

# DOWNTOWN DEITY

The late **DAVID S WARE**, who died in October 2012, emerged from New York's 1970s loft scene to become a champion of free jazz principles. Even his dalliance with a major label could do nothing to quench his indomitable fire, as he continued to sustain and develop the ideas previously laid out by pioneers such as John Coltrane, Albert Ayler and Cecil Taylor. **Philip Clark** surveys Ware's questing music and spoke to pianist Matthew Shipp to assess the iconoclastic saxophonist's lasting legacy as documented on a series of archival recordings issued by the Brooklyn-based AUM Fidelity imprint

**I**n 1969, a 20-year-old saxophonist from New Jersey named David Spencer Ware was standing on the corner of 8th Street and Sixth Avenue in downtown Manhattan when he saw Sonny Rollins: the saxophone colossus was walking out of a grocery store carrying two bags of fruit. Ever since Ware had begun to intuit the power of jazz, Rollins had been his man. Witnessing the saxophonist perform at the Five Spot and the Village Vanguard had blown the young man's brain – music can be *this* too? And so Ware sidled over to Rollins to ask if he could come to his apartment for a lesson and, a few days later, found himself learning circular breathing being guided by his idol. From the get-go Rollins instilled into Ware that technique ought to mean more than routine scales – circular breathing was also a form of meditation that connected the raw physics of the saxophone to ancient mantras of the East, to the very stuff of existence in fact.

Bumping into Sonny Rollins on a Manhattan street corner, then having him teach you circular breathing, is part of the rich mythology upon which jazz regularly feasts: file under Charlie Haden stumbling across Ornette Coleman in Los Angeles, or Dave Holland's chance encounter with Miles Davis at Ronnie Scott's. But the music of David S Ware also feels oddly detached from the mainstream mythology of modern jazz, post Coltrane. British readers who consider themselves *au fait* with other saxophonists who emerged during the 1970s – David Murray or Anthony Braxton, for instance – might have less of a handle on Ware's work simply because, after 2003, he never played here. By the time the David S Ware Quartet – which featured Matthew Shipp (piano), William Parker (bass) and a revolving cast of drummers – was being lionised by the likes of Gary Giddins, who in 2001 famously described the group as “the best small band in jazz today”, and was signed briefly to Sony Jazz, Ware's health problems made travelling beyond the US increasingly difficult.

It could be argued, though, that spiritually, and perhaps even geographically, Ware's music demanded that you travelled towards it. Between 2004 and 2008, when I was making

the trip to New York City every few months, I came to appreciate how deeply Ware's work mattered to audiences thirsty for a living embodiment, and a development of, the free jazz principles as bequeathed to the music by the likes of John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, Sunny Murray and Cecil Taylor. And ‘principles’ is the appropriate word because Ware never let his music congeal into a generic style, a preset mode of behaviour – or a repertoire.

Some nights I heard his group the music was rodeoing around a slipstream of mighty

all took their place within Ware's view of what free jazz must now be – and often he counterpointed one approach against another, leading to ecstatic collisions of improvisational fire purposefully slamming into a previously seeded idea. “The last 100 years of jazz, there was our rehearsal,” Ware memorably remarked when I interviewed him in 2011, albeit about a later group, “but it's not like we're digging inside some nostalgia shit. History opens telepathic channels between the four of us, and that's what makes this music deep.”

A year after that interview, Ware died aged 62. Expressions of grief were raw, but thanks were given that his strength and fortitude had likely bought him more time on earth. After enduring 10 years of dialysis treatment, Ware underwent kidney donor surgery in 2009 – his donor was Laura Mehr, whose late husband had been a fan of Ware's music – and during the last three years of his life Ware would produce a series of recordings that summed up his career while simultaneously redefining the parameters of his art. A pairing of unaccompanied saxophone albums, *Saturnian* and *Organica*, were complemented by two entirely new quartet concepts. *Shakti* featured guitarist Joe Morris with drummer Warren Smith and the ever-faithful William Parker on bass, while *Planetary Unknown* found Ware and Parker working with Cooper-Moore (piano) and Muhammad Ali (drums). It would be tempting to suggest that, with mortality praying on his mind, Ware had consciously decided to summon up free-jazz ghosts of the past. Ali had played on Albert Ayler's *Music Is the Healing Force of the Universe*, while his brother Rashied replaced Elvin Jones in John Coltrane's group. Cooper-Moore – the performance persona of Gene Ashton – was a close associate from the old Downtown loft scene. But the extended mantras Ware laid bare in the solo recordings, and the textures and improvisation strategies he worked out on the group projects, suggest that his universe was ever expanding.

These projects were released on AUM Fidelity, the Brooklyn-based label that launched itself in 1997 with a DSWQ album given the prescient title *Wisdom of Uncertainty*. And it is



**“The last 100 years of jazz, there was our rehearsal”**

grooves, on others around the aggravated mayhem of a constantly dissipating rhythmic flow. Harmonically, the group's palette ranged from note-specific hymnal chorales to action-painting the air with fractious energy. Improvisational structures built around oscillating vamps, re-purposed standards (for a while ‘The Way We Were’ became the DSWQ's ‘My Favourite Things’) and free improvisation







that same label, headed by Steven Joerg, that has decided to keep Ware's memory vivid by plundering the archives. Newly released this autumn is *Live In Sant'Anna Arresi*, a 2004 duo set with Matthew Shipp, the follow-up to last year's *Birth Of A Being*, an expanded version of the first recording that brought Ware attention, cut in 1977 and originally released on hat Art. Following, in 2017, will be material recorded by the David S Ware Trio – featuring William Parker and Warren Smith – at the 2010 Vision Festival and the Blue Note. All this music helps clarify where Ware positioned his art against first generation 'Fire Music' – his ability to draw on the music as an article of faith, while retaining his steely independence.

*Birth Of A Being* documented Ware's first group – the aptly named Apogee, which featured Cooper-Moore on piano with Marc Edwards on drums, who was also working with Cecil Taylor at the time. For an ensemble ostensibly playing free jazz the realisation quickly dawns of how structured and, well, unashamedly melodic much of this music sounds. The line weaving through 'Prayer' feels like the genome model of every Albert Ayler, Marion Brown or Coltrane sanctified piece you've ever heard. Ware opens with a boldly unadorned melodic statement; Cooper-Moore's churchy tremolos eventually dig for bass notes that shift the harmony to a new plateau.

All the way through, the music flirts with our senses. Subliminal, teasing hints that the piece is about to lock into a gospel groove are never delivered upon, and increasingly urgent swells of improvisational impetus are always mediated by the structure. Even when the piece does eventually break free – and Ware moves from the mid-range of his tenor to a hollering falsetto – the structural strings are plucked effortlessly out of the ether again as he heads back towards his theme. Flip forward to the 2004 duo with Matthew Shipp and Ware is still deploying the same tactics – although now less self-consciously. For the opening segment of the concert, titled 'Tao Flow', his saxophone sticks entirely around an emotionally heightened falsetto inside which Ware finds a kaleidoscope of harmonic nuance. But now the structural trapdoor falls open the other way: with an endpoint approaching, Ware abruptly drops into the mid-register of his instrument and into a hectic impatient swing. Shipp throws some chromatically-spiced boogie-woogie back at him. The structure reboots itself; endings shouldn't be allowed to happen that easily.

In 1973, Ware's onetime mentor Sonny Rollins had Apogee open for him at the Village Vanguard – a spiritual homecoming for Ware perhaps, but a move that upset many established Rollins fans. Subsequently, Ware became part of the Cecil Taylor Unit, and threw himself into the loft scene alongside the likes of



**Top:** Ware in 1979 with bassist Nick DeGeronimo with Andrew Cyrille's Maono Quartet, Burghausen, Germany, 14 October – photographer unknown; 2009 portrait at home by Nick Ruechel. From Ware's return to the concert stage at Aprons Art Center, NYC in 2009 following kidney transplant that May, photo by John Rogers. 2009 portrait at Ware's home by photographer Nick Ruechel. 2011 with L-R: Cooper-Moore, Muhammad Ali, William Parker (the group, Planetary Unknown) 10 June Vision Festival, photo by Peter Gannushkin

Sam Rivers, Frank Lowe and Reggie Workman. And yet I'm stuck with this sense, alluded to earlier, of Ware immersing himself in the tradition of Coltrane's *Ascension*, Ayler's *Spirits Rejoice* and Pharoah Sanders' *Karma* – while also being minded to keep a discreet distance from the tradition, and certainly any idea that his music need conform to those expectations.

"David completely and utterly saw himself coming out of this tradition you mention – of religious expressions of free-jazz faith," Matthew Shipp told me over coffee in New York a few months ago. "He saw free jazz as the new American religion, and the saxophone, and his quartet, as a direct channel for Kundalini. He totally subscribed to Coltrane's idea of cosmic music; however, he had no interest in duplicating the Coltrane sound. We used to say that we wanted to rearrange the molecules of the cosmos – a fancy way of saying that we wanted to make a big impact. David was an iconoclast who took his instruction from his own inner nature. He had a vision that coalesced – but he *never* subscribed to any jazz fashion or political correctness of the jazz universe."

In his own sleeve notes introducing the duo album, Shipp describes how the music is both independent of, but built around the strategies and vocabulary "we had developed together within the envelope of the quartet," he writes. He goes on to discuss how their relationship subtly evolved as Ware became conscious of the fact that his pianist had become a leader in his own right: "David used to talk about his time with Cecil and what he'd learnt," Shipp tells me, "but then say he heard in me someone who was as distinctive a stylist as Cecil, but who had a sense of what the piano is now – without being bound by what went down in the 1960s. I was someone with an extensive harmonic imagination that could help put some bricks under his motivic imagination."

Throughout the 18-year history of the David S Ware Quartet, drummers came and went. Whit Dickey, Marc Edwards, Susie Ibarra, Hamid Drake and Guillermo E. Brown all played with the group, and it became Shipp and Parker's responsibility to induct a new drummer into the group's ways and means. "Beaver Harris and Andrew Cyrille were mentors to David," Shipp says, "and David needed a drummer who could keep a rolling pulse while being able to break things up. Finding that right balance was always an issue for his music."

At the 2006 Vision Festival I had a last encounter of my own with Ware's music in the flesh, his quartet's final performance, a concert released on AUM Fidelity as *Renunciation*. The group took to the stage, but a technical hitch delayed proceedings. Ware stood impressively statue still, his eyes glaring into the auditorium as though burning this moment in history into the soul of everyone present. A call-and-response piece – 'Renunciation Suite I' on the CD – had different permutations of piano, bass and drums respond to the pertinent questions spewing from the saxophonist's horn, and this felt like his art raised to perfection. The piece had an intentioned form, but one that was being revealed through improvisation. Ware's quartet had investigated this material – and by the end of the concert its own history – until there was nothing left to investigate. ■