



EVANESSENCE

By John MacCalkies

CONTACTING EVAN PARKER ISN'T EASY. HE HAS NO GREASED PUBLICITY MACHINE, JUST A FAX MACHINE AT HOME IN WEST LONDON.

Mr. Parker is not intentionally elusive, just busy. He had returned from Austria shortly before I called, and flies to Switzerland this weekend before hitting the Empty Bottle, the first gig on a U.S. tour with woodwind wizard Ned Rothenberg.

"I'm not so driven that I would take an e-mail arrangement or a mobile phone on the road" he says. "And with ansamachines, people assume you've got the message, when that might not be the case." But the impression that Parker is lofty and unapproachable, would be misleading.

Though focused on solo forays on soprano, wherein an entire set involves extensive micro-tonal explorations on one breath, he is open to interaction, as his diverse discography indicates. He has thrown down with Cecil Taylor, Paul Bley, electronic music protagonists Walter Prati and Marco Vecchi and trombonist/computer music boffin George Lewis. His most frequent non-solo context has been in two trios, one with pianist Alex von Schlippenbach and drummer Paul Lovens, the other with bassist Barry Guy and drummer Paul Lytton. Last February, he toured the UK with Kadri Golpanath, a South Indian carnatic alto saxist.

"Kadri is a pioneer, he comes from a family of nadaswarum players, but broke the tradition and took up saxophone. Now there are 500 saxophonists in South India playing carnatic music, in fact in some places the name for saxophone is 'kadri.' The carnatic style emphasizes the mrandangan in the rhythmic accompaniment, a barrel drum with a high-pitched right and a low-pitched left hand—like the two drums of the tabla set in one, though the mrandangam precedes tabla in the evolution of Indian music." Parker met Golpanath ten years ago, but it took "a few years for seeds planted to bear fruit."

He was introduced to Rothenberg in the seventies, when the New Yorker visited Europe in a large Anthony Braxton group that played the Moers festival. "Ned was obviously a very good player and a bright guy, someone to watch for, but it wasn't until much later that we recorded together." That was in 1997, on "Monkey Puzzle," for the Leo label.

Rothenberg, who never studied formally with Parker, regards him as a mentor, yet is one of few who can count himself a peer in context of the unique language Evan defined for the saxophone. Rothenberg plays alto and bass clarinet, and is an expert practitioner of the Japanese shakuhachi, but hasn't recorded solo on soprano in deference to Parker's preeminence. "Our interests don't overlap completely" says Parker, "he has other groups and music, different to what I do."

Rothenberg credits himself with emphasizing issues of pulse in their duo collaborations, where Evan had previously been preoccupied with "that swirling thing, moving forward and backward simultaneously."

At the behest of Bruno Johnson and John Corbett in 1995, Parker made his debut on Chicago-based Okkadisc playing solo tenor, normally he plays tenor against drums.

Way back, after transcending his first influence, the alto sax sound of Paul Desmond, he ate a slice of his student grant buying a tenor, when he came under the spell of Coltrane. "I saw the Coltrane group in London during a particularly hot period, a week after they recorded at the Village Vanguard."

We discuss the pivotal influence of Jimmy Giuffre's "Free Fall," and I make the customary connections between Parker's botanical studies at Birmingham University, enthusiasm for Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, and the scientific and philosophical implications this has for his music. More topically, he has been reading an amazing tome by Charles Arthur Musès about eschatology and the Egyptian Book of the Dead, "the study of last times, the death of the universe, the ends of things."

Will he be buried with the soprano? "Well you could have the tenor turned into a funerary urn. Personally, I think having your flesh pecked by vultures seems the most ecological way to go—the Native American method—put the body out and let the animals deal with it."

You'll probably expire on stage, huh? "Well, there's a great story, supposedly true, about Wayne Marsh dying in the middle of a chorus on 'Out of Nowhere.' I haven't worked it out myself yet—it wouldn't have quite the same resonance dying in the middle of a free improvisation."

Parker plays in duo with Ned Rothenberg, April 12, at the Empty Bottle, 1035 North Western, (773)276-3600.