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America

Wadada Leo Smith / Jack DeJohnette | Tzadik

By Troy Collins

Originally proposed to ECM Records in 1979, the collaboration of trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith and drummer Jack DeJohnette has finally found new life in *America*. Recorded last year in Bill Laswell's New Jersey studio (but without his heavy-handed production aesthetic), this unadorned acoustic session documents two of the world's most versatile and virtuosic improvisers working through a set of six new compositions written by Smith.



Legendary veterans whose seminal innovations can be traced to the late '60s, Smith was a charter member of the AACM, while DeJohnette served with Miles Davis during his influential fusion period. Their finely tuned rapport was rekindled in the company of pianist Anthony Davis and late bassist Malachi Favors in the first version of Smith's Golden Quartet. Favors passing in 2004 disbanded the original line-up, leaving their first two albums, *Golden Quartet* (Tzadik, 2000) and *Year of the Elephant* (Pi, 2002) as definitive examples of creative improvised music for the new century.

Opening with celebratory fanfare, the episodic "America Parts 1, 2, 3" gradually segues from brassy, martial turbulence into spacious impressionism that quotes the Dark Prince's "Concierto De Aranjuez" before returning to a climactic vortex of clarion trumpet calls and frenetic trap set ruminations. "John Brown's Fort" and "Masnavi: The Falcon and the Owls" spotlight Smith's smeary chromatic flurries and DeJohnette's ricocheting rhythms while "Red Trumpet" and the lyrical "Ed Blackwell, the Blue Mountain Sun Drummer" demonstrate their adroit use of spatial dynamics, as Smith's recoiling lines weave around DeJohnette's elastic downbeats with nimble dexterity. "Rabi'a's Unconditional Love, a Spiritual Mystery of the Heart" offers introspective respite, in which Smith's delicate muted refrains are accompanied by DeJohnette's tastefully spare accents.

Despite their limited palette, Smith and DeJohnette reveal a wealth of expressionistic possibilities. Bringing years of experience into play, each approaches the jazz tradition from opposite ends of the musical spectrum, yet they make a perfectly balanced pair. Smith's protean timbre and abstruse cadences are delivered with studied virtuosity, while DeJohnette executes intricate polyrhythmic fragments and elaborate fills with freewheeling verve. Exuding a primordial timelessness reminiscent of an extended ritual invocation, their empathetic dialog surpasses contemporary trends and stylistic precedents. Their interplay is measured and precise, neither overwrought nor timid, lending *America* an air of regal austerity--the sound of two masters engaged in an intimate musical conversation.

Visit Wadada Leo Smith and Jack DeJohnette on the web.

Track Listing: America Parts 1, 2, 3; Red Trumpet; John Brown's Fort; Ed Blackwell, the Blue Mountain Sun Drummer; Rabi'a's Unconditional Love, a Spiritual Mystery of the Heart; Masnavi: The Falcon and the Owls.

Personnel: Wadada Leo Smith: trumpet, flugelhorn (6); Jack DeJohnette: drums.

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