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Experts Hail Arthur Blythe As "The Unknown Giant"

By Loretta Manago
Post Managing Editor

Los Angeles and New York insiders once hailed him as "the unknown giant." But with his recent association with Columbia Records and with such rave reviews as "the alto saxophonist with one of the most flexible and compelling voices in contemporary music," Arthur Blythe no longer remains obscure.

Blythe says that it was an unexplainable urge to play an instrument (any instrument) that got him veered in the direction of a musical career. He was only nine at the time. With his mother's direction he soon found himself playing the alto saxophone and within a matter of four years he was performing in a blues band.

Three years later, Blythe's thoughts turned to jazz and the music of Monk, Miles, Cannonball Adderly and Coltrane. He recalls that period in his life. "I saw him (Coltrane) perform a few times and I was overwhelmed—over, under, around and through. I was just whelmed."

To become the best, performing in local bands was not quite enough for Blythe. He took time out to study and in 1960 he moved back to Los Angeles. In that stage of Blythe's career, finding steady work was no easy job. "It was a very cliquish scene and it appeared that I didn't fit in."

Despite the difficulty that Blythe was experiencing in finding a break, he did get a break, a major one at that. He began a 10-year association with legendary pianist-composer Horace Tapscott. "The involvement led him and other experimental musicians into the Underground Musicians Association, an organization formed to preserve black music. According to Blythe, "We did concerts,



ARTHUR BLYTHE

...No longer remains obscure

seminars, whatever we could to make the community more aware of what the music was about."

By the time the '70s had arrived, Blythe was leading his own trio. With this new group Blythe traveled the West Coast, spent some time in Virginia and played on a couple of movie soundtracks and made a final move to New York in '74.

Success somehow dodged Blythe longer than some others in the business. At one point in Blythe's career he found himself working as a security guard in a porn theater in order to

make ends meet. But the hard times were soon to leave.

Having worked with Leon Thomas, a vocalist, Blythe landed his first major job as a sideman when he joined Chico Hamilton's band. Associated with this band of musicians, Blythe was once praised by critic Robert Palmer as "simply outdistancing any other saxophonist working in the idiom. Blythe's affiliation with Hamilton reaped multi-benefits. Not only did he get a chance to be on wax through Hamilton's recordings, he also received more exposure, got more steady work

and had the freedom to explore the "new music" being worked out on the lofts, colleges, and small clubs around the city.

During the two years with Hamilton, Blythe also worked with arranger-composer-band-leader Gil Evans. There was a great deal of music satisfaction for Blythe, but Blythe had other aspirations and it was nothing that could be done while he was a member of another person's band. So in 1977 he became the leader of his own group. His first two albums were done for the small India Navigation label, "The Grip" and "Metamorphosis" both recorded live in New York with a sextet.

By 1980 virtually every critic was hailing Blythe as the most impressive player of his instrument to appear in the last 15 years. It is perhaps the review by Fatisha that captures and most accurately tells the essence of Blythe. He says: "Therefore, Blythe Spirit... Arthur Blythe the altoist... is not super, he is supernal; he is not revolutionary, he is evolutionary. He is not transcendent, he transmutes the variety of possibilities that there are for uniqueness in sound into Blythe's sound. If you listen to him play a standard or his musical composition, you're hearing the essence of a new musical spirit. So... kindly I urge you not let your life be devoid of spirit and REALLY!!! don't let your life be devoid of Blythe Spirit!"

CCS Auditions

The Charlotte Choral Society will hold auditions for its spring production January 21, 7-9 p.m., in the Shalom Hall of Myers Park Baptist Church. The spring production, "On The Town," is a light classics to pops program to be presented May 16-17 at Spirit Square.