

Returning to the stage after numerous physical and professional setbacks, **David S Ware** is the latest in a long line of saxophonists to invoke the ecstatic powers of going solo. By David Keenan

Jazzing himself: David S Ware



David S Ware
Saturnian: Solo Saxophones Volume 1
Aum Fidelity CD

Onanism gets a bad name. There's always some wiseguy ready to call you a wanker as soon as you reject the demands of the group or the audience in favour of the ecstasy of self-stimulation. As antisocial as punk might have been, taking a solo meant being a wanker, and wanking was too base even for punks. But there's a more initiated interpretation that sees masturbation as a powerful magical act that gives birth to something – on whatever plane – every time. In the hands of occultists like Aleister Crowley and Austin Osman Spare, 'energised enthusiasm' became a way of breaking down artificial personas and seeding new paths to the future in the form of a 'magical child'. Going solo has also been one of the main engines of change for jazz, the place where innovators take a break from the compulsion of form in order to re-conceive the future.

Solo documents of free improvisation are the batteries that charged the formal aspects of the new music. Think of Anthony Braxton's *For Alto*, Roscoe Mitchell's *Nonaah*, Evan Parker's *Saxophone Solos*. In many ways solo saxophone remains the most potentially radical of instrumental investigations. Without fixed notes, articulated by the breath, the sound can go anywhere. And despite Derek Bailey's dictum that it's impossible to play anything but jazz as long as you have a horn in your mouth, solo saxophone is the arena where the instrument finally breaks the gravity of genre altogether. Saxophonist David S Ware is deep in a period of transition, so it makes sense that he would return to the possibilities of solo playing, a focus that runs all the way back to his debut solo album, 1978's *From Silence To Music*. Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s Ware looked like the saxophonist to finally take free jazz overground again. His quartet with bassist William Parker, pianist Matthew Shipp and a series of revolving drummers remains the most important small group of the post-Fire Music age, but their turbulent relationship with major label Columbia conspired with Ware's high hopes for a potential crossover to leave the saxophonist feeling badly burned. In the wake of the dissolution of his 'classic' quartet, he turned his attention to a variety of sporadically interesting projects – a string ensemble, a group with Joe Morris, William Parker and Warren Smith – while he licked his wounds. Then in December 2008 he was given the news that a long-term kidney problem was now terminal and that a full transplant was his only hope for survival.

Saturnian, a live album recorded in NYC in October 2009, represents Ware's return to the stage after successful surgery. There are three long pieces, each performed on a different horn. The tenor saxophone remains Ware's axe of choice, but throughout his

career he has devoted equal time to the stritch and the saxello, recording with them both on 1991's *Great Bliss* sessions. The stritch is a straight alto that was popularised by Roland Kirk while the saxello is closest to a soprano.

Ware opens on the saxello, hyper-dextrous and playing at the speed of thought. In the specific tactile quality of his sound he most resembles Roscoe Mitchell, but Ware was never the kind of player to deal in constellations of single, deliberately stated notes. The arc of his melodies are supported by fast runs up and down the registers, as if he were juggling the high notes with towering accumulations of breath. Could a group even think this fast? A rhythm section? In its title, *Saturnian* foregrounds the attributes of form and constriction of force traditionally associated with that planet's influence. In the sleeve notes Ware makes a point of underlining this: "The freedom allows you to witness and solidify what is passing through." It's as if the saxophonist sees himself as a conduit for energy, with musical decisions working as points of friction that lend the sound incipient form. Ware has talked of the feeling of accessing an eternal storehouse of sound when performing at particular improvisatory peaks, of plugging into a zone where all melody, all harmony and all rhythm is happening at once. And there are points where it feels as if he is playing in simultaneous directions, diverting fleeting fully formed phrases into contradictory arcs of time.

It isn't all solid gold: halfway through the stritch solo, his ideas degenerate into a cartoon chase sequence, but even here he's quick to spot the transmutation potential of the basest material, diverting it into an inspired Albert Ayler-esque fanfare. Inevitably, it's the closing tenor performance that packs the most emotional weight. It starts out with a simple declamatory phrase, with Ware teasing out a sequence of restatements and inversions. When he makes it all the way up into the instrument's most phantom register, he holds it there for a minute, drawing circular feedback tones from the resonance of the brass in a way that sounds closer to vocal blues than atonal texture.

Ware is no cliché. He refuses to be characterised solely by the wildman sides he cut for Homestead in the 1990s. His vision of jazz is informed by the heritage of the past, even as it is hypnotised by the future. Freed from the weight of expectation that saw him as the great hope for the mainstream future of free jazz, his playing never sounded so focused and so fully energised. And with its subtitle of *Solo Saxophones Volume 1*, *Saturnian* looks to be the first of a series of recordings, giving birth to the next phase of his evolution through the initiatory application of ecstasy and energy. □

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