

Arts

Left-over American wasteland needs good jazz

by Michael Brennan

I haven't bought a jazz album in a long time and it's not because my interest in jazz has dwindled (though rock and roll has had the best of me lately).

The reason is almost all the innovative and exciting music in America has not been available

on record in Canada. I guess record companies figure Canada is some sort of left-over American wasteland with no market for anything that's not commercial. This is true for the most part, but there is a sufficient market here for underground music - jazz or rock or

whatever.

The music I'm speaking of now is the electric, more rhythmic free-jazz that has emerged principally from New York and Ornette Coleman's mid-seventies work. With **Dancing in Your Head** (released in 1976), Coleman used electric guitars

and bass to create a wild, repetitive beat as he improvised over the top, his wonderfully maniacal alto sax lines piercing your skull. What he did was give free-jazz a needed rhythm and a fresh instrumentation and beat.

In a way, **Dancing in Your Head** could be called off-beat disco funk. It had the raw, uncompromising passion of pre-jazz and the electric rhythm of funk. Of course Miles Davis had done a similar thing with his hard funk in the early 70's, but this music has a completely new beat.

Under Coleman's direction, guitarist James Blood Ulmer, drummer Ronald Shannon Jackson, saxophonist Arthur Blythe and others have since been working. Each makes music that is unique, raw and refreshing and much of it funkier than Coleman's. It could be called fusion but their music is as energetic and creative as the best jazz and is nothing like the pale, techno-pop fusion of Chick Corea and Jean-Luc Ponty, among others, that has unfortunately dominated the jazz scene in the last decade.

The problem is that almost none of Ulmer's, Jackson's or Blythe's albums have been available in Canada. Ulmer and

Blythe even have contracts with Columbia Records, a major company, but neither of their recent albums have been released here. That is until recently, however, when Ulmer's newest release, **Free Lancing**, finally came out. It's been available in the States for months. I was surprised to see it and even happier listening to it. It is a very good album. Ulmer is a great guitarist, approaching the instrument as Coleman approaches his, and with added touches of Jimi Hendrix. All the cuts on the album are short, his solos never overly long and the rhythm section right on. He even sings on a couple of songs and quite powerfully, his gutsy voice as passionate as Otis Redding's at times. And the beat is truly funky in the tradition of James Brown and Miles Davis, with Ulmer's guitar revolving sharply with the rhythm. It dances in your head alright.

I can do nothing but recommend this album. Ulmer has been getting a fair bit of publicity lately and has become somewhat popular with the new wavers. Whatever attention he gets, it is certainly deserved. Jazz has been given a fresh injection of energy, so don't pass it by.



In case you were wondering, Spring began last Sunday. Who can relieve the pain?

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