



William Parker



Elaine Mitchener



Orphy Robinson

Black Top Presents: Hamid Drake/Elaine Mitchener/William Parker/Orphy Robinson/Pat Thomas

Some Good News

Otoroku 2×CD/DL

Pat Thomas and Orphy Robinson have been working together since 1997 and their free improv/free jazz duo Black Top was formed in 2011. “We wanted to incorporate things from our Black British background, such as reggae and funk,” Thomas explains by phone. That background obviously implies grooves – free improv limits itself if it excludes them, he believes. This attitude is reflected in their latest album, which features their current instrumentation, with Thomas on piano and electronics, and Robinson on marimba, xyloynth and electronics – the xyloynth combines the feel of conventional xylophone and marimba, with the flexibility of non-acoustic instruments.

Thomas has abandoned big electric keyboards and can now carry everything in a laptop bag: “They’ve sorted out the latency [delay] problem with the new iPads,” he comments. The duo blend lo-fi samples, dub effects and experimental electronics, providing a spontaneous, sometimes humorous commentary on their Afro-Caribbean roots. Thomas had previously worked in a trio with American masters William Parker (bass) and Hamid Drake (percussion), but Black Top’s first partnership with them was for a 2016 residency at London’s Cafe Oto. The resulting quartet embraced Caribbean genres, and Saharan gnawa – Parker also plays doson ngoni, the Malian traditional guitar, and nageswaram, the South Indian double-reed horn.

When Parker and Drake returned to perform with Black Top at Oto in 2019, they added vocalist Elaine Mitchener to make a quintet. This superb double CD, recorded live in July 2019, is the result. It documents a memorable meeting across two eventful varied sets

of jazz and improv. The first disc – *Put The Brakes On* – opens quietly, with Thomas’s slow electric organ-like chords on iPad. He switches to piano, with a solo that showcases his intensely bluesy, freely improvised jazz, in which he begins by probing gently, slowly evolving his distinctive blend of lyricism and freedom – it’s that rather neglected approach to free improvisation that embraces grooves and melody as well as more abstract approaches.

Five minutes in, the spotlight turns to Elaine Mitchener, whose work moves dynamically between phonetic experimentation, Kurt Schwitters based sound poetry and wordless vocalising, against a context of bluesy free jazz/improv and electronic embellishment. Thomas’s fierce chordal poundings – moving into territory more familiar from Cecil Taylor – raise the temperature further. In this opening ten minutes, the ensemble run the gamut of rhythmic freedom, from ebbing and flowing rubato, via tumbling momentum, to solid grooves – it’s a remarkable quicksilver morphing, given that only a few minutes have elapsed. In one memorable cameo, around the 25 minute mark, Thomas’s doleful futuristic space sounds on iPad are heard against Robinson’s vibraharp. From around 40 minutes, these futuristic sounds rival Mitchener’s vocals in prominence. Towards the end of the set, Parker contributes a plangent solo on nageswaram, bringing out its beautifully veiled nasal sound.

I’ve highlighted one prominent feature of the album – its flexibility in crossing from melody to noise, from groove to rhythmic freedom. That’s no surprise from these musicians, who are adept at this unusual freedom. Also pervasive is the special relation of voice – Mitchener’s radically exploratory vocal improvising – to instrumental sound. As she comments by email, “It was an incredible night and

one that was a venture into the unknown for me with these titans.” She adds, “I think I held my own.”

A listener will form a different connection with the voice than they do with instrumentation. A voice reveals a lot – authenticity, clarity or lack of it, insecurity – and its influences are naked. But also, unlike with conventional musical instruments, we experience the human voice as less separated from everyday, non-musical sound. This is the philosophical issue of the acousmatic – how listeners spontaneously detach musical tones from their everyday causes, while everyday sound is experienced as having a certain worldly cause. Indeed musique concrète is often called acousmatic, as its everyday causes are made invisible.

Sound becomes tone when organised by pitch and rhythm – non-acousmatic experience of non-musical sound and noise is distinguished from acousmatic (musical) experience of tones. But vocalising, with its intimate connection to the performer’s body, bridges this gap. It has a more worldly status, especially when – as in free improv vocalising such as Mitchener’s – it avoids conventional musical tones (that’s true of noise based sound art in general, in fact). There’s an evolutionary origin to this phenomenon, in that non-musical sound and noise warn us of predators. The result is that the voice gains a special prominence in the ensemble.

The second disc *Some Good News* is as powerful as the first. A highlight is Parker’s plangent solo on doson ngoni, against Drake’s hand drums. Thomas unleashes an electronic toy followed by chordal sounds and radio tuning. At 27 minutes, Robinson has a compelling solo on marimba, and the album concludes with an inspiring vamp. The work of this unique group shows how free improv can incorporate various genre musics, merging them into a miraculously coherent yet spontaneous whole. □

Pat Thomas and Orphy Robinson expand their **Black Top** project for an all-star groove-laden improv blowout. By **Andy Hamilton**

Dawid Laskowski



Pat Thomas



Hamid Drake