

The Roots and Trunks of *Ailanthus / Altissima*

Page 1/3

Two decades ago, the biggest news in Cecil Taylor's world was a month-long block of concerts in Berlin to showcase the breadth of his musical endeavors—solos, and duets and small- and large-ensemble performances with players mostly new to his circle. Looking back across Taylor's creative history, the Berlin month in 1988 becomes a boundary before which he mainly assembled ensembles around the central, American-based figures of his group, the Unit. Post-1988, with the Unit name finally retired, international collaborations and summit meetings have played a much bigger role. There are exceptions on both sides of this over-simplified divide, but the indisputable lasting impact of the Berlin work was the start of an ongoing bond with Tony Oxley.

CT opines in hindsight that the impresario of those concerts devilishly knew what was good for his featured artist, that he must have anticipated what a treat it would be for Taylor and Oxley to join forces. In fact, the idea was an afterthought; Oxley was added to the program of pairings with drummers after the series had already begun. Their duet on July 17, 1988 turned out to be the dessert, so to speak—the last item in the month's concert schedule, a day after their first meeting in person at ages 59 and 50, respectively.

The large-scale Berlin '88 CD box project quickly became one of the most visible items in Cecil Taylor's catalog of recorded music, and it still holds that status. *Leaf Palm Hand*, the duet disc with Oxley from that first encounter, is likely still the most visible project of their history, and until *Ailanthus / Altissima*, their debut together on microgroove, it has been their only duet through 15 hours of issued music together. Oxley instantly became part of The Feel Trio with William Parker, a new formulation in CT's *praxis* that would be his steady vehicle for most of the next five years. After a hiatus, Taylor and Oxley began performing again—in duet—in 2000. Maybe every time they play now carries a certain dose of "reunion" character, though their choice to play together is as "regular" as it can be.

For much of these 20 years since Berlin, Cecil Taylor's music has had two lobes. On one side are European performances, nearly always with Tony Oxley if they're with anybody, and by now the two have made hundreds of appearances there. Oxley lives in Germany; his hand-crafted kit is much more cumbersome than is the case for most drummers, and while he's grown older, the skies have also become less friendly for musicians packing their instruments. His visits to play the States with CT in 1989, 2000, and 2008 have been rare breakthroughs. Taylor is of course based in Brooklyn, so an entire second hemisphere of his group activities in the USA has evolved using a variety of participants. As American trio documents in this century have begun to balance the stockpile of European CDs from the Nineties, listeners in each part of the world can fill in the rest of the picture from records.

On both continents, nearly all of CT's performing work is in festivals and concerts. Only the US groups have enjoyed even a whiff of the Jazz club exposure that CT still gravitates to. There's something to the idea that what he offers in clubs in his own country is really the continuous thrust that is tangibly descended from the music of the Sixties. He fuels that impression more than a little, selecting the piano/bass/drums trio for every stateside case that's not a co-billing of headliners. Taylor has never been warmly welcomed on the nationwide circuit of week-long gigs where high-profile jazz is played, and with the continuous decline of that system through the last four decades, his appearances at any New York venue are now limited to long weekends, single nights, or even lone sets.

Adding all this up: Working a full week of two sets nightly in July 2008 at the Village Vanguard was its own blockbuster occurrence, and having Oxley on board even less common (with a still bigger surprise when lightning struck a second time in November with another week by the duo at the club). The last time CT worked anywhere that long was in fact at this venue, in the very beginning of the century. His return reignited the temptation to maneuver Taylor's beyond-category sounds into the bustle of Jazz via its oldest shrine, while also rekindling some of the contentiousness that marked even his very first appearances there.

During preparations for their first stand, Oxley predicted that American audiences might not get exactly what they were expecting. He observed that the way the duo had been playing recently in Europe was different from the dense, intense, going-up-in-flames of 20 or even 10 years ago. Nowadays it's a constant push and pull, spurts of high energy and velocity interspersed with cool-downs where the pace and dynamics change frequently, in small quanta. It's not unlike the conversational interplay of what now gets called European Free Improvisation. Their momentum-driven residence at Tonic in November 2000 is a fitting example of that older style Tony's talking about. The punishing density of one particular set there left Oxley with sore hands and the realization that an upcoming gig with CT would require an athletic training schedule.

In that full-throttle, kaleidoscopic Old School playing, there's hardly a question of controlling the rate of ideas or involvement in the music; full engagement for both players is de rigeur at all times. Action and reaction swirl beyond recognition. By contrast, especially in the club environment presented on *Ailanthus / Altissima*, the energy sometimes planes out to a near-transparency where the breathless audience can (seem to) sense thoughts being exchanged between Taylor and Oxley. Ultimately this recent 'New Music' model calls on the listener for greater discernment to follow the sense of sequence in the duets—what leads to and from certain choices and gestures. Maybe the performances on the record deliver the 'understandability' many clamor for.

For detractors, that means no nervous headache; for supporters it may mean actually having a chance to follow every nuance instead of losing some to the delicious blur.

Whether every set fell neatly into one of two types of playing is again debatable, just as it's unclear whether to segregate those types as old and new, concert and club, or European and American. Not subject to debate is that both musicians use more modes of interaction, and perhaps different modes of action, than they would have a decade ago, or two decades ago. Since the beginning, CT/TO collaborations have drawn some of their sublime compatibility from the fact that that Oxley's music-making matches Taylor's in giving the impression that it could go on forever, undemarcated by beats in micro, measures in macro, or even accents that might imply the grand tectonic boundaries of structure. So in the proposition of an evening-length concert, there is always a greater danger of not finding an outlet to disengage from playing than there is of running short on ideas. While that marathon property hasn't departed from Taylor's or Oxley's creativity, their current projection is more variegated. Five- and seven-minute pieces don't occur only as encores to longer ones. And the new paradigm allows that energy will sometimes suck all sound down to level zero even within a piece, then change direction, and move out again.

Stipulating all of that, the first thing that Taylor and Oxley played in the club was still dominated by the old model, and they burned down several more houses in the early sets of the week, whether they were proving something, limbering up, or excited to be playing there/again. Both modes of playing eventually appeared each night, in no predictable order, and in fact are to be found throughout. A sympathetic, international audience was on hand to ride the roller coaster with them. On the 20th anniversary night—Thursday in the July week—at least one audience member had even been in attendance for that very first encounter, at the Berlin Kongreßhalle in 1988.

What you hear on *Ailanthus / Altissima*, several months downstream from the July opening, is from the year's fall visit—the first set from the last night (Sunday), and the turning point set from Thursday. CT refuses to subjugate the music to a special occasion in history—not 20th anniversary reunions, not Oxley's 70th birthday before they went into the Vanguard; also not the manifold issues of change and positivity that were on so many minds in November of 2008, nor even his own 80th birthday, which finally is the *raison d'être* for this release. Instead, he tells us wordlessly and devoutly every time about the sacred act of exciting these new vibrations from these chords and membranes. Finally, it was Cecil Taylor and Tony Oxley going again to work, night after night, casting and welding the miracles that are their own *cause celebre* and the jubilant ritual of music itself.