

BEAST IS by Barry Wallenstein, AK•BA Records, P.O. Box 1737. NYC 10027.

By Larry Smith

Poetry-and-Jazz is still with us, and it's taking some new turns lately around New York City. Following the craze of the late 1950s (Ferlinghetti, Rexroth, Kerouac, and the truest poetry-jazz maker Kenneth Patchen), the form subsided into the pretense of corner coffee shops in Everywhere, America. Kenneth Koch and Larry Rivers gave it a boost at New York's celebrated Five Spot Cafe around 1961, and Waller Lowenfels put together a collection of diverse experimenters in his edition of *New Jazz Poets* (BR 461 I) in 1967. That group included poets Ishmael Reed, Paul Blackburn, John Morgan, Peter Lafarge, and Joel Oppenheimer. Then it seemed to be shelved as a curious phase where poets and jazzmen exploited each other's audiences rather than creating a new form. About five years ago some real exploring and molding of forms took place. It has resulted in a new wave of practitioners with diverse talents and idiosyncratic forms.

Perhaps one of the greatest jazz poets is Imamu Amiri Baraka, who has released three albums. Allen Ginsberg, who wasn't involved in the earlier west coast phase of the movement, is now performing with David Aram, and Jayne Cortez has released a fine album with bassist Richard Davis (*Celebrations and Solitudes – Strata East SES 7421*). Now make way for another fine performer in Barry Wallenstein, a poet from New York who has developed some solid forms with jazz pianist Stanley Cowell and with Cecil Mc-Bee on bass and cello. The album *BEAST IS* takes most of its written material from Wallenstein's book *Beast Is a Wolf with Brown Fire* (BOA Editions, Brockport, N.Y.) and adds some material written for the album. Together poet and jazzmen have developed a working synthesis of poetry-and-jazz that is tight and mutually alive.

These fraternal street artists, contemporary oral poet and the jazz-men, have always had a lot in common. Creating outside the main-stream of society, tradition, and art, they have each evolved forms based on intuitive improvisation and emotional flow ("hot" or "cool," gut or cerebral) that foster uninhibited expression of anger, joy, and love. Both champion a bold humor of survival and create a witness to life's potential marvel and its daily waste. They seek an engaging reflection of life while ingesting reality and expounding it through the resonance of their special forms. Why shouldn't the two come together? When it has failed it has been because these street artists have failed to listen to each other. Kenneth Patchen was and is the champ at the form because he would bend his lines, words, even his voice to the jazz feel, and the musicians would respond in kind. It can happen that way, and Wallenstein knows it.

Barry Wallenstein explains the relationship set up between himself and McBee and Cowell. "With Cecil and Stanley, there was real preparation. They read the poems, divided them up, and worked out ideas to go with them. I'd suggest a dominant mood, where spaces might be, where humor and irony might be heightened. I feel the music helped bring out the humor in my writing The other side of it is that I wrote many of these poems with jazz in mind." Together they present some 22 separate jazz poems that arc beautifully linked by mellow transitions into which Wallenstein cuts his titles then etches the work – words and music eating themselves into each other in this expressionistic art. David Rosenthal describes Wallenstein's voice as "hip,

distanced, street-wise" and it is also touchingly clear. His phrasing is usually exact, though somewhat Formal in diction, yet responsive to the finely tuned accompaniment. His range lacks the scar-ing force and lush tones of Patchen's and he doesn't ride or bend much with the music of words beyond speech. Yet his moods go further than Patchen's anger and love (so akin to Charlie Parker's). Dealing with basics of drugs, sex, anger, coolness, Wallenstein is more personal (confessional) with his poems. There is the light but mellow "Skimmer:"

And the music and voice explore both the surface and depth of this existential mood. "The Short Life of the Five Minute Dancer" wields us through a field composition that ech-oes wonder and pain. "Deep in the haze: I'm fine/ so fine in fact I'm fed through veins." And the three-part climax, "Time After Time:" exhibits the group's mental and emotional range.

In this jazz poetry a type of free and imaginatively transforming imagery works best. When it isn't unleashing a flat directive at life's circumstances – the waste and pain, the casual violence and underlying evil – it is best at a kind of Condensed and deep imagery that transforms itself-like – music. Thus, we have:

BEAST IS A WOLF WITH BROWN FIRE

runs across meadows
and bounds up into
old farms, now stubbly
and overgrown.
she runs through brush
she rests among the evergreen
and the poplar.
her eyes are pinned to the light
flickering through the leaves.
she pants white mist, she lounges,
she changes sex in the shadows
and emerges in red fire.

the beast is a wolf and
 she goes to you
 she's found you out,
 my love.

The language reaches an intuitive flow that opens itself to the unconscious and surreal. Like Patchen's best poetry-and-jazz works which defy the rational, Wallenstein's writing sails the musical sea changing sails with intuitive shifts of wind--and it works. When the heart and the impulse are finely tuned it shows us all what can be.

OBSERVATION POST

By Frederic Seaman

This adventurous jazz/poetry album features Barry Wallenstein reading his poems, with instrumental accompaniment by pianist Stanley Cowell and bassist Cecil McBee, two outstanding figures in contemporary jazz. It is an ambitious work that successfully integrates the two elements into a cohesive whole.

Wallenstein explains in the liner notes that he wrote many of the 22 poems on the LP with jazz in mind, and in Cowell and McBee he has two sensitive collaborators who are remarkably attuned to his poetry.

Most of the poems on *Beast Is* are culled from Wallenstein's recent book of poetry, *Beast Is A Wolf With Brown Fire*, and the author reads them with a passionate, breathy voice that floats above the music and assaults the listener's imagination with vivid imagery. Much of Wallenstein's poetry deals with weird experiences and encounters in the urban jungle, and there is an undercurrent of irony and dark humor, anxiety and paranoia in many of his poems. Throughout the album Cowell and McBee embellish the poetry with thoughtful jazz improvisations that underscore the mood and imagery the poems convey. The music also builds fluent transitions between poems, so that each side of the LP provides a continuous and engrossing flow of words and music.

Beast Is, distributed by AKBA Records (P.O. Box 1737, NYC 10027), is a significant contribution to jazz/poetry, a genre that has traditionally met with a great deal of resistance from the jazz establishment.