

# EUPHORIA RIPENS

Review by Michael Coyle  
Cadence Jazz

Barry Wallenstein (2) both comes from and travels to a different place. As John Spayde so nicely puts it, though at the risk of making him sound derivative, Wallenstein is "one-part Mose Allison cool, one-part Allen Ginsberg beat." Nevertheless, as I've noted above, not everyone will hear things that way. The estimable Thom Jurek, for instance, scoffed that Wallenstein's *Taking Off* (Bleu Regard 1999) is little more than "aged, oh-so-hip beatnik tropes played to an absurd extreme with a band who can barely handle the burden of these words." Finally, Jurek finds, even "the late, great Charles Tyler" sounds like he is "chomping at the bit on his tenor, hoping (the music gels) so he can cut it all loose and into the heavens," but can't because he must stay "anchored" to the poetry, speaks to the very nature of the genre. Jurek's critique exemplifies that attitude I've sketched above: listeners wanting the music to unfold according to its own logic will rarely be satisfied by the hybrid logic of a Jazz Poem. There's no reason to argue the point. But for those willing to grant semiotic play, Wallenstein's latest record has lots to offer. First, Wallenstein has since 1995 continued to hone his craft. What's more, his band has improved big time. Daniel Carter is a free-Jazz heavyweight. And so, also, Vincent Chancey, who has since the 1970's played with Sun Ra, David Murray, Lester Bowie, and Carla Bley, among others: nuff said? Adam Birnbaum, Bob Cunningham, and Steve Carlin, too, have all established their credentials. In fact, Chancey and Carter were with Wallenstein on his last record, *Pandemonium* (Cadence Jazz 1194), and their rapport with the poet shows as much. This is a band that delivers at every moment what Wallenstein needs, whether it's a down comforter to pillow a certain passage or a rock-solid base from which he can kick with energy. There's no question here about the band handling the poet's words.

As for the words, well, Wallenstein has had time there, too, to hone his craft. Like Javors, he holds-or held (he is now emeritus) an academic post (he professed literature and creative writing at City College, CUNY). And he's been writing poetry for 30 years now, publishing the first of his five collections in 1977. Check out the quiet particularities that open "Tony Cleans the Stove," about 4:45 into the sequence or poems that comprises track three:

Some hooks the mind comes up with  
endanger the mind itself,  
so I blunt the Points,  
file down the barbs,  
and find great pleasure in cleaning the stove:  
scouring powder and the pink sponge,  
the whole arm tightening,  
bearing down on a fast scrub,  
the black crust softening to be gone

This is the work of an experienced poet, one who knows (as Dante said) that the way up is the way down, that the way to wrestle with cosmic things is by embracing the mundane and quotidian.

The poem takes its time, never racing ahead of itself or claiming unearned epiphanies. But the music here works no less well, at once contributing to the vision and helping keep it real. Guitar, piano, and bass establish a slightly irregular and dynamically variable obbligato that conveys atmosphere but also responds to rather than dictates the cadence of the spoken word. In other words, the musical lines remain elastic. To be sure, that the musicians remain fixed to what they are doing as if they were comping behind a vocalist. There are similarities, not least of which is that they must work never to overpower Wallenstein's hip but unpretentious voice. But precisely because the poet isn't singing their musical charge is all the more important; their role is less to cushion his performance than to recontextualize it. Wallenstein's is unmistakably a Jazz sensibility, but his band is there to transform sensibility into aural texture—to take the poem from “jazzy” to Jazz. They do so brilliantly. A good example of how this works could be found in the section of the “Tony” sequence that immediately follows the lines quoted above. “Tony at the Table., turns on Benny Golson's “Killer Joe” riff, and indeed the poem addresses that song directly:

"what's that tune you're humming by Benny Golson?"

"Killer Joe "

-it's the talk at the table

that makes me miss it off the radio-

"Killer Joe?"

If anything swings,

It's “Killer Joe”

Played by John Hicks.

This crew, come to my table uninvited,

Has made this mess I hesitate over.

“This crew” is a playful little moment, at once carrying the story *in* the poem and referring to the performance of the band (and, in performance, Wallenstein substitutes the names of his players for the phrase, “this crew,” before returning to the poem as written). “Killer Joe” really is more a riff (and an irresistible one) than a song, and that could lead to dulling repetitiveness. But here the experience of Wallenstein's band in playing post-bop music proves its worth: the KJ riff is always there, but always being played with. Birnbaum in particular takes the riff as a starting point from which to venture elsewhere. In any case, “this mess I hesitate over” is a mess in the best sense: full of life, and like life variable and unpredictable. And, like Art, absolutely worth hesitating over, worth pondering, worth giving a serious and seriously playful listen.

There is a distinction to be made between a record like Wallenstein's, where the words are central to the record, and Javors', where the spoken word is in the mix as an invited guest. But the other differences, both aesthetic and historical, between the work of a slam poet and the work of a Jazz Poet, remind us that the relations between Jazz and poetry' are anything but simple and are changing and developing all the time. Like Jazz itself ... My own preference is for the Wallenstein date, but both records contribute to this hybrid form. In fact, and I suspect this point will matter to Cadence readers more than most, the sonic textures of Wallenstein's work are always simulating.