**The World Saxophone Quartet**

The World Saxophone Quartet is one of the greatest small groups to ever come out of jazz and music as a whole. David Murray, Julius Hemphill, Oliver Lake, and Hamiet Bluiett, visionary musicians in their own right, came together and created a new kind of sound that would take the world by storm. The World Saxophone Quartet has traveled the world, touring America, Europe, and Japan extensively and have recorded a number of seminal records. They are unquestionably the most successful free jazz, saxophone only group to proliferate after 1975 and arguably some of the most creative musicians of the modern day.

David Murray, playing tenor, moved to New York from Oakland in 1975 at the age of 20. Murray’s life can be separated into three phases: performance, composition, and an elegant merging of the two. When he moved to New York, he quickly formed the World Saxophone Quartet and explored a dissonance-heavy free jazz style of playing. In parallel with the World Saxophone Quartet, he recorded his own octet that featured trumpeter Olu Dara, bassist Fred Hopkins, and drummer Phillip Wilson, exemplifying his eccentric soloing and metro sound. Notable charts of his from this era include *3-D Family*, *Fast Life*, and *Ming*, each of which exemplify his radical playing. Elements of his playing style show a focus on tone and timbre as a tool for expression that is many times on par or above the importance of melody and pitch. Murray continued to play this style of jazz into the early 80’s where he settled into leading small ensembles that played much simpler pieces. These ensembles played old recycled compositions and tributes to new and old masters. He played in a quartet with Hopkins on bass, Dave Burrell on piano, and Ralph Peterson on bass. Murray’s work done at this time and through the 80’s is considered to be his worst, but it paved a path to the creation of some of his best works for the World Saxophone Quartet in the 1990’s. The three albums Takin’ It 2 the Next Level, the three movement Mbizo, and Requiem for Julius all exemplify the powerful culmination of his compositional work. Entering the 21st century, Murray settled into a performance and compositional roll in the World Saxophone Quartet.

Julius Hemphill was born in Texas in 1938. Before he moved to New York in 1973, Hemphill moved to St. Louis in 1968 where he became a leader of the Black Artists’ Group. He proved to be one of the leading composers of his time through his pieces that exemplified his bluesy melodies. He composed three lengthy pieces called *Dogon A.D.,* *The Painter*, and Rite*s. The Hard Blues* which were fourteen, fifteen, and eight minutes long each, respectively. After moving to New York, Hemphill performed in Anthony Braxton’s saxophone-only ensembles until 1976 when he formed the World Saxophone Quartet with Murray, Lake, and Bluiett. Here, he exemplified a bold dissonance in works such as *Scared Sheetless* and *Steppin’*. Hemphill also continued work on his own as a composer as Murray did and recorded the double LP Blue Boye performed entirely by Hemphill himself on alto, soprano, flute, and percussion. Other pieces that exemplified Hemphill’s blues are *Countryside*, *Hotend*, *OK Rubberband*, and *C.M.E.*, all around ten minutes long and much denser pieces then his previous. Some lighter blues of his can be found in Live In New York, a duet album with Abdul Wadud, Buster Bee, and Oliver Lake recorded in 1976. During the 80’s, the World Saxophone Quartet used Hemphill’s compositions as their main source of original material, though they also moved onto playing more accessible material. After the recording of Big Band in 1988, Hemphill left the World Saxophone Quartet to pursue more sophisticated music. Hemphill did some work in ballets and theatrical pieces throughout the early 90’s, but his new endeavors were cut short. Julius Hemphill passed away in 1995.

Oliver Lake is a St. Louis alto saxophonist born in 1942. His first important recording came with *Ntu – The Point from Which Freedom Begins* in 1971 which showcased his dissonant play style. In 1975, though, Lake played on *Heavy Spirits* where he experimented rhythmically and harmonically on tracks such as the 11-minute *While Pushing Down Turn* and the 9-minute *Rocket*. While moving to New York, Lake played on *Holding Together*, creating his own style somewhere between hard bop and jazz that starkly opposed the string instruments that played with his, including a guitar and a string quartet. In 1976, he joined the World Saxophone Quartet, but continued to record projects with other groups and continued to develop his sound. Entering the 80’s, Lake was one of the first improvisers to get into popular music. On *Jump Up*, he played with a reggae-oriented band that exemplified the unique rhythmic elements of his improvisations. Afterwards, he formed his own quartet and recorded *Expandable Language* in 1985, a record comprised of his own compositions. *Expandable Language* showcases Lake’s genius by creating complex pieces that are accessible to the listener yet still challenging to the player. Lake recorded two more records of the same caliber, *Gallery* and *Impala* that showcased him and most of his band members. These pieces show Lake’s ability to compose for both his audience and his performers. At the beginning of the 90’s, Lake recorded *Again and Again*, a group of postmodernist ballads that have very little dissonant content – an all-in-all easy listen with sprinkles of complex movements. This combination of style that Lake exploits has combined to form a song type that highlights the movements within his pieces clear, pleasantly, and wholly. Lake’s compositional influence on the World Saxophone Quartet is evident in his own works.

Hamiet Bluiett is a St. Louis born baritone saxophonist. Bluiett is considered to be one of the greatest baritone saxophonists to ever live. He has a range that extends far beyond what is considered plausible, stretching high into the soprano register. His control at such high pitches alone warrants his praises, though that is not his only asset. Bluiett had an ability to play across many different kinds of music and styles of jazz. In St. Louis, Bluiett played in wind ensembles, blues bands, and even the Gateway Symphony Orchestra. He reflected

“The way I used to work, I would go to a job where the guy wanted a tenor. I would just go sit in. Somebody wouldn’t show up for rehearsal, and I would say ‘let me play,’ and they’d say ‘no, we need a tenor.’ Then I would take the parts and play them like a tenor and then drop down into baritone and the cats would say ‘damn, you got the tenor sound and I’ve got a big band! OK, we’ll hire you.’ And then after I’d leave, they’d say ‘no, we’re not going to do that anymore because we can’t find a replacement.’

Bluiett’s eclectic skill was key to his success as a player. In 1974, he moved to New York and recorded with Anthony Braxton, Oliver Lake, and Julius Hemphill. Lake, Hemphill, and Bluiett, along with David Murray, then founded the World Saxophone Quartet. Bluiett revolutionized how the baritone saxophone was looked at. It was always thought to be a supporting instrument, but his mission is to bring it to the forefront. Pieces such as *Sophisticated Lady* on the World Saxophone Quartet’s *Plays Duke Ellington* show how much character and range the baritone saxophone can have. Hamiett Blueitt’s playing in the World Saxophone Quartet has let their music elevate to the high it has.

The World Saxophone Quartet came together in an effort to play revolutionary music that was ahead of its time, but considered dissonant and confusing by most. The play style and compositional content of the World Saxophone Quartet changes as the decades move on and different players rotate through. This led me to choose *Steppin’*, a piece off their first album, to reflect on because I wanted to hear want their first intensions as an avant-garde group were.

My first reaction to this piece was, not so surprisingly, was somewhere along the lines of “What did I just listen to?”. This piece felt all over the place, as though there was no anchor at all. Crossing and dissonant lines spanning multiple octaves are constant throughout. The only “reasonable” sounding instrument seems to be the baritone, which holds a nice low bass rhythm. Unfortunately, these low bass lines seemed completely out of place and only added to the confusion. The baritone was bouncy throughout, until of course he decided to solo himself, in which all chaos was present. After a couple listens, I was able to more understand the role of the baritone. The root that it provided as a home base for the rest of the instruments seemed to delegate the structure and movement of the piece. It felt more that the baritone would serve not just as a metronome but also as a leader. I thought this was interesting as, normally, this sort of role in jazz is reserved for the rhythm section and a lead instrument such as a trumpet or alto saxophone. I noticed that, due to the three other players’ lack of harmony, the only sense of continuity lay with the baritone. I kept this in mind as I listened through the piece more and found some method in the madness. The parts of the piece that have a synchronization and alignment between the instruments became much more apparent and other parts became more evident as pure improvisation sections.

Layered over the baritone is the tenor. The tenor leads this piece as the main melodic instrument. At first, I could not dare call this tenor melodic at all. The lines did not fit with any sort of established rhythm, if there was, and the ideas it brought in rarely connected with the rest of the music. The first time through, I could not make sense of it at all. As I became more accustomed to the style of music, I could hear more how the tenor fit in relation to the rest of the piece. The tenor follows the baritone, which itself keeps the continuity of the piece. I feel as though the tenor’s lines constitute the majority of the musical motifs within *Steppin’*. If the tenor and baritone were isolated together, the piece would become much more clear.

The alto and the flute act in similar ways as the tenor. My first listens made the alto and flute seem more like support instruments then anything else, and I really could not say much more. The sounds they produced are incredibly dissonant and acted like embellishments. It reminded me very much of a kind of music called “noise music”, which consists of soundscapes and instrumental sound bites used in a way to replicate the feel of natural sounds in the world. This became less and less the case as I listened through the piece more. The alto played off the tenor in a way that almost harmonizes with the tenor. In no way is this apparent in the classical sense, but if the lines of alto are looked at as higher extensions of what the tenor lines are, then the alto seems to make more sense. It comes in mostly as the tenor changes direction or finishes one of its lines. The flute, however, still feels like a supportive instrument. The sound it provides is incredibly dissonant and does not make sense melodically. It does go off on it’s own from time to time, but it usually stays in rhythm with the baritone and plays strange intervals off it.

*Steppin’* is a perfect example of the strange, unusual sound the World Saxophone Quartet was so eager to make. After listening through the piece about fifteen times, I was able to hear the movement of the piece through the baritone and how the tenor explored its lines created some fantastic music. The alto added a lot of content that I enjoyed being able to hear multiple times and still find new aspects that spoke to me differently and the flute added a ton of texture. The more I listen, the more content I can make sense of. I would like to hear versions of this song that extrapolate and classically harmonize the piece in a more organized fashion. Of course, at the end of the day, the original arrangement of *Steppin’* makes it the masterpiece it is.

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