV), applying John Cage’s aesthetics to the practice of free jazz, contributing to the mid ’60s development of non-genre improv being practiced by AMM and the Spontaneous Music Ensemble in London. He attended concerts by Enrico Rava and Don Cherry and got to be friends with Coleman. Such straddling styles turned out to be a lifetime pursuit.

The main thing driving that pursuit was a desire to learn and to invent. It was around that time while living in Europe, that he had a vision that set him on course for unearthing unusual sounds. “I got interested in brain waves,” he said. “I had a fantasy one night that I could make music with brainwaves and Rzewski told me about this guy called ‘Moog’.”

The New York City native promptly headed home

and landed a job in the Psychology Department at Queens College where he learned how to use the electrodes that would enable his idea about brainwave music while saving enough money to buy a synthesizer. He made his way northwest to Trumansburg, NY, to meet synthesizer pioneer Robert Moog. As it happened, saxophonist Steve Lacy was in New York at the time as well and daily jam sessions during the summer of 1967 resulted in Chinese Food for LBJ with Irene Aebi singing texts borrowed from the 6th century BCE Buddhist philosopher Lao Tzu. (Recordings of those sessions remained unreleased until 2012, when Emanem included them on the Lacy collection *The Sun*.) Later that year, he returned to Italy, Moog synth in hand and rejoined MEV. Lacy would play with MEV for a while as well. “I look on Steve as my first improvisation teacher,” Teitelbaum said.

Another key figure from the jazz world who would figure prominently in Teitelbaum’s career is drum legend Andrew Cyrille. The two were initially brought together by the late violinist Leroy Jenkins for his *Space Minds, New Worlds, Survival of America* album (Tomato, 1978). They met again on Valentine’s Day, 1981, when Cyrille had two nights booked at the multicultural performance space Soundscape on W. 52nd Street and invited Teitelbaum to join him. “He invited me to play with him at Verna Gillis’ club,” Teitelbaum remembered. “Totally free.” That encounter was released by Silkheart in 1997 under the name *Double Clutch*. A peek at the credits shows Teitelbaum’s set-up at the time: PolyMoog synthesizer, modified MicroMoog synthesizer, Zannini custom random generator and SYM-1 single board computer. He elaborates in Kevin Whitehead’s liner notes. “My equipment on that concert was a PolyMoog synthesizer, a MicroMoog synthesizer and some modifications and custom stuff, namely, an analog random generator that I had made in Italy way back in the ’60s. And then there is a computer, a single-board digital processor. It’s pre-MIDI, so the instruments are analog, but the PolyMoog puts out a control voltage which gets converted from analog to digital and goes into the computer, where it goes through all kinds of delays and loops and sequences and overlays and multitracks, in real time

and then plays the MicroMoog with it. That’s what I think is going on.”

Cyrille and Teitelbaum continued to play together, doing some dates in Europe and in a trio with Anthony Braxton. And it’s proven to be a lasting relationship. Cyrille’s *The Declaration of Musical Independence*, released by ECM last fall, includes Teitelbaum on synthesizer and piano, guitarist Bill Frisell and bassist Ben Street. It’s a remarkable meeting—warm and inviting yet not quite like anything before it. And true to his roots, according to Teitelbaum, Cyrille made it a real group session with everyone bringing in a composition and the group doing several free improvisations as well. Teitelbaum’s “Herky Jerky” is a brief round, layered and angular, a catchy melody growing surprisingly complex as it turns in on itself.

Teitelbaum’s first band has proved to have staying power as well. While others have come and gone, the core of MEV—Curran, Rzewski and himself—has carried on. They played at last year’s Festival de Actuelle Musique de Victoriaville in Quebec [issued as *Symphony No. 106* on Victo, see review on pg. 22]. A tour this summer will take them to the Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, TN. “It’s been a kind of renaissance,” Teitelbaum said. “It was our 50th anniversary this year so we took that as an opportunity to try to get some gigs.” Asked what he attributes MEV’s longevity to, Teitelbaum laughed. “Old age,” he answered. “Most of us are still around.” ❖

For more information, visit inside.bard.edu/teitelbaum. Teitelbaum is at Dizzy’s Club Feb. 16th with Andrew Cyrille. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Steve Lacy—*The Sun* (Roaratorio-Emanem, 1967-68)
- Leroy Jenkins—*Space Minds, New Worlds, Survival of America* (Tomato, 1978)
- Anthony Braxton/Richard Teitelbaum—*Open Aspects 1982* (haHUT, 1982)
- Joëlle Léandre—*Joëlle Léandre Project* (Leo, 1999)
- Richard Teitelbaum—*Solo Live* (Mutable Music, 2009)
- Andrew Cyrille—*The Declaration of Musical Independence* (ECM, 2014)

LEST WE FORGET



JODIE CHRISTIAN

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

Jodie Christian, who died five years ago this month at 80, was a pianist from Chicago, best known locally as a founding member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. Possessing both technical facility and great melodic originality, Christian always preferred the supporting role. He spent most of his life in Chicago and made numerous records with artists like Dexter Gordon, Stan Getz and Les McCann, as well as fellow Chicagoans Gene Ammons, Eddie Harris and Von Freeman. Primarily a straightahead bebop musician, he worked locally with Johnny Griffin, John Gilmore, Victor Sproles, Wilbur Ware and Wilbur Campbell, among many others, and played behind all the big names passing through, such as saxophonists Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Teddy Edwards and Don Byas, to name a few. He also accompanied vocalists and a range of performers from bluesman Jimmy Reed to intrepid saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell.

Christian grew up surrounded by music. His parents were both pianists: his mother directed a church choir and his father played the blues at speakeasies and rent parties. His mother was his first

teacher and also took him to performances at places like the Savoy, the Regal and the Chicago Theater. He also participated in choirs from a young age and credits this for his early musical training. “I sang all the parts,” he told the *Chicago Tribune*. “A lot of times I wouldn’t know a song, but I could anticipate what was coming next because I had experience doing that, singing parts.” But he always knew he wanted to play piano and the ability to anticipate what was coming would serve him well in the rhythm section. In the ’40s he was underage at the Savoy Ballroom when he heard Gene Ammons and Charlie Parker. He had heard some records before, but seeing this music performed live was transformative. He was soon out playing jazz and became a mainstay on Chicago’s rich south side jazz scene from the late ’40s through the ’50s and beyond, developing his own provocative voice on the piano.

Christian demonstrated leadership as an engaged accompanist, urging the soloists rhythmically and harmonically whatever the situation. Two of his great early records are under the leadership of bop trumpeter Ira Sullivan: *Nicky’s Tune* and *Bird Lives*, recorded in 1958 and 1962, respectively. On these early quintet sessions, the pianist’s musical voice and individual feeling are readily apparent. In the ’60s he appeared on several popular albums by Eddie Harris on Atlantic, including *The Electrifying Eddie Harris* (1967), *Plug Me In* (1968), *Silver Cycles* (1968) and *High Voltage* (1969). These exhibit the inventive pianist in various settings

including boogaloo and jazz funk. The double LP *Excursions* (Atlantic, 1966-73) includes “Aleph the Fool”, an amazing performance showcasing Christian’s virtuosity and innovation. His accompaniment to Harris is like a simultaneous solo in counterpoint, exploiting the tune’s dissonance, and he constructs the bulk of his own solo out of 2nds, striking adjacent keys simultaneously. His unique energy and musicality is also evidenced on *The Chase* by Gene Ammons and Dexter Gordon—you can’t miss the animated live audience; this music is burning! In the ’80s-90s Christian made several great recordings for the Chicago-based Delmark label with artists such as Roscoe Mitchell, Harold Ousley and Eric Alexander. He also made the first recordings under his own name with the label, producing five albums between 1991-2000 and another one for SteepleChase in 1994. These present a seasoned master who loved the music. ❖

Recommended Listening:

- Ira Sullivan—*Blue Stroll* (with Johnny Griffin) (Delmark, 1959)
- Eddie Harris—*The Electrifying Eddie Harris* (Atlantic-Rhino, 1967)
- Roscoe Mitchell Quartet—*The Flow of Things* (Black Saint, 1986)
- Von Freeman—*Lester Leaps In* (SteepleChase, 1992)
- Jodie Christian—*Soul Fountain* (Delmark, 1994)
- Jodie Christian—*Reminiscing* (Delmark, 2000)