

DAVID LIEBMAN QUINTET: BRILLIANT AND INTENSE

by Eric Myers

David Liebman Quintet

NSW State Conservatorium of Music

Published in the Sydney Morning Herald, February 14, 1980

With the Art Ensemble of Chicago and the David Liebman Quintet appearing in the same month, Sydney jazz fans have had a welcome opportunity to hear two distinct variants of modern jazz, as they are at present being played in the United States.

The Art Ensemble represented contemporary free jazz. The Liebman Quintet's music is based on the achievements of two great jazz sources: the music of John Coltrane, the saxophonist who died tragically in 1967, and that of the classic mid-sixties Miles Davis Quintet, which included Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Tony Williams and Ron Carter. That is, the Liebman Quintet is immersed in the revolutionary advances in jazz which, in the mid-sixties, finally overturned the conventions of bebop.



American saxophonist David Liebman: keeping alive the heritage of John Coltrane...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN



L-R, Herbie Hancock (piano), Miles Davis (trumpet), Ron Carter (bass), Wayne Shorter (tenor sax), drummer Tony Williams is obscured: one source of the music of the Liebman Quintet... PHOTO COURTESY DEFINITIVE ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPEDIA OF JAZZ & BLUES

The bebop idiom is, to a great extent, still the basic language of much Australian modern jazz. It is based on the playing of improvised melody lines against a prescribed pattern of harmonic movements, or chord changes. Although there is some room for flights of imagination, both the soloist and accompanist conform to the tonal centre established at any one time by the chord structure.

Liebman's music, as I understand it, supersedes this convention by allowing the soloist to play melodic lines which suggest a different tonality to that established elsewhere in the band. This technique has been described as "chromaticism" which, of course, has often been used in European classical music. Stravinsky's *Petrushka* (1911), as an example of how two keys can be used simultaneously, has exercised fascination over many jazz musicians.

As we heard last night, the superimposition of different tonalities in jazz gives the listener the impression that the band is playing in two (or more) keys. The result, especially in the long solo passages, is an inordinate degree of dissonance, which can sound, depending on your scale of values, outrageous, boisterous, harsh, even ugly.

As a saxophone player, David Liebman comes close to virtuosity. He may be preoccupied in keeping alive the heritage of John Coltrane, but his imaginative reworking of Trane's innovations suggests that the possibilities of those innovations are not yet exhausted. Liebman is not merely a committed disciple, but a superb and attractive stage performer in his own right.



Japanese player Terusama Hino: his solos were unfailingly exciting...

PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

This was the case also with the charismatic Japanese player Terusama Hino, whose solos were unfailingly exciting. Even at its most dissonant, his playing was informed by lyricism and he was able to coax an extraordinary variety of sounds out of the cornet, which is a little-used instrument in modern jazz. The rhythm section, comprising John Scofield (guitar), Ron McClure (bass) and Adam Nussbaum (drums), gave a powerful exhibition of high-energy playing, continually building and resolving the tension with the soloists.

While the opportunity to hear this jazz was welcome, I found the music draining, particularly in view of the poor sound balance, which again showed that the worst aspect of jazz presentation in Sydney is the lack of first-class sound technicians. The moments of lyricism and traditional musical beauty were few and far between, but they came as a great relief, in contrast to the intense dissonance of the surrounding music.

Despite the brilliance of this music which, incidentally, is played with a certain sense of cultural superiority peculiar to Americans, one does not cry out for more. Australian jazz musicians will want to understand these developments in the art of jazz, but I trust that few will want to play with the awesome intensity of these New Yorkers.