JD Allen / Shine!

Notes by BEN WALTZER

There's something about JD Allen, the 36-year-old Brooklyn tenor saxophonist, which harkens back to an earlier era. Maybe it's the Five Point Ivy cap, penchant for proper dark blazers, or that on the road he seems to be the only musician not constantly fiddling with a digital keep-in-touch. He wouldn't seem out of place in a sepia-toned photo amidst carriage-horses, tenement dwellers, and pickle carts. And there is something too in Allen's arresting and hypnotic sound that reaches deeply into the past – his own past and our collective one - to grasp the essential. What he's unearthed -- a weighted, incantatory voice free of glibness and blithe eclecticism -- is needed in jazz today and can be felt in its fullness and immediacy on "Shine!"

The word "shine" has many associative meanings. There's the Negro spiritual "This Little Light of Mine," itself a swung, blues-based echo of Matthew 5:16: "Let your light shine before others…." It's black slang for someone with particularly dark skin (as well as, conversely, an epithet). Shine is also a mythic hero in the African-American oral tradition, much like Stagger Lee and John Henry. As the story goes, Shine, a lone black stoker in the belly of the Titanic, tries desperately to warn the ship's captain of impending disaster. But the captain trusts technology blindly. "Shine, Shine, have no doubt/I told you we got ninety-nine pumps to pump the water out." Shine isn't buying it and decides to test his fate against the ocean's dreadful immensity as the passengers who ignored his warnings plead frantically to be saved. Along the way Shine encounters, among other inconveniences, a ravenous shark and says, "I know you outswim the barracuda, outswim every fish in the sea/But you gotta be a stroking motherfucker to outswim me." When he learns the Titanic has sunk and that its passengers "went to heaven, Shine was in Sugar Ray's Bar drinking Seagram's Seven." According to Lawrence Levine, author of *Black Culture, Black Consciousness*, Shine is "an epic figure, a culture hero [who] breaks all precedents and all stereotypes." In the end, his triumph is not only a tale of survival and clear-eyed self-reliance, but a larger metaphor for the struggle to be human, to find one's true voice in a roiling indifferent sea while dodging the burning wreckage of materialistic hubris brought low by collective delusion. Sound familiar?

"Shine!" is Allen's second Sunnyside release and an extension of the saxophone trio concept he introduced on the critically acclaimed "I Am, I Am." There, Allen, with bassist Gregg August and drummer Rudy Royston, established an aesthetic that, if you wanted a banner, might read "The New Concision."

"We all have a juke-box mentality. Nothing more than five minutes," says Allen. "I'm trying to get back to that. I want to establish a feeling, play three or four choruses and get the hell out. If you can't find it in three you can't find it. Hit and run." (As Royston says, "Establish the vibe and finish before sliding into netherness.") Allen's approach is to craft small pieces with stark, deeply-etched personalities. His music is memorable in the way folk songs are, and when he plays he gets to the point. This is not lost on his contemporaries.

"JD trusts in the value of a note," says label-mate and fellow tenor saxophonist, Bill McHenry. "He lets his note choices ring out in time and gives you a chance to really feel them. Because he does that so well, he's strung to what he says and can't step away from what he means because it's been said so plainly and cleanly. That gives you the sense you're listening to something substantial."

Allen was born in 1972 and grew up in Detroit. In fact, he is Detroit: his ancestors arrived from Kentucky in 1807 and during a recent stint at Baker's Keyboard Lounge he seemed always to be saying, "That was my cousin." In the eighties, when he was coming up, Detroit had a closely-knit jazz community. Musicians would learn from their elders and collectively school the next generation.

"My first gig was when I was 16 with bassist Rodney Whitaker's 'Octsemble.'" says Allen. "Rodney had learned from the saxophonist Donald Washington, who led the Bird-Trane-Sco-Now group ['Sco' as in Roscoe Mitchell]. Washington's idea was that there was no difference between 'in' and 'out,' traditional and avant-garde, but that it was all one thing." Now a commonplace, this was a novel concept in the eighties nationally. It's also a characteristic of some of the most compelling voices to emerge from the Motor City in the last twenty-five years, including Geri Allen, James Carter, and Gerald Cleaver, as well as their forebears, such as Marcus Belgrave and the late Lawrence Williams. Listening to "Shine!" you can hear how JD Allen upholds and extends this tradition.

"On this record I'm thinking about deconstruction and reconstruction, I'm thinking about form, I'm also asking 'In how many different ways can you deal with three voices?'"

In a style that evokes Rollins and Coltrane of course, but also Dewey Redman and John Gilmore, Allen connects the grounded blues of 'Son House' to the terrestrial explorations in Butch Morris's "Conjuration of Angles," the jaunty roll of "East Boogie," a take on Ornette Coleman's "Ramblin," to the cantorial free-association of "Ephraim." Royston and August both support and lead, offer foundation and cloak form with texture. Royston, who has been in high demand since arriving from Denver two years ago, has worked with Ron Miles, Bill Frisell, John McNeil and Bruce Barth. August, a bassist of great drive and ingenuity, is an accomplished composer, 1st chair in the Brooklyn Symphony Orchestra, and leader of his own groups.

Perhaps what I really meant earlier, that Allen seemed of an earlier era, was really just that he doesn't come across as distracted. Musically and personally, he is fully *there*. "He engages situations and people in a full-frontal way," says drummer Gerald Cleaver, leader of "Violet Hour," of which Allen is a member. "He's also a humble person. He'll tell you when he's wrong or when he needs to work on something. You don't meet a lot of people who will truly let you know where they're at with whatever endeavor."

With his solid foundation – he has worked with Betty Carter, Lester Bowie, Cindy Blackman, Jeremy Pelt, Duane Eubanks, Orrin Evans and others – Allen is poised to become a leading voice on the tenor saxophone, and in jazz. Actually, he already is and more people should know it.

"I want to make something that's alive," says Allen, putting on his cap and lighting a cigarette. "And be serious about it."