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## reviews

### Wadada Leo Smith's Golden Quartet - *Tabligh*

By [clifford](#) · July 21, 2008 ·  · [commentellen](#)



#### [Cuneiform Rune 270](#)

I have to confess a bit of personal history with Wadada Leo Smith. My uncle Philip, at one time a reedman and composer, studied with Smith in New Haven in the late '70s and early '80s, eventually becoming part of the Creative Musicians Improvisers Forum (CMIF). Phil went to a workshop that Smith was teaching, and ended up being one of two attendees. Rather than the “introduction to freedom” that he was expecting, Smith played Louis Armstrong’s “West End Blues” solo note-for-note, with perfect pitch and similar attack, enough so that one might be hard pressed to differentiate between the recording of Satch and what Smith was doing. The AACM-schooled trumpeter whose Kabell recordings were micro yet far more expansive than any Art Ensemble recordings was, at heart, a traditionalist.

Of course, Smith’s name is rarely—if ever—mentioned alongside the new traditionalists coming up in the '80s, and he’s not characterized as part of the Wynton, Nicholas Payton, etc. (wonder if they even know who he is?) crew. Yet Smith’s participation in groups like Yo Miles! and his own Golden Quartet place him in line with those who are directly addressing and expanding upon the post-bop language vis-a-vis Miles Davis. The latest incarnation of Smith’s Golden Quartet features regular cohort, bassist John Lindberg, as well as recent additions in pianist Vijay Iyer and drummer Shannon Jackson. After recording for Pi and Tzadik, *Tabligh* is the first disc by the group on Cuneiform.

Thinking of Smith's music microcosmically—and especially as I was exposed to it from a lineage of free improvisation—seems antithetical to tradition, even if it's aesthetic. Smith's philosophy of rhythm units seems atomistic, but being able to encapsulate and reference an entire composition (or an entire tradition) in phrases and the spaces between gives largeness to the very small. Miles' sound might be more condensed, even as the music was often very open. It's an interesting dichotomy that he was able to play with, and that tension seems most pronounced on his mid-Sixties recordings. Armstrong's sound was, by comparison, huge and full-bore, yet his Hot Fives and Sevens seemed utterly wound-up (partially due to the exigencies of recording).

On "Rosa Parks," the image conjured—courtesy Iyer's electric piano and synthesizers—is that of Miles' languid late-Sixties pulse, yet with Smith skittering over the top in brittle explosions often in tandem with Jackson's martial Sunny Murray-esque allover thrum. Smith is at times like crumpled paper and wisp, but never is he indirect, even at his most terse. It's interesting to think of him as a rhythm player, as he's frequently trading volleys with the drummer as piano and bass create a swirling sound-field below and around them. Smith's homage to the group's previous percussionist, "DeJohnette," begins with a terse brass sketch as Iyer engages acoustic cascades and tosses bricks in erudite surges. Smith, like Miles, knows how to use a group and is able to adjust his prominence or sit back and watch others create in a framework he may direct, but whose impulses are collective. This collectivity is often dense, constant cymbal chatter, arco glisses and clanging blocks filling in while Smith's pointed shots and simple extrapolations sometimes sail of a separate, sketched motor.

Midway through "DeJohnette" a wistful blues etude erupts into growls and blurred high-register swaths, Smith encapsulating a full-band density in nearly unaccompanied space. It is these moments where the rhythm section mostly lays out, prodding on occasion, that the trumpeter steps out into the open and his range—sonic and historical—cuts through the air. *Tabligh* is an album that should be on the shelf of anyone with an interest in the past eighty-odd years of trumpet improvisation.

~ Clifford Allen

Tags: [AACM](#), [CMIF](#)



## Discussion

### 5 comments for "Wadada Leo Smith's Golden Quartet - *Tabligh*"

1. Haven't heard this one, but your review has made me curious. It's getting harder for me to listen to synthesizers, though.

Anybody have that Kabell box? I have the Tzadik version of 'Reflectativity', which I adore. I'd love to hear the original recording.

*Posted by Michael C. | July 21, 2008, 1:53 pm*

2. You won't hear any "cheesy" synth licks in this one.

I have the Kabell material on LP. It's interesting stuff, though I haven't revisited those albums

in some time. The greatest Leo Smith work I've heard is the private LP release, "The Sky Cries the Blues," an orchestral conflagration released on the CMIF co-op label. It's a collective venture, but Leo's stamp is on it for sure.

*Posted by clifford | July 21, 2008, 8:51 pm*

3. I studied with Wadada at the Creative Music Studio in 1979, as part of a five-week session led by Roscoe Mitchell (other teachers were George Lewis & Anthony Braxton). Mr. Smith was a great, patient teacher, and as indicated, very involved with the deep tradition. He handed out piano solos to the four piano players (piano was my instrument then), pieces named after great masters of yesterlore: "Hines," "Monk," etc. Each one was a miniature jewel, glinting with those odd-looking "rhythm units."

He also played the loudest single note I have ever heard out of an unamplified brass instrument. Just warming up.

*Posted by djll | July 22, 2008, 8:52 am*

4. I like this cd a lot. Wadada is a great person and I also had many good experiences with him. Probably my favorite music ever is his trio with Kowald and Sommer, thanks to slsk there is more to that story now.

I heard Nasheet Waits is playing drums in this group now. He is great, but I liked hearing Shannon Jackson on this.

Lindberg is great as always. He is one of my very favorite bass players.

I learned a lot from the few bass lessons he gave me.

*Posted by damon Smith | July 22, 2008, 9:21 am*

5. I like Yo Miles and Golden Quartet; he's such a great trumpeter. I saw Smith in Saalfelden, August 22nd, with Vijay Iyer, Brandon Ross and Pheroa AlKaff playing Davis' Jack Johnson. A disappointing and short set; because of technical and stage problems, maybe his troubles playing without a better fit I think. He wasn't clearly satisfied, his musicians (Ross) looked embarrassed as him.

*Posted by Alino | September 2, 2008, 11:11 am*

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