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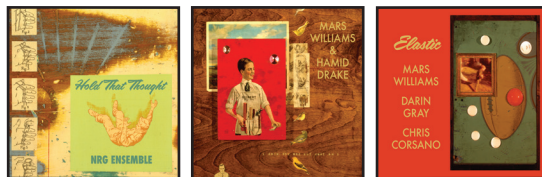
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Hold That Thought
NRG Ensemble (Corbett vs. Dempsey)
I Know You Are But What Am I?
Mars Williams/Hamid Drake
(Corbett vs. Dempsey)
Elastic
Mars Williams, Darin Gray, Chris Corsano
(Corbett vs. Dempsey)
by Ken Waxman

Chicago saxophonist Mars Williams' death at 68 last year (he would have turned 69 last month) ended the peripatetic career of a player embedded in the pop and jazz worlds. Touring with The Waitresses and The Psychedelic Furs, Williams still maintained his jazz chops. A member of Hal Russell's NRG Ensemble (which he kept going after its leader's death), Williams also mixed Albert Ayler compositions and Christmas tunes in a series of releases and regular holiday-time touring and worked with numerous international improvisers. These three archival releases demonstrate his skill as a composer, improviser and organizer.

The 1996 NRG Ensemble's *Hold That Thought* is a fierce blow-out showcasing the multiple skills of Brian Sandstrom (trumpet, guitar), Kent Kessler (bass) and Steve Hunt (drums, vibraphone), plus the reeds of Williams and Ken Vandermark. From the same year, *I Know You Are But What Am I?* is a dialogue between Williams' decisive saxophone timbres and the propulsive power of another Chicago world-traveler, drummer Hamid Drake. Demonstrating the saxophonist's rapport with younger players, 2012's *Elastic* has Williams interacting with bassist Darin Gray and drummer Chris Corsano.

Exhibiting organization is rare in free jazz, but on *Hold That Thought* Williams shepherds the NRG through tunes that splatter, scream, yelp and rattle at different pitches and tempos, while still retaining forward motion. Adding sampled mumbling voices, melody snatches and crackling static on the extended "In the Middle of Pennsylvania", Williams' breathy sax and Vandermark's clarion clarinet flutters are fragmented into multiphonics, while consistency is maintained by Kessler's walking bass. Other tunes allude to cha-chas, Carnatic drones and march cadences, as the players vary performances with unexpected solo interludes that interrupt the groove. Besides guitar frails and horn vamps, the saxophonists mirror each other's evolution as do Hunt's vibes and Sandstrom's guitar on "Automatic Platinum", with a slinky exposition presaging the harsh theme. Tracks such as "Wire Money" and "Cut Flowers" are driven at supersonic speed by the drummer.

In contrast to Hunt's bellicosity, Drake eschews intensity for ingenuity on *I Know You Are But What Am I?*. Although creating thrashing ruffs and prestissimo pops, Drake's pulse also verges on lyrical without power loss. Equally adaptable, Williams' reeds veer into textures that resemble military bugling, bagpipe drones and flute trills. This is accomplished by lip buzzing, triple tonguing and staccato flattement, while maintaining horizontal movement and lyrical asides. The album's climax is the concluding "What Am I", as Williams blows two saxophones simultaneously creating an exposition that sounds like Ayler playing "In the Land of France". Attuned to that singsong, Drake elevates its simplicity with sophisticated rolls and pings as

the saxophonist scales the theme with prestissimo whistles.

Combining Hunt's power and Drake's resourcefulness, on *Elastic* Chris Corsano creates a prototypical free jazz session with thickened rumbles plus interludes of quiet shuffles. Until the end, Gray isn't as audible as Kessler. However, on "Set One 3" he propels his strings with spiccato shakes and kalimba-like pings. The saxophonist follows his lead with brawny projections and a concluding moderato dissolve. Before that conclusion, it seems that the three never stop playing, with Williams cramming so much squeaking reflux and fragmented honks together that the interface becomes claustrophobic. The drummer's ruffs and rolls take up equivalent space. There are reflective moments with Williams creating kazoo-like snarls and brief melody inferences, completed by a defining bass string thump. Overall, the tonal shading display defines creative music. Williams provided the same sort of invention every time he played. That's ended, but these discs serve as a fine legacy.

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A Monster Is Just an Animal You Haven't Met Yet
Angelica Sanchez/Chad Taylor (Intakt)
by Alex Henderson

Avant garde jazz has long had its firebrands as well as its more restrained and nuanced improvisers. Pianist Angelica Sanchez clearly favors the latter approach on *A Monster Is Just an Animal You Haven't Met Yet*, forming an intimate duo with drummer Chad Taylor.

That's not to say that Sanchez has escaped the influence of the firebrands altogether. Her more forceful side comes out on "Animistic" and "Threadwork", both of which draw on pianist Cecil Taylor's intensity.

Sanchez, however, is far from a by-the-book Cecil disciple, and her style of outside expression is no less mindful of Paul Bley, Myra Melford or Muhal Richard Abrams. The latter, a founder of Chicago's trailblazing Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) in the '60s, had a more subtle approach to the avant garde, which stood in sharp contrast to the ultra-dense, ferocious free jazz coming out at that time. The AACM influence here on this album is alive and well on Sanchez/Taylor's probing duets, particularly in "Tracers of Cosmic Space", "Liminal" and "Holding Presence in Time". The pianist and drummer make extensive use of space, giving "Myopic Seer" and other selections an avant garde flavor that is pensive and reflective rather than confrontational.

The improvisers take a break from their piano/drums format on the title track, which finds Taylor switching to the mbira (African thumb piano), an instrument (along with its more modern cousin the kalimba) that a variety of jazz musicians have featured on their recordings over the years, including bassist William Parker, tenor saxophonist Pharoah Sanders, Cameroonian saxophonist Manu Dibango, banjoist Béla Fleck, trumpeters Wadada Leo Smith and Jon Hassell,