

Ann Nguyen
Music 265
AACM Unit
Analysis #4 of 4
Muhai Richard Abrams: "Ritob"
April 23, 2002

Like the title of its 1978 album, *1-OQA+19*, "Ritob" contains a peculiar union of elements. Yet the structural, harmonic, and rhythmic aspects of this Muhai Richard Abrams work cohere well, forming a distinctive ambiance and manifesting a democratic sensibility. The collectivist impulse that drives such performances by members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) comes through in more commercial, personal, and sociopolitical areas, as well.

Initially, the structure of "Ritob" does seem rigid. After the thrumming bass lines and the tentative drum thumps and cymbal tings, the piano and saxophones (alto and soprano) repeat the ominous interlude and the buoyant theme. At 1:48, 3:10, 4:08, and 5:45, the soprano sax, piano, alto sax, and drums progress through their own solos before they conclude with the head and a sonic broth. These bookends and clear divisions recall the standard arrangement of jazz songs. Paradoxically, this strict setup also helps blur instrumental boundaries. When the ensemble plays the theme at the start as well as the end of the piece, this reiteration not only represents a common device but also stresses the group dynamic that the AACM values (Wilmer 115). With that concern, the solos gain import not so much for highlighting individuals as for giving them all a chance to shine. The drum-supported opening by the bass serves as the latter's own moment in the spotlight. Meanwhile, the solos are not even that clear-cut. The soprano saxophonist starts his section by holding a note from the end of the head. The keyboard accompaniment becomes a solo only because the horn man has quieted. The piano also continues a few bars after the alto sax has entered and several notes after the drum has increased in activity. These structural overlaps keep the musicians conscious of each other and promote collaboration as they step out on their own.

"Ritob" also meshes well harmonically. This quality is most obvious during the head. When the horns and piano start their thematic zigzag, their sounds are octaves apart and thus match exactly.

Even when the number and pitches of their notes differ in the preambles at 0:48, 1:18, 1:42, 6:11, and 6:41, the saxes seem to dovetail with the piano's deliberate chords. Tones agree during solos, too. As the soprano horn twirls about melodically at 2:46, the piano echoes it with bubbling, single-note lines. Likewise, at 4:45, the keyboardist slides toward the low range as the horn player spirals downward with similar notes. The piece's finale, though more entropic than the theme before it, coalesces with a sustained alto note, soprano trills, and piano glissandos. Though improvisational freedom always threatens to push music toward dissonance, the perpetual piano-comping and bass-plucking do imply the melody's dependence on the background.

The rhythm of "Ritob" is just as grounded, albeit variegated. Though the drummer offers waves of thumps, tings, and patters that occasionally syncopate (such as the offbeat accents at 0:54), he adds color rather than keep time. The latter duty falls to the bassist, whose notes between the heads always land on the beat. During the theme, the pianist presents ostinato triplets that consist of a changing chord and a low repeated note that drive on the otherwise unfettered horns. Beyond explicit pulses, meter becomes more complex. It alternates between 6/8 and 4/4 during the theme as the piano's triplets break off and join the meandering horns. Moreover, the bass continues its regular eighths throughout the solos, but from soprano to piano to alto, it is difficult to tell if and when the meter shifts from 6/8 to 4/4 or vice versa. The performers sometimes place different meters on top of the main one, as well. For example, the pianist's left-hand chords at 3:10 and 3:51 last two bass notes long, which implies 4/4 time. Yet the accents on every third or sixth beat immediately after 1:49 and 5:07 suggest 6/8. In order to ensure rhythmic diversity—a quality toward which Abram strives (Wilmer 119)—each performer cannot just follow his whims but must recognize an overriding meter to contrast in the first place. In that way, these differing rhythms stem from a holistic view of the music.

Other referential aspects make "Ritob" more interesting overall. With the piano's glistening, high-note lines at 2:48 and 7:30 and the horns' fluidity at 3:03 and 4:52, smoothness characterizes the melody. Conversely, the alto's staccato notes at 4:38, the soprano's series of short lines at 2:35, the horns' zipping thematic phrases, and the quick piano chords from start to finish illustrate the sonic

spaces that often pad the band's performances (Wilmer 119). With the drum's evocative rumblings, the soprano sax's rush of notes at 2:23 and 2:46, and the screeching alto at 4:30 and 5:12, the musicians reveal their concerns with texture (113), a less melodic stacking of sounds than harmony. The question of timbre arises as the piece's swift, jagged horn lines hint at a jaunty conversation. This mood affirms the Chicago musicians' injection of humor into their compositions (119). The piece's "dialogic" approach (Radano 43) applies more culturally to its embedding in the world of "black urban pop," rock and roll (45), and African music (Prof. Michael Veal, April 16, 2002). All these genres use repeating rhythmic patterns. Rock in particular exalts communality and "cultural resistance" (Radano 41)—facets that Abrams's band displays through its synergy and irreverence. The leader's emphasis on commitment to the band's ventures and musicians' self-respect (Wilmer 116) enhances the significance of groups along with that of individuals. Additionally, disappointment with the promised "Negro Progress" in Chicago (Radano 33-4), when coupled with the verve of black South Side culture (32), may have intensified the personal inflections of pieces like "Ritob." The church (35), black militancy (57), and colonial independence in Africa (36) also link ideological fidelity with defiance of an unsavory status quo, a combination that Abrams's band projects through its musical mission and breeziness. Whether it fuses contrasts or makes sociopolitical and musical allusions, the band merges its disparate elements into a confident assertion about the state of the world and the possibilities of sound.

In "Ritob," Abrams's band creates a sonic palette whose strength lies in the blend of its colors as well as in their variety. The piece's refreshing lightness does not hide its layers so much as ease their transmission to the public. The AACM stands for not only a collection of musicians with equally distinctive roles but also an amalgam of concepts and values that connect generations, arouse communities, and broadcast the voices of the silenced.