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Interview: Harriet Tubman

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Ascension (Sunnyside)

by Phil Freeman

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This is a very New York record. Laid to tape over a decade ago and finally issued thanks to the folks at Sunnyside (who don't seem all that concerned with getting the press attention that imprints like AUM Fidelity, Clean Feed or Posi-Tone are racking up, but are nonetheless one of the best jazz labels around right now), it documents a live performance by an augmented version of the Downtown trio **Harriet Tubman**.

Originally just guitarist **Brandon Ross**, bassist **Melvin Gibbs**, and drummer **J.T. Lewis**, the group doubles its membership on this disc, adding trumpeter **Ron Miles** and two turntablists, **DJ Logic** and **DJ Singe**. The

music was recorded at the Knitting Factory on September 2, 2000, and held in the vault until now, for reasons unknown but probably at least partly related to the demise of the Knitting Factory Works and Avant labels, which issued the first (1998's *I Am a Man*) and second (2000's *Prototype*) Harriet Tubman albums, respectively.

The album takes its title from the **John Coltrane** piece of the same name, but has relatively little in common with the source material. There's electric guitar, only one horn, and lots and lots of rhythm. Lewis sets up a driving, yet dubby funk-rock groove not unlike things one might hear on **Living Colour** or **Burnt Sugar** records from more or less this same time period, bolstered by Gibbs' massive, liquid bass, and Ross creates heavily effected, spacy, somewhat psychedelic guitar leads that remind me of players like **Pete Cosey** and/or **Jean-Paul Bourelly** in the way they do totally insane stuff without ever seeming wanky in a post-**Hendrixian** "hey look at me" sort of way. It's like atmospheric metal, or something.

Even though the album's divided into 10 tracks, it's really a single 52-minute performance, nearly seamless and thoroughly conceptually unified. And I decided, somewhere in the middle of my third or fourth listen, that maybe the men behind it could explain it better than I could. So I emailed Ross, Gibbs and Lewis a series of questions. Their answers are below the fold.

Why did this CD take so long to appear?

MELVIN GIBBS: In a nutshell, the labels we approached couldn't see the vision. Thanks to Sunnyside for being an exception. At the end of the day I think we just had to wait for the times to align with this project. The culture needed to digest the references we're using so people could hear how we're manipulating them. I think people in general are hearing the recording in a way they wouldn't have ten years ago, and in this case that seems to be a good thing.

BRANDON ROSS: Technical issues with the recording format, and label interest. Several labels were either not interested, had full rosters, it was not their "direction" and/or they doubted the viability of the project as something they could "sell."

J.T. LEWIS: When you have a vision, sometimes it takes a while for the public to "catch up" to your vision. It took a while for labels to take the chance with the vision...and thanx to Sunnyside for having the cojones!

How much of it is really derived from Coltrane's *Ascension*, and in what ways? And given that this is a live recording, were the other pieces improvised and given titles later, or were they fully formed compositions?

GIBBS: Tubman derived this record from *Ascension* the same way we assume the original band did. We expanded the melodic material Coltrane provided to make an extended group composition. In my personal opinion, the fact that Coltrane's name is the only name listed as a composer is more a function of how the music business is structured than a reflection of how the music on the original *Ascension* album was created. Everything other than the actual melody was spontaneously composed by the group. What Coltrane did was pick a set of players who were versed in the musical language he wanted to hear, and fit his vision, and let them go. A different set of players would have produced an entirely different record. We decided to be that different set of players. Everything other than JC's original melody was composed on the spot. We re-titled the segments that didn't contain John's original melody to reflect the reality of the compositional process.

ROSS: We used the melodic statement that the opening of Coltrane's "Ascension" recording used as a point of development/departure and as a thematic "marker" of movements in the evolution of the arc of our live

concert.

Harriet Tubman is a sophisticated ensemble – by that I mean, we improvise in a compositional framework – we are composing spontaneously—and at the very least organizing and structuring vis a vis “arranging” individually and collectively, in a simultaneity, which coalesces into the group’s “sonic signature.” To accommodate the CD format, and to benefit from the ways the industry has structured to be compensated for one’s (recorded) musical output, we titled different movements in post-production.

LEWIS: Well, I hadn’t listened to *Ascension* since my college days, but it was embedded in my memory. We used the melodic themes as a template and then let our Tubmanizing technique take over. I made a conscious effort to not go back and listen to the original music until we were done so as not to corrupt the idea streams that were coming to me.

Is Harriet Tubman currently an active unit? Are there plans for future recordings, or more old stuff in the vaults?

GIBBS: We are an active unit. The *Ascension* band (the Double Trio) will be playing the Undead Festival on June 23, and we’ll be playing the Frankfurt Jazz Festival and touring Europe in October. We’ve got quite a few things in the vault and we’ll record more as the opportunity arises.

ROSS: Absolutely. Both. We have met with what I’ll call “resistance” from areas of the industry during the time we’ve been doing what we do. Interestingly, context seems to inexorably influence what and how people experience, and its meaning. The fact that we are who we are, doing what we do, as we do it reads differently (and perhaps rightly so) than it might if we were other people doing something similar in the same context. It’s interesting to us that something we recorded 10.5 years ago still sounds current in today’s context. I find that telling of several different developments in the music *business*, and of the undying importance of the developments in the music *world*—that they be chaperoned and heralded—which are too big for this moment in my personal time clock, to go into...maybe later, but for now I’ll say this: the free flow of information—*musical* information—needs *all* of our custodianship!

LEWIS: Yes...very much a working unit, 12 or 13 years running. There is stuff in the vaults but also we’re constantly evolving. The core group (trio) has grown to lead other projects of their own, but Tubman remains the think tank that seemed to have a life of its own. We’ve developed over time our own language and terminology, and once that occurs, there’s no turning back...the music is us, we are the music.

This record seems very New York to me in its sound and approach – a point on a line that includes work by Bill Laswell, various Black Rock Coalition acts, and Burnt Sugar – where do you see Harriet Tubman fitting into all that?

GIBBS: Well, seeing as I: 1) am an original BRC member; 2) was one of the co-leaders of one of the few (2?) BRC bands that made a major label record; 3) Introduced DJ Logic to the scene by bringing him into that band, and 4) J.T. was the drummer for **Living Colour** before **Will Calhoun** was, I guess it’s reasonable to say the *Ascension* record is part of a continuum that includes the BRC. And since **Greg [Tate]** and I, together with our good friend **Arthur Jafa**, have spent a lot of time talking through ideas over the years, it’s fair to see some shared intellectual energy between what Greg is doing and what we’re doing on this record.

As far as Laswell... I don’t see the *Ascension* record on that continuum. I see it as a disruption of what that continuum represents. I mean, was **Eminem** on the continuum of what the **Beastie Boys** were doing or was he a disruption? Sure, you could put them both in the “white rappers” box but you’d be missing the fact that they represent diametrically opposed aesthetic angles of attack, and you’d be missing the fact that Eminem

signaled the end of the Beastie Boys era. Eminem always seems to me like the kid from that one white family that lived in the ‘hood. He always seems like that white guy who could go deep in the ‘hood and have people ask him “‘Sup, how’s your Mom? Tell her I said hi.” The Beastie Boys, great as they are, always seemed like cultural tourists. You can’t imagine that they were runnin’ around in the hood when they were coming up. Their thing feels mediated. Laswell, when his thing was poppin’, made a lot of great records. But his function was to be a mediator, in the same way the Beasties were. That era is over. It’s 2011, not 1986. **Obama** is president. **Jay-Z** and **Dame Dash** are millionaires. **Dr. Dre** is branding headphones. The idea that “urban” cultures need an outside mediator is dead. I’d say that the fact that this record is finally coming out after 11 years represents the fact that the collapse of the music biz has finally forced jazz to start to make the same move away from mediators that the rest of the culture did 10-15 years ago.

You talk about this record having a “NY approach.” I’m from Brooklyn. J.T. is from Queens. Brandon is from NJ, but still. DJ Logic is from the Bronx. I’d say that if you made a record based on spontaneous composition and you recruited a large percentage of native NYers for the team it would make sense that that record would reflect the cultural blends and collisions of NYC.

ROSS: We live and think and work in NYC. We know most of the people who might be associated with some of the individuals/groups/ associations you mentioned, but we come, not out of them, but as a parallel stream of development. Chronologically speaking, ahead of some, and that just means what we did with the information that was around at the time, in contrast to what they did/are doing with it. Our thing has always been about Mastery—I can’t comment on others’ intentions—a mastery of what we discovered about who we are making music, and what kind of music wants to be made from and by that awareness and that revelation, and being true to our sense of that.

LEWIS: NYC is the fertile soil that is all of those projects. I’ve been a part of most of those projects, excluding Burnt Sugar, although I’ve worked with Greg Tate on countless BRC projects, but our DNA comes from the same gene pool. Also my experience with the Masters, four years with the great **Don Pullen** and after that four more with Maestro **Henry Threadgill**...put in between that a few excursions with **Kip Hanrahan**, and **David Murray** projects, including all of the rock and pop experience I acquired before that with **Herbie [Hancock]**, **Tina [Turner]**, **Sting**, **Lou Reed** and countless more is where my musical vocabulary was formed, however once I arrived around those masters of composition and improvisation (Threadgill, Pullen etc.)...I started to hear my own voice and how I wanted to express my journey as a listener and musician on this planet.

Also, if you live in New York City it’s impossible to *not* sound like it. If you just stand and listen to the sounds of the city, you can hear the music of it (or at least I can)...a beautiful cacophony of chaos and order 24/7, whether you notice it or not. You are where you live: the way you talk (i.e. to be heard), walk, etc., and also the way you play...the City or wherever you live becomes part of you.

How was it adjusting to the larger ensemble, particularly adding Ron Miles’ trumpet? What did DJ Logic and DJ Singe bring to the music, in your mind?

GIBBS: I personally never feel like I’m adjusting when I play with Ron. And Brandon and Ron play together extremely well. I felt like Ron is another harmonic voice singing alongside J.T., Brandon and myself. One of the ideas I’m interested in is **Stockhausen**’s idea on scaling. You can use the idea of scales for other things besides notes. You can set up a scale (a continuum) with free playing/noise/open rhythm on one end and composed/melodic/ “closed” rhythm on the other. From that you can structure a series of steps (a scale), a series of combinations (chords), movements, entire compositions based on the blends. Having

the two DJs really allows these ideas to be explored in a visceral way. You can have sections where one DJ is using noise to “harmonize” with Ron’s extended technique while the other is harmonizing with his “melody,” for example. You can have sections where J.T. is “modulating” the rhythm one or both of the DJs provide. You can have two different trios improvising simultaneously and not have it fall into some default “noise” or “free jazz” pocket. A group of musician/composers can explore all the different steps of the “scale” between free jazz and “structured” rhythmic/melodic playing, which is what we did on this record.

ROSS: Do the standard assumptions create “lead” voices and then “secondary” voices, etc.? That’s funny to me. Actually, the roles are always moving around in anything we play— whoever’s expressing the strongest idea or the idea that cuts through the sound field is the “lead” voice, in my opinion. Harriet Tubman’s “Ascension” is edited into tracks, and again due to technical issues, we were not able to render a live, as-is, concert recording onto CD. If we had, the directorial role in that concert as I recall was held by Melvin, for several different reasons. What can be heard on the recording we released is the multi-dimensional functioning of Ron Miles and myself, as both of us moved in and out of playing melodically, to playing texturally, or contrapuntally. A great deal of the sonic palette of our “Ascension” is generated by Ron, acoustically, and by me via live sampling of my own playing, and expanding my “role” away from the guitar hero cliché. Playing with a large ensemble is all about listening, and more listening. Actually, it’s the same in any ensemble. I love Ron Miles’s playing, and it happened to be the first time we ever got to play music together. Ron is that kind of musician: No musical apartheid. And he is a supremely acute *listener*. Which is what all musicians who are great truly are: The best listeners in the room—and it’s not a hierarchy, it’s just a way of going about it. Short answer: it was a thrilling and inspiring adventure to play with Ron.

Melvin, you’ve worked with a lot of guitarists who blur the lines between rock, jazz and metal, like Vernon Reid, Chris Haskett, Pete Cosey and Sonny Sharrock – is that the playing situation you feel works best with your bass style?

GIBBS: Well, I think it’s time you added Brandon to that list. He’s kind of an anti-guitar hero, not a testosterone jockey, and I guess he’s more known for playing acoustic guitar. But he’s playing things on the *Ascension* record that are unique, personal...and loud. Best for my style...I don’t know. The drummer is just as important. He’s got to know how to harmonize with rhythm. J.T. is an expert at that.

Brandon, you’ve worked with a number of high-profile AACM players – Henry Threadgill, Wadada Leo Smith, Muhal Richard Abrams – in what way do those guys’ organizational principles inform the more rock-oriented sound of Harriet Tubman?

ROSS: Hmmm. I didn’t know we had a “more rock-oriented sound.” I think we just have a sound, which is a tremendous accomplishment in music, at any time, but especially today, when it’s “noisy” in so many ways. Lots of stuff being generated by all kinds of technology and all kinds of people, though most of us are being asked to listen to the same thing, at the same time, in the same way most of the time. To be a musician or a band and to have realized a sound is a beautiful thing! Yet because we are so “connected” (or so we’re constantly being told) it can be a challenge to find and go one’s *own* way in any regard. Some of us want to be like everybody else, but I believe most of us don’t—we just want to be a part of a community, accepted as we are, appreciated for who we are, aware of our uniqueness. And the moment that the system suggests that one could connect with millions of people, that is the moment when we enter a different field of endeavor. New rules, ‘nother game, ‘nother plan, different intention. None of this is “bad” or “good.” I just find that we define and tag things, and separate them into endless categories, and seem to dismember the oneness, the wholeness, the entirety, into so many separate parts, so many specialized niches.

So, if Harriet Tubman has a rock-oriented sound, how do the organizational principles of some of the

AACM players I've worked with inform our sound? Well, in the same way as our non-rock-oriented sound. Style isn't a closed door, unless it is! It depends on who's playing/listening. We just go where we go, musically. I have heard people call us a rock band, and not want to book us at their Jazz Festival, and the same music be considered "too jazz" by rock festival promoters, who passed on us...I just don't see it that way in terms of Harriet Tubman.

Henry, Wadada, Muhal, **Leroy Jenkins** (R.I.P.), all asked me to be musically *myself*. They never asked me to be somebody else—not even the somebody sitting next to me in the band I may have been in. Always to find my own "design," my own way. *That* principle informs everything I do musically—and as each of the members in Harriet Tubman have interfaced with all of those AACM people, as well as other innovative and creative visionaries, we *look to ourselves*. We do that in the context of being part of a continuum. We are using slightly different tools, and will come to other insights and possible conclusions, but the great stream that we sail upon is a powerful undulating current, with no end in sight.

J.T., as a drummer, do you enjoy working alongside turntables? What did Logic and Singe bring to the music?

LEWIS: Logic and Singe are rhythmartists like me...there's no conflict. They hear something and react to it...they came to the project with no preconceptions of what the music would sound like, and vice versa. Though the turntables have been pigeonholed to one genre of music, it has evolved into a musical instrument and has taken its place in the modern world of sound making, or better said...music making!

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