

Wadada Leo Smith interview, 2000

LA Weekly, 10/25/00

by Greg Burk

Summer Saturday evening at West Hollywood's Schindler House. Flat '20s Modern architecture. Pre-televisional vibe of dead artists who once drew lines here. The concrete interior retains the bake of the departed sun; the courtyard lawn is cool after watering.

It's a night of solo horns, played from inside the house, through wide doors, to a yard full of listeners. Missed Sara Schoenbeck's bassoon -- damn, it started on time. Vinny Golia has splotched out his rich, split tones on bass clarinet, channeled spirits on soprano sax, breathing like a swimmer. Lynn Johnston has shrieked on alto, sweetening when he moved to baritone. It all sounded good.

Before his own set, red-shirted Ishmael Wadada Leo Smith hunches forward on a folding chair, dreadlocks tenting his face, and softly blows long trumpet notes into a crack in the floor. When he gets up, the atmosphere changes. The others played a lot; Smith composes simpler phrases, blurred at the edges, spaces between. He blows a burst, stops and lets it sink in. Puts a mute on his horn, opens and closes it while playing so it sounds like he's duetting with himself. Hits one high, clear note and holds it.

In the audience, a baby harmonizes, eh-h-h-h. In the grass, crickets chirp along. Two houses down, a dog yaps commentary. No question: This one's not a solo performance.

A couple of days later, Smith explains what he did there, what he always does: He listened. And after listening, he concluded that the other players' faster and higher stuff sounded distorted.

"I wanted to make more melody, to fit the room better. I kept using the floor and the open space. Outside, sound dissipates so fast, and if you don't channel it, it'll be all over the place." Environment. To play your best, you have to consider where you are.

This is the kind of thinking that makes Smith a good educator, as well

as a world-acknowledged multi-instrumental performer. He's been teaching since 1975, longest at upstate New York's Bard College, before accepting the Dizzy Gillespie Chair at CalArts in 1993. The Valencia school was well aware of Smith's reputation: as an early adherent of Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, beginning in 1967; as a collaborator with the likes of Anthony Braxton, Marion Brown, Henry Threadgill and Leroy Jenkins; as a theoretician who's written on the art of improvising. So not long after he answered CalArts' ad, the search for an x-factor faculty member was terminated.

He was a good fit. Most institutions of higher learning, says Smith, are about making students good citizens. But "CalArts is a school for artists. Artists have no citizenship." Plus, he enjoys the climate here: warm, though not the same kind of warm as his native Mississippi.

Unlike many musicians he's encountered, Smith likes teaching, and he has an artist's approach to it. When students come to him wanting to learn how to play bebop or swing, he sends them to somebody else. What he teaches is a way of seeing things, hearing things.

"It's very individualized," he says, his voice light, deliberate, just the kind of tone you hope for when you ask a stranger for directions. "I find out what the students know. And I also find out what they want to achieve. I send them to discover the musical moment $\frac{3}{4}$ the most distinct part of a piece of music or a solo $\frac{3}{4}$ and how to make it evolve."

Smith is aware that this personal kind of artistic journey carries risks. "People who have just a slightly different approach about the process of living end up being exiled," he says. But an obsession with conformity and ease is society's own loss: "I think a little bit of chaos would be good."

Different? Chaotic? Start with his name. Smith's mama called him Leo back when he was learning about the blues from his stepfather in Mississippi, where even the marching bands improvised. He added Wadada, which means "love" in Amharic, when he embraced Rastafarianism around 1980. Upon converting to Islam five years ago, he appended Ishmael, after the biblical/Koranic progenitor of the Arab race, from whose heelprint gushed the sacred spring of Zamzam. But he kept his dreadlocks, because of the style's ancient origins and

because "It's nice not to worry about dandruff."

Smith's music is even more cornucopian than his name, and this year he's busting out with a millennial harvest. Two new companion CDs on John Zorn's Tzadik label, *Wadada* Leo Smith's Golden Quartet and *Reflectativity*, reunite Smith with mates from the golden era of pattern-smashing jazz, Art Ensemble of Chicago bassist Malachi Favors Maghostut and pianist Anthony Davis; *Reflectativity* is a special grabber because of the headlong drive it produces without drums, though the fourth corner of the Golden Quartet happens to be a not incapable skinsman named Jack DeJohnette. Just out on the German Between the Lines label is the John Lindberg Ensemble's *A Tree Frog Tonality*, which may be the classiest release of the year: Smith, bassist Lindberg, saxist Larry Ochs and drummer Andrew Cyrille combine sparseness, balance and swing in a way you've never heard, but you're guaranteed to click on it the first time anyway. And Smith has just birthed five CDs' worth of material in Marin County and Oregon, including, among other works, four of his major suites, some Miles Davis tunes, and a set with Zimbabwean chimurenga ("liberation war") artist Thomas Mapfumo.

The last few years have also found Smith bouncing off studio walls with, among others, multiwindman Golia and bassist Bertram Turetzky (on the swamp-gassy *Prataksis*), his ever-mutating N'da Kulture ensemble (the gently abstractionist *Golden Hearts Remembrance*) and Henry Kaiser (the rocking two-disc *Yo Miles!*). Each shows a different side.

At the Knitting Factory a few weeks ago, it's the electric-Miles side that's showing, with nods to Ornette Coleman's *Prime Time* and Henry Threadgill's plugged-in units. In other words, N'da Kulture this night is a huge, freaky groove machine, churning out simple riffs and doing some heavy lifting on Ishmael Wadada Leo Smith's improvisational principles.

Veteran drummer Sonship Theus lays down the stomp & slosh. Since two bassists (Ali Elder and Leon Jones) are never enough, tuba player William Roper bolsters the low end with smears and elephantine blasts. One guitarist (Del Williams) articulates the funk, while the other (Woody Aplanalp) squirrels and howls. David Philipson brings the clear call of nature into the din with elegantly bent excursions on his bansuri (wooden flute). Smith's wife, Harumi, sits like a wallflower through most of the performance, rising only twice, just when you couldn't

stand another riff, to quell the storm with her poetry about a claustrophobic sky and the birds of prey that dine on her flesh.

Smith's trumpet chatters, slashes, riffs. And in this context, he pushes his usually most natural sound to every AC extreme, using echo, feedback and wah-wah like a latter-day Hendrix, going places even Miles never thought of in the most coked-out days of the '70s. The Knitting Factory's sound system, built to be the best club design in the world, rises to the challenge, reproducing the band's multiple sensualities as one.

One thing makes all this totally unlike a Miles performance: There's no evil. While Smith's music may acknowledge pain, it's all about joy. This time, it's a loud, crazy joy. Smith believes music can transform spirit and flesh. It's like he says about the blues: When Robert Johnson threatens to blow his woman in two, he's not talking about destruction, he's talking about transformation. (Positive transformation, one hopes.)

"The law of thermodynamics says that matter can't be created or destroyed," says Smith. "If that's true, then things do change, but they're still around."

The few people here tonight aren't going anywhere; they're fully drawn in, and you can tell they want to dance. But it's not the weekend. And there's too much space on the floor.

Now the process of transformation has begun, though. Next time. Definitely next time.

Posted on January 31, 2006 11:49 AM | [Permalink](#)