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## Berkeley Native Murray Shows Jazz Isn't Dead

By IRA STEINGROOT Special to the Planet (06-25-04)



When I first heard the Gwo-Ka Masters debut album, *Yonn-dé*, I was, in a manner of speaking, blindfolded, even hoodwinked. A friend played it without showing me the cover and I said, with a bittersweet feeling, "Now we have to go to the West Indies to hear great jazz saxophonists." I'm always lamenting the death of jazz. In this case I was wrong. The remarkable tenor saxophonist and bass clarinetist embedded within the olla podrida of jazz players and Guadeloupean musicians was Berkeley's own David Murray, among the greatest of all living jazz musicians.

Born here in Berkeley in 1955, Murray studied ragtime and stride piano before picking up the alto saxophone at the age of nine. Almost immediately, he began

accompanying his gospel pianist mother in church. After graduating from Berkeley High School and a number of local swing, bop and soul ensembles, he attended Pomona College. At that time, the Pomona jazz faculty included Stanley Crouch—now a renowned jazz critic—and free jazz players Arthur Blythe and Bobby Bradford. Saxophonist Blythe and cornetist Bradford were part of the intermediate group of avant garde jazz musicians that followed Coltrane, Ornette, Cecil Taylor and Sun Ra. Indeed, Bradford was playing with Ornette and Eric Dolphy in the early fifties in Los Angeles. By the early '70s, when Murray got to college, this second line was passing the jazz mantle on to Murray's generation of teenagers. Murray's lifetime of exposure to all forms of African-American music made him a uniquely receptive vessel for the cutting edge jazz of the '70s.

By 1975, he had moved to New York and within a year had joined with fellow reed players Oliver Lake, Hamiet Bluiett and the late Julius Hemphill to form the World Saxophone Quartet. He still performs and records with the WSQ, whose *Plays Duke Ellington* album set a standard for what great free jazz playing could be. I was lucky enough to catch their all Ellington show at the Great American Music Hall in 1986 and it remains among the half dozen greatest musical events I have ever witnessed. Murray, in particular, was by turns galvanic, lyrical, raw, funky, tender. At one moment you were floating along on the most ravishing tenor saxophone tone imaginable and at the next being dragged through the melody by your heels in a slash-and-burn, take-no-prisoners advance that left you limp.

Great players like Murray understand that free jazz is not just a matter of sounding freaky or of learning the rules of playing outside conventional chord progressions any more than bebop was merely learning to improvise on the higher intervals of the chords of pop tunes. Real jazz, of any era, is about finding an inner place within the space of the music in which to play freely. "Space is the place," as Sun Ra said. That is the simple secret of improvisation whether practiced by Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker or Archie Shepp. As

Murray says in the liner notes to his just released second album with the Gwo-Ka Masters, Gwotet (Justin Time 200-2), "When I reach the point of paroxysm in a piece I'm sure that I must be in contact with the Holy Spirit, like the Santeria priests. That state goes beyond the word jazz, beyond notes....It goes very deep, down to an unattainable point around which we all turn, a point which we all try to touch without ever quite managing it."

Murray's current group, a mix of U.S. and West Indian players, is Creole Project III, which, through interface, reveals the common African roots of blues, gospel and jazz and the gwo-ka music of Guadeloupe in the French West Indies, one of the centers of Creole culture in the Caribbean. Gwo-ka takes its name from the hand-held gwo-ka drums whose origins date back to the early slave period. David Murray is absolutely contemporary in his post-modern, post-colonial approach to the music generated by Africa, but what brings us back to hear him again and again is the authority, sweep, inventiveness, heartfelt emotion and stunning technique that fill every note he plays.

David Murray's Creole Project appears at Yoshi's, 510 Embarcadero West, Oakland, CA, from Monday, June 28 through Wednesday, June 30, with shows at 8 and 10 pm. For more information call 510-238-9200

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