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## BORAH BERGMAN: DARING TO BE DIFFERENT

The history of jazz piano could be written as the search for new things to do with your left hand. Every great jazz piano player -- [Fats Waller](#), [Thelonious Monk](#), [Herbie Hancock](#), and [Cecil Taylor](#), to name a few -- has found a unique role for his left hand. Perhaps none of them has gone as far in liberating the south paw from its strictly supportive role as the dazzlingly ambidextrous Borah Bergman.

Despite his formidable technique and originality, Bergman is certainly one of the most obscure figures in contemporary jazz. Between 1975 and 1992, he released only four solo albums, two on Chiaroscuro and two on Soul Note. Recently, he's more than doubled his recorded output with an impressive series of duets, including collaborations -- some might say confrontations -- with saxophonist Tom Chapin, Evan Parker, and drummer Andrew Cyrille. Two new duet recordings -- *Reflections on Ornette Coleman and the Stone House* (Soul Note), a fiery duet with drummer Hamid Drake; and *First Meeting* ([Knitting Factory](#)) with saxophonist Roscoe Mitchell -- are further indications of this overlooked virtuoso's impressive skill and imagination.

Creative sparks fly immediately on *Reflections*, which, like the Mitchell recording, documents a first encounter between two artists. Bergman and Drake use four [Ornette Coleman](#) compositions and one Bergman as reference points in a riveting continuous 50-minute set. Bergman's astonishing independence of hands forces you to listen to the piano in a different way -- following the left hand is as critical as following the right. And Drake's multi-directional orchestration of the drum kit mirrors the pianist's multiple lines. The music is often dense, complex, swift, and urgent; this is a joyously dancing, organic performance.

Bergman and Drake lock together from the start of "Focus on Sanity," a 17-minute excursion that rises to tumultuous heights and subsides into delicate spaciousness several times before segueing into "Lonely Woman." The tension never resolves during their contemplation of Coleman's most famous tune, as the music swells over Bergman's dark, continuous bass-clef patterns. A brighter "Congeniality" alternates a swinging beat and pulsing rhythms. Drake, whose versatility is an important part of the performance's intensity and success, should be more widely hailed as a major talent.

In contrast, the anticipated fireworks between Mitchell and Bergman never materialize. Mitchell is unyielding, and Bergman never really succeeds in cracking the saxophonist's hard exterior. The pianist spends much of the album proffering ideas that Mitchell never accepts, making for a frustrating one-sided conversation. On the title track, Mitchell eases in with soft wedges of sound. Quiet saxophone tones, shaded in subtly different ways, alternate with short motifs; Bergman offers sharply angled lines and wide blocks of notes in response. Without building up to it, Mitchell shifts to long waves of notes that create a sense of swing yet never define a fixed beat. Bergman double-clutches into high gear himself and, synching into the pulse, erupts with lashing and jabbing parallel lines. "Deep Delta" sustains a contemplative mood throughout. The two remaining duets follow the same course, indicating that free improvisation is no protection against formulaic playing. Baritone vocalist Tom Buckner, a member of Mitchell's Space Ensemble, improves matters on three short, more interactive improvisations, but all in all, this seems like a missed opportunity.

Bergman gambles every time he records one of these first-meeting improvisations, and the exhilaration he produces when the risk pays off, as it does on *Reflections*, is reason enough to listen to these daring duets.

-- Ed Hazell



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