

The New York Times



THE CLAUDIA QUINTET +1 FEATURING KURT ELLING AND THEO BLECKMANN

“What Is the Beautiful?”

(Cuneiform)

The temperaments of the poems of Kenneth Patchen (1911-72) have a wide frequency: they are brave, mystical, honest, funny, smart, tender-hearted, indignant, earnest, absurd, resistant, interior, out of step.

The drummer, composer and bandleader [John Hollenbeck's](#) music has some of those traits too, and in “What Is the Beautiful?,” his Claudia Quintet puts a handful of Patchen’s poems to music. Most of the record was commissioned by the University of Rochester, whose rare-books library is currently showing an exhibition of [Patchen’s graphic art](#); the poem pieces are broken up by a couple of instrumental ones that aren’t directly related to Patchen.

Fitting music to verse can be tricky territory: if you literalize a poem with musical gestures, you may be taking away its mysteries and killing it. But Mr. Hollenbeck’s work generally gives listeners something concrete — an effect or an event or a process in the music — without becoming condescending or obvious. Here he has paid sensitive attention to the words and moods of the Patchen poems.

Sometimes that simply means that musicians mimic the words’ rhythm and melody, as happens in “Showtime” and “Do Me That Love,” or their meaning, as in “Limpidity of Silence,” which is basically a classical-music piece that indeed involves a lot of limpidity and silence. (A lot of tension too.) But sometimes it means much more. With the singer Kurt Elling reading some texts, and Theo Bleckmann singing others, Mr. Hollenbeck respects how the poems begin, modulate and end. As much as possible, he has let the poems write the music for him.

The title track, with the poem excellently read over the music by Mr. Elling, is a good example, probably the best. The first four stanzas are short and fairly similar in shape, and the strange and slowly accumulating group sound, with accordion and vibraphone, cymbals and bowed bass, repeats a figure accordingly. Later, longer stanzas contain arcs of momentum, which the music mimics with rising lines. At the end of every stanza comes the word “pause,” followed by “and begin again,” which of course likewise happens in the music.

Then drums and piano trickle in, through a series of repeated questions: “Will the shapes of evil fall?/Will the lives of men grow clean?/Will the power be for good?”

There’s steady rhythm and a few levels of harmonic motion from the different instruments, some repeated and steady, some wayward. (This is an expanded version of his Claudia Quintet, with the pianist Matt Mitchell as an extra member.) And the piece as a whole has its own cumulative momentum, its music becoming denser and broader, coming to a period of wordless collective improvisation in the middle.

For seven minutes, everything logically and constantly grows, until the chilling and unresolved end. It’s a piece with a lot of improvisation, one that takes a lot of cues from its literary source, but at the same time it’s a marvel of composition.

There are some less good examples. Mr. Elling is a great singer who sometimes explores his sense of humor a little too much; he’s the same way as a reader, rendering “Opening the Window” with what sounds like an exaggeration of Patchen’s own woozy baritone (which you can hear on [recordings from the late 1950s](#)). He abandons the clarity he achieved in the title track; instead he becomes jokey and too knowing. But this comes at the end of the album, and so much good has been achieved by then that it seems forgivable. **BEN RATLIFF**



The Claudia Quintet +1 featuring Kurt Elling and Theo Bleckmann *What Is the Beautiful?*

Released 10 October 2011

A collaborative jazz/poetry affair that proves to be a piece of vital, living art.

Daniel Spicer 2011-11-09



deeply felt love poetry. To mark his 100th birthday in 2011, the University of Rochester commissioned New York's Claudia Quintet, led by percussionist John Hollenbeck, to revisit Patchen's jazz-plus-poetry experiments, by setting some of his poems to new music. The result is the group's most compelling album to date.

Here, as on 2010's *Royal Toast*, the group is expanded to a sextet with the addition of pianist Matt Mitchell – and some arrangements will feel familiar to listeners already hip to Hollenbeck's mixture of 20th century minimalism, contemporary classical and rockish post-jazz. But, for this latest set, the unit is also augmented by two vocalists with contrasting styles, who take the album into some interesting new territory. Theo Bleckmann, who has previously collaborated with Hollenbeck's Large Ensemble, interprets a handful of pieces with a soft, wispy singing voice that conveys a mournful quality perfectly suited to the dreamy, rippling ballad, *The Snow is Deep on the Ground*.

Nonetheless, it's crooner Kurt Elling who steals the show, inhabiting tracks with a rich, spoken baritone and an actor's sense of character and timing that bring Patchen's words vibrantly to life. Moreover, there's a neat conjunction between Elling's interest in vocalese and Patchen's experiments with speech-poetry. On Showtime, for instance, Elling's louche yet authoritative announcements are closely matched by tightly scored double-bass and vibes shadowing the rhythms of speech, before diving into nippy, slightly old-fashioned swing that, while uncharacteristic of The Claudia Quintet, serves as a welcome tip of the hat to Patchen's original milieu.

It all comes together on the title-track: an intensely compassionate piece of writing, bursting with apocalyptic love for humanity, and punctuated by the repeated refrain: "Pause. And begin again." Supported by a beautifully understated accompaniment, that lets Elling's delivery exhale just the right amount of gravitas, it's genuinely moving – and easily elevates the album to the status of vital, living art.

The Claudia Quintet +1 *What Is The Beautiful?*

CUNEIFORM 327

★★★★½

John Hollenbeck continues to astound as a composer, prone to value accessibility as much he does adventure, on the fascinating *What Is The Beautiful?* As on the previous Claudia Quintet

disc, *Royal Toast*, Hollenbeck extends the lineup with a “+1.” But it’s sort of misleading; it should read “+3,” because in addition to Matt Mitchell, who takes over the piano chair left by Gary Versace, vocalists Theo Bleckmann and Kurt Elling contribute invaluable.

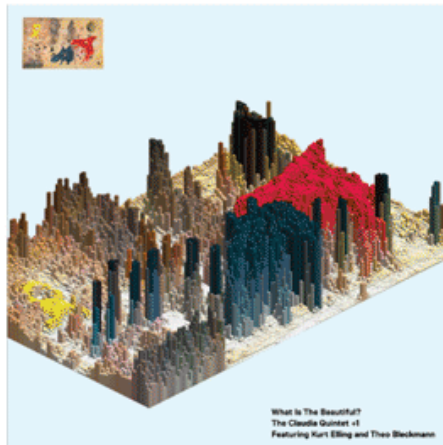
The singers play a crucial role on this album, because it’s Kenneth Patchen’s pioneering poetry that serves as its launching pad. Patchen’s legacy adds another level of intrigue, given his relative obscurity. But his prescient works paved the way for the Beat generation and of the fusion of jazz and poetry. Commissioned by the University of Rochester as part of an exhibition commemorating what would have been Patchen’s 100th birthday, Hollenbeck recruited Elling to read some of Patchen’s work before he composed the music. Hints of overdubs are remarkably absent, because the ensemble couches Elling’s recitations beautifully—as on the opening “Showtime/23rd Street Runs Into Heaven,” on which Drew Gress’ emphatic bass shadow dances in perfect unison to Elling’s effective reading. As Gress’ bass lines develop into a bouncy swing alongside Hollenbeck’s streamlined yet propulsive drumming, Mitchell and vibraphonist coalesce intertwining lines underneath the voice before saxophonist Speed then later accordionist Ted Reichman comes in to reprise the parallel dance as Grew, Mitchell and Moran did prior. The overall effect is mesmerizing.

Elling’s gift for interpreting spoken word is made all the more apparent in his ability to affect different characters. On “Showtime,” he genuinely sounds like an old-school television voiceover talent and on “Opening the Window,” his deliberate, slightly slurred delivery deftly evokes the craggy, inebriated shut in of the poem’s protagonist. His most gripping performance is on “The Bloodhounds” (originally titled “Nice Day For A Lynching”) on which he expresses the horrors of watching a black man being lynched amongst a gaggle of laughing white men.

On other occasions, Patchen’s prose comes to life via Bleckmann’s ethereal singing. Bleckmann is particularly bewitching on “The Snow Is Deep On The Ground” on which his otherworldly crooning is swept afloat by the rolling, counterpointing melodies and rhythms of piano, vibraphone, accordion and bass. Bleckmann finds an emotional gateway on “Do Me That Love” and on “Limpidity Of Silences,” Bleckmann shows his flair for extreme dynamics as he whispers the words at an excruciating pianissimo without losing its rhythmic vitality.

While Hollenbeck employs virtuoso drumming in full service of his compositions, a closer listen reveals him to be a sparkling rhythmic engine, capable to driving the ensemble with supple grace. His drumming gets plenty spotlight however on “Mates For Life,” on which his shuffling brush work duets magically with Moran’s prancing improvisational lines.

—John Murph



What Is The Beautiful?: Showtime/23rd Street Runs Into Heaven; The Snow Is Deep On The Ground; Mates For Life; Job; Do Me That Love; Flock; What Is The Beautiful?; Beautiful You Are; Peace Of Green; The Bloodhounds; Limpidity Of Silences; Opening The Window. (66:17)

Personnel: John Hollenbeck, drums, percussion, keyboards; Ted Reichman, accordion; Chris Speed, clarinet and tenor saxophone; Matt Moran, vibraphone; Drew Gress, acoustic bass; Matt Mitchell, piano; Kurt Elling, voice (1, 4, 7, 10, 12); Theo Bleckmann, voice (2, 5, 8, 11).

Ordering info: cuneiformrecords.com

What Is the Beautiful?

Claudia Quintet + 1

(Cuneiform)

Claudia Quintet explores the poems of Kenneth Patchen

By **Michael J. West** • October 7, 2011

What use has the Claudia Quintet— whose textured, complex jazz relies on dense instrumental interplay—for a crooner like Kurt Elling? A lot, it turns out. This is evidenced on *What Is the Beautiful?*, the New York ensemble's lovely but unsettling new album for Silver Spring's Cuneiform Records.

But Elling doesn't sing here. Nine of the 12 tracks are drummer-composer John Hollenbeck's settings for the verses of proto-Beat poet Kenneth Patchen, which Elling recites on five pieces. He dominates the ensemble's matrix of timbre and polyrhythm. And as good as his singing is, his speaking voice—a rich, sonorous tenor with a bit of flint and an actor's confidence—is even better.

Elling delivers stark Patchen lines about destroying the world as part of a job application ("Job") and societal complicity in a lynching ("The Bloodhounds"), but it's the musicians (drummer John Hollenbeck, tenor saxophonist Chris Speed, vibraphonist Matt Moran, accordionist Ted Reichman, bassist Drew Grass, and "+1" pianist Matt Mitchell) who give them depth. On "Job," Hollenbeck and Gress create an erratic groove with a confounding meter, emphasizing the words' black humor, while Speed moans softly and sorrowfully on the "The Bloodhounds." After those songs, the deluge: "What is the Beautiful?" asks Elling in the title song. Moran and Reichman respond in luminous tones that darken with Patchen's images of "unrest in the outer districts" and "bodies cracked open like nuts." As Elling continues musing about this strange future, the full ensemble enters, oscillating between light and dark while navigating around full stops signaled by Elling's repeated commands of "pause." Even that ambiguity feels profound.

Theo Bleckmann sings the other four poems. On "The Snow is Deep on the Ground," he sees in the wintry precipitation a divine reassurance, while Moran and Mitchell evoke its life-affirming chill. Yet Reichman and Speed turn in sad solos between verses, which are driven home in the CD booklet's printed poem: Bleckmann omits two lines that completely change the tone—"The war has failed " and "Only a few go mad." Their absence is far more disturbing than their inclusion would have been.

The three non-Patchen songs are instrumentals. Two, "Mates for Life" and "Flock," feel out of place. The third, "Peace of Green," is a short lyrical passage with a headache-inducing rhythm cycle that meshes nonetheless. Still, in the end it's the poet's words—and Elling's and Bleckmann's treatments of them—that give *What Is the Beautiful?* its spellbinding, nerve-rattling grandeur.



Future Tense: Claudia Quintet explores a strange utopia.



The Claudia Quintet + 1 featuring Kurt Elling and Theo Bleckmann: What Is the Beautiful? (2011)

By **TROY COLLINS**, Published: October 5, 2011

Jazz and poetry have a longstanding relationship that precedes the postwar experiments of the Beats, dating back to the Harlem Renaissance. As with any artistic collaboration, the cooperative efforts of improvising musicians and poets have yielded mixed results over the years. One of the first artists to successfully explore this territory (with John Cage and Charles Mingus) was Kenneth Patchen (1911-1972), a poet, novelist and painter whose innovative work ranges from political protest and sardonic humor to sentimental romance. In honor of Patchen's 100th birthday the University of Rochester commissioned forward-thinking composer John Hollenbeck's flagship ensemble, The Claudia Quintet, to set some of Patchen's prose to music.

Hollenbeck recruited two very different vocalists to articulate Patchen's poems on *What Is the Beautiful?*. Theo Bleckmann is one of Hollenbeck's most dependable collaborators, often performing with him in a variety of contexts—from intimate trios to big bands. His ethereal phrasing and diaphanous tone infuses a song-like air to one half of the album, with the other hemmed by Kurt Elling. One of today's most celebrated male vocalists, Elling's rich tenor and dramatic cadences bring a cinematic flair to Patchen's surreal and emotionally profound narratives.

The vocalists' wildly different readings of the texts are underscored by the leader's elaborate trap set work, Drew Gress' sinewy bass lines, Matt Moran's luminescent vibes, Ted Reichman's shimmering accordion and Chris Speed's plangent reed work. The Quintet is further augmented by Matt Mitchell, whose scintillating pianism further amplifies the group's kaleidoscopic palette. The core ensemble's remarkable timbral versatility is emphasized on three instrumental numbers commissioned by the Edinburgh Jazz and Blues Festival. The contrapuntal workout "Flock" is the most spectacular, a clangorous display that recalls the ground-breaking work of avant-garde composers like George Antheil and Harry Partch.

Incorporating vocals is a novel but not entirely new concept for the Quintet; that Bleckmann and Elling so convincingly assimilate themselves into the veteran unit's sound world is most impressive however. Bleckmann's impressionistic detours drift gracefully into semi-abstraction, fading into the ether as easily as Speed's breathy clarinet. Elling's ability to modulate his diction into different personalities is even more striking, as he demonstrates on the funky "Job," where he performs a virtual duet with himself. On the poignant closer "Opening the Window" Elling's extended syllables and distorted annunciation matches the harmonic bends of Gress' elastic fretwork, creating phantasmagoric discourse between form and content.

Long considered one of the scene's most unclassifiable groups, The Claudia Quintet integrates Patchen's iconic verse into their oeuvre with an organic grace that brings his words to life. A unique merger of evocative poetry and avant-garde jazz, *What Is the Beautiful?* is a sophisticated work of art whose emotional resonance is as profound as the intricate formal elements that support it.

Track Listing: Showtime/23rd Street Runs into Heaven; The Snow is Deep On the Ground; Mates For Life; Job; Do Me That Favor; Flock; What Is the Beautiful?; Beautiful You Are; Peace Of Green; The Bloodhounds; Limpidity Of Silences; Opening the Window.

Personnel: John Hollenbeck: drums, percussion, keyboard; Ted Reichman: accordion; Chris Speed: clarinet, tenor saxophone; Matt Moran: vibraphone; Drew Gress: acoustic bass; Matt Mitchell: piano; Kurt Elling: voice (1, 4, 7, 10, 12); Theo Bleckmann: voice (2, 5, 8, 11).

Top Songs

By BEN RATLIFF

Published: December 15, 2011

ORRIN EVANS CAPTAIN BLACK BIG BAND “Jena 6” (Posi-Tone)

CLAUDIA QUINTET +1 FEATURING KURT ELLING “What Is the Beautiful?” (Cuneiform)

DRAKE featuring the Weeknd “Crew Love” (Young Money/Cash Money/Universal Republic)

MIGUEL ZENÓN “Olas y Arenas” (Marsalis Music)

DONALD LAWRENCE “Spiritual” (Verity)

BON IVER “Perth” (Jagjaguwar)

LLOYD “Private Dancer” (Zone 4)

DAVID BINNEY “All of Time” (Mythology)

M83 “Midnight City” (Mute)

ALL PIGS MUST DIE “The Blessed Void” (Southern Lord)

A version of this list appeared in print on December 18, 2011, on page AR21 of the New York edition with the headline: Packing Heat and Singing Sweetly.

JazzTimes®

The Top 50 Releases of 2011

Our critics pick the best new and historical recordings of the year

...

19. **KURT ELLING** *The Gate* (Concord Jazz)

20. **BRAD MEHLDAU** *Live in Marciac* (Nonesuch)

21. **THE CLAUDIA QUINTET +1 FEATURING KURT ELLING AND THEO BLECKMANN** *What Is the Beautiful?* (Cuneiform)

22. **JOHN SCOFIELD** *A Moment's Peace* (Emarcy)

23. **MATANA ROBERTS COIN COIN** *Chapter One: Gens de couleur libres* (Constellation)

24. **VIJAY IYER WITH PRASANNA & NITIN MITTA** *Tirtha* (ACT)

...



Mark Corroto's Best Releases of 2011

By **MARK CORROTO**, Published: December 19, 2011

Noah Preminger *Before the Rain* (Palmetto)

Animation *Asiento* (Rare Noise)

The Claudia Quintet *What Is The Beautiful?* (Cuneiform)

Peter Evans Quintet *Ghosts* (More Is More Records)

Harris Eisenstadt *Canada Day II* (Songlines Recordings)

Agusti Fernandez *El Laberint de la Memoria* (Mbari Musica)

Francois Carrier Trio + 1 *Entrance 3* (Ayler Records)

Wadada Leo Smith's Organic *Heart's Reflections* (Cuneiform Records)

Akira Sakata & Jim O'Rourke with Chikamorachi *And That's The Story Of Jazz...* (Family Vineyards Records)

Sonny Rollins *Road Shows, Vol. 2* (Doxy Records)

Greg Ward *Phonic Juggernaut* (Thirsty Ear)

Gerry Hemingway Quintet *Riptide* (Clean Feed)



2011: A very rich year in jazz

The music soared locally, nationally and beyond

By George Varga - Originally published December 20, 2011 at 1:17 p.m., updated December 22, 2011 at 10:34 a.m.

Best jazz albums of 2011

"Rio," Keith Jarrett (ECM Records)

"Bird Songs," Joe Lovano US Five (Blue Note)

"Live in Marciac," Brad Mehldau (Nonesuch)

"American Legacies," The Del McCoury Band & The Preservation Hall Band (McCoury Music)

"Synasty," Jen Shyu & Mark Dresser (Pi)

"David Murray Cuban Ensemble Plays Nat King Cole en Español," David Murray Cuban Ensemble (Motéma)

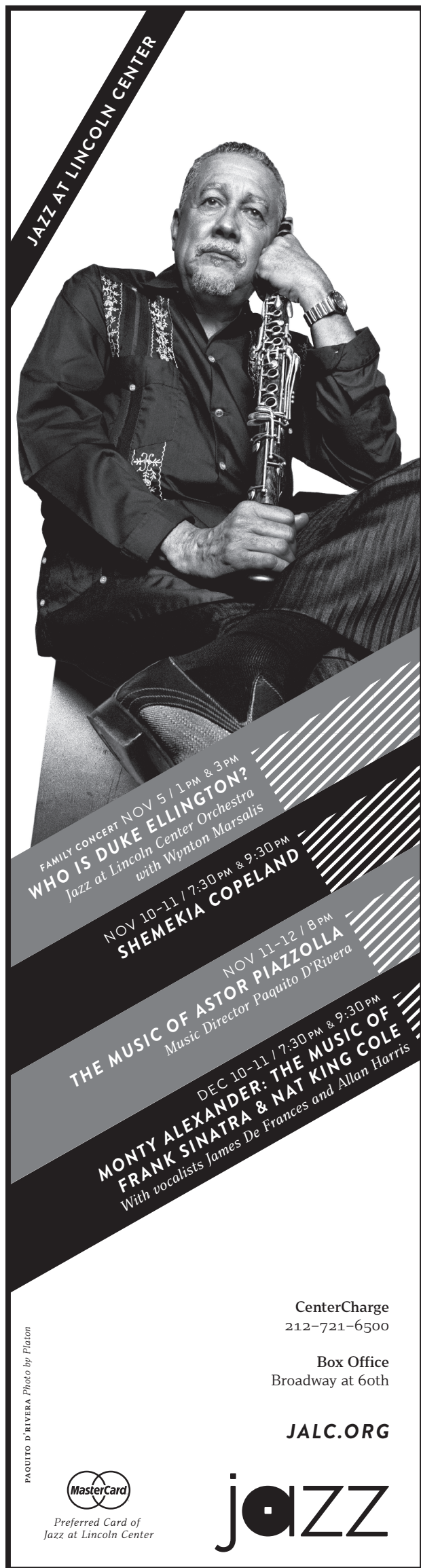
"Unsung Heroes: A Tribute to Some Underappreciated Trumpet Masters," Brian Lynch (Holistic Musicworks 1)

"Alma Adentro," Miguel Zenon (Marsalis)

"Open Source," The Jeff Gauthier Goatette (CryptoGramophone)

"What Is the Beautiful?" The Claudia Quintet, featuring Kurt Elling and Theo Bleckmann (Cuneiform)

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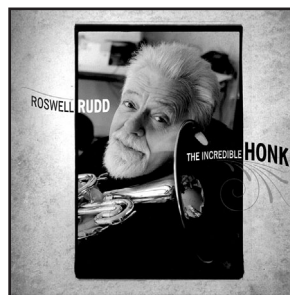
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The Incredible Honk
 Roswell Rudd
 (Sunnyside)



Blues and the Empirical Truth
 Allen Lowe (Music & Arts)
 Featuring Roswell Rudd, Marc Ribot, Matthew Shipp, and Lewis Porter

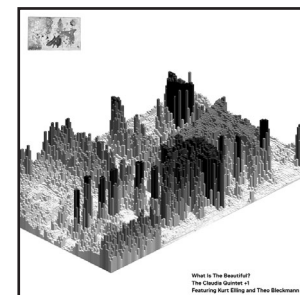
by Jeff Stockton

Just about every old man you run into will tell you that the primary benefit of reaching a certain advanced age is being able to do what you want and at 75 Roswell Rudd has reached that point. After pioneering free jazz trombone in bands with Steve Lacy, Bill Dixon and Archie Shepp among others, until the mid '90s Rudd focused less on making music and more on making a living in non-jazz pursuits. On *The Incredible Honk* Rudd's comeback reaches its apex.

He's gathered a number of his musical friends to make a record that represents his globe-spanning musical interests. The gloriously pristine recording opens with "Feeling Good", a blues built by Rudd's laidback, muted trombone and the cool sound of keyboards, bass and drums. "Waltzin' with My Baby" is an effortlessly melodic duet with pianist Lafayette Harris, Jr. while "Berlin, Alexanderplatz" adds Ken Filiano on bass and is equally warm and welcoming. Peppered around these familiarly jazzy tracks are stops in Cuba, the Bayou, China and the program's high-water mark, a triptych of tunes that revisit Rudd's connection to the music and musicians of Mali and epitomize music-making that is in-the-moment, original and deeply felt. Sprinkle in some American Songbook-type singing and a version of "Danny Boy" and you have a first-rate Roswell Rudd at the turn of the century sampler, a collection that manages to stand on its own as a broadly rewarding listening experience as well as whet your appetite for more focused investigation.

Blues and the Empirical Truth is a personal project of a different order. A modern day Harry Smith of archiving historic blues recordings, Allen Lowe is an academic as well as accomplished musician who has been cursed by obscurity. He is also, possibly, quite mad. But this madness is channeled into a method that results in many multi-disc compilations, copious annotations, commentaries and this effusive three-disc set that features major jazz musicians from his days in New York as well as partners he's met since his relocation to Portland, Maine. An interview with no less than Wynton Marsalis irritated Lowe enough to spur the creative output contained herein, an emphatic effort to demonstrate his command and understanding of blues music and it's all here: staggered, fractured, off-kilter, slow-drag, upbeat, downtrodden, high wire and warped. Lowe recently taught himself guitar and triples on tenor, alto and C-melody saxophones, the latter adding to the anxiety inherent in these performances. Vocals are processed into a creepy nightmarishness and the use of electronic drums tends to heighten the sense of displacement. But Marc Ribot's jagged guitar is prominent; Matthew Shipp flirts with stride piano and introduces a sacred mellowness on Farfisa organ and Roswell Rudd, for whom Lowe was a great supporter during his return to prominence in the '90s, lays on tart, brittle, sly interjections with his slide trombone. The sheer number of tracks (52 totaling more than three-and-a-half hours) is a lot to absorb, but Lowe's skill and commitment make it a success.

For more information, visit sunnysiderecords.com and allenlowe.com. Rudd is at The Stone Nov. 15th as a guest of *Ideal Bread*. See Calendar.



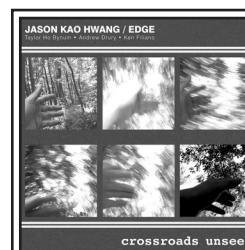
What is the Beautiful?
 Claudia Quintet + 1 (Cuneiform)
 by Tom Greenland

John Hollenbeck never fails to amaze: as a drummer, composer and bandleader he's an artist to keep your eyes and ears on. *What is the Beautiful?*, his sixth all-original project with the Claudia Quintet, retains the original team - Ted Reichman (accordion), Chris Speed (clarinet/tenor sax), Matt Moran (vibes) and Drew Gress (bass) - augmented by Matt Mitchell (piano) and two guest vocalists, Kurt Elling and Theo Bleckmann. Commissioned for the University of Rochester's centennial celebration of the life and works of poet/visual artist Kenneth Patchen (who passed away in January 1972 at the age of 60), Hollenbeck set the singular bard's verses to apposite musical milieus, each filtered through his own singular vision of small group composition and improvisation.

In the resultant tableau, Elling and Bleckmann, two remarkably different vocalists, serve as distinctive character actors: the former varying his intoned persona from "sports caster" to "barroom lush" (on "Jobs" he switches between two roles); the latter delivering the lyrics with uncanny intervallic leaps and lucent vulnerability, so enlivening Patchen's passionate odes to his wife Miriam.

In spite of the strong vocal performances, the quintet comes most alive on three instrumental tracks - "Mates for Life", "Flock", "Peace of Green" - where the leader's less-can-be-much-more approach to drumming, along with the immaculate simpatico of the like-timbred 'melody' instruments, amalgamate in a truly collective concept. Reichman, Speed and Moran are distinctive stylists, but here they form part of a broader palette, blending and bleeding 'colors' in novel tints and tinges. Mitchell's playing, at times extremely busy, at others leaving room to spare, is a welcome addition. As Elling stumbles over the lyrics of "Opening the Window", the final track, Hollenbeck makes a programmatic reference to Patchen's boozy tale, "sound[ing] like somebody having a fit with a snaredrum on either side of us."

For more information, visit cuneiformrecords.com. This group is at The Stone Nov. 18th with guest Theo Bleckmann. See Calendar.



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