

Alan Braufman *The Fire Still Burns*

28 August, 2020 Valley of Search LP/CD/digital

Alan Braufman: Alto saxophone, flute
Cooper-Moore: Piano
James Brandon Lewis: Tenor saxophone
Ken Filiano: Bass
Andrew Drury: Drums
Michael Wimberly: Percussion on
Morning Bazaar and City Nights

Alto saxophonist and flutist Alan Braufman (b. Brooklyn, 1951) and pianist/multi-instrumentalist Cooper-Moore (b. Loudoun County, Virginia, 1946) began working together in Boston around 1969 while Braufman was studying at Berklee. By 1973, along with saxophonist David S. Ware, bassist Chris Amberger, and drummer Marc Edwards, they had relocated to New York and minus Edwards, all were occupying a TriBeCa walk-up at 501 Canal Street. A solid two years of living around one another and playing in the loft's storefront performance and rehearsal space resulted in Braufman's 1975 LP *Valley of Search* (India Navigation 1024, reissued in 2018 as *Valley of Search 001*). Until recently, *Valley of Search* was an out-of-print rarity documenting serious loft-era improvised music, but within its stark black and white cover art and heavy-weight vinyl grooves was a discographical marker of friendship. After all, music is a sharing of information, beliefs, emotions, and spiritual connection developed from camaraderie, and ideally it results in lasting sonic and personal relationships.

Just shy of forty years later, Braufman, bassist William Parker, and Cooper-Moore convened for a small concert at the latter's East Harlem apartment – the first time the two had made music together since the 1980s. As Braufman puts it, “Cooper-Moore and I have this relationship – he's my best friend, and I'm not one to stay in touch with people so my best friends are those where we don't talk for two years, the next time we talk it's like we never stopped. Cooper-Moore, we always had that baseline of communication that doesn't change. He called me up one day and said ‘next time you visit, let's do this.’ He arranged it and that was that.” This auspicious new beginning was followed by a concert at Manna House, a music school and venue run by Bertha Hope, where the trio was supplanted by saxophonists Darius Jones and Brian Price and drummer Chad Taylor, as well as a 2016 Vision Festival performance with Braufman, Price, Cooper-Moore, and percussionist Michael Wimberly.

A match had been struck, though with Braufman living in Salt Lake City it was difficult to generate more work until *Valley of Search* was reissued. A commemorative concert came together in 2018 and in 2019, the pair reconvened to wax *The Fire Still Burns*, the latest chapter in their creative reunion. For both settings the ensemble has consisted of James Brandon Lewis on tenor saxophone, Ken Filiano on bass, and drummer Andrew Drury (here, Wimberly guests on two tracks). In terms of assembling this unit, Braufman says “Cooper-Moore recommended Ken and Andrew and I'm so glad he did, as they are wonderful people and wonderful musicians. I chose James; I was debating because *Valley of Search* didn't have a second horn, and it wasn't that I needed another horn, but I wanted to play with James so this was an opportunity. I love his music, I love his playing, and I love him personally. When the chance to record arose I decided to keep the same band.” The cast of musicians combined have an extensive pedigree, but it's their empathy and skill that make this record what it is.

Apart from chosen ensemble, there is a crucial difference between *Valley of Search* and *The Fire Still Burns*. The former LP grew out of regular playing under intense, somewhat lawless conditions — rough and bankrupt 1970s Lower Manhattan — and while its melodies are primarily credited to Braufman, both musicians lived and breathed those pieces. For *The Fire Still Burns*, Braufman wrote all of the pieces from his Salt Lake City base and brought them to the session. As he says, “I write a lot, but so much that I write doesn’t make it past my editing process. Once I have an idea I can develop it, but this was magical in the sense that once [producer] Nabil [Ayers] said ‘let’s do an album,’ all of a sudden ideas just came. For “Home,” I was just doodling on the piano and I finished it in twenty minutes. The year before we recorded I was teaching at Utah State University, and it was an hour and a half drive each way once a week so a few of them I wrote in the car just humming, and they stayed with me.”

Commonly, the spiritual influence of figures like multi-instrumentalist Don Cherry permeates both albums. As Cooper-Moore relates, “one of the things Alan and I both feel is that Don was really our leader. For him and me playing together, Don’s spirit was it, because he was broader than most of the other cats. I love ‘Trane and Ornette but it’s Don, because the whole world was his audience and he was so open to all kinds of musics. He would play with everybody.” Further, Braufman points out that “I was a teenager when I heard Don Cherry’s *Complete Communion* and *Symphony For Improvisers*, and it made a real impression on me that these tunes didn’t stop, they evolve, and I thought to myself why doesn’t everybody do that? Why stop a tune — you break the whole chain of continuity. So when I started writing *Valley of Search* with the Canal Street band, it was important to me to keep it as a suite because that’s how we were performing live. Don was a big influence, and his band with [tenor saxophonist] Gato Barbieri — Gato didn’t so much influence my musical concept as he did my approach to the saxophone and the sound I was going for.”

The Fire Still Burns has that gritty, forthright sensibility we hope to hear in sonic collaborations borne out of beauty and struggle, but there’s a populist ease that comes with age and reflection. Braufman’s melodies are hooky and vibrant, sometimes with an almost Kwela-like flair in their liquid appeal. His alto retains the push of forebears like Jimmy Lyons or Jackie McLean, vibratoless and pure that, coupled with James Brandon Lewis’ rich, throaty call, makes for a dynamic front-line balance. Bolstered by chunky piano chords and spiky runs hooked into the unflagging motion of Filiano, Drury, and Wimberly, a swell of rhythm carries the proceedings forward. Cooper-Moore opines that “Alan got his concept early on, and he’s not going to change. It’s his, he’s not taking it from any specific culture, though it sounds ‘not American,’ and he has a tone world that’s different from all of ours. His harmonies and the way changes fall are like nobody else’s that I know. He has his own language that’s beautiful and I have mine, and when we come together he’s someone who says ‘do what you want to do.’” Put simply it’s natural music — complementary, individual, and full of the sweet, hot taste of celebration. And now, Alan Braufman and Cooper-Moore are bringing it *Home*.

Clifford Allen
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