

George Russell and New York, N.Y.

Written by Steven Cerra, © -copyright protected; all rights reserved.

posted on Jazz Profiles Blogspot

(<http://jazzprofiles.blogspot.com/2013/04/george-russell-and-new-york-new-york.html>)

Focused Profiles on Jazz and its Makers while also Featuring the Work of Guest Writers and Critics on the Subject of Jazz

*“Think you can lick it? Get to the wicket.
Buy you a ticket. Go!*

*Go by bus, by plane, by car, by train...
New York, N.Y..*

*What they call a somethin' else town.
A city of more than eight million people,
with a million people passin'
through every day. Some come just to visit
and some come to say. If you scuffle hard enough
and you ain't no dunce, you can always get by
in New York City. I heard somebody say once. Yeah...if you can't make it
in New York City, man, you can't make
it nowhere.*

*So where do people come to scuffle? Right here.
Think you can lick it? Get to the wicket. Buy you a ticket. Go! New York, N.Y., a city so
nice. They had to name it twice. It may seem like a cold town,
but man. let me tell you, it's a soul town.*

*It ain't a bit hard to find someone who's lonesome or forlorn here...
But it's like findin' a needle in a haystack to find somebody who was born here.*

*New York, N.Y., a somethin' else town, all right!
East side, west side, uptown, downtown.*

There's one thing all New York City has and that's Jazz.

*A while ago, there were cats readin' while cats played jazz behind them, but wasn't nothin'
happening, so the musicians cooked right on like they didn't even mind them.*

*I wrote the shortest jazz poem ever heard.
Nothin' about lovin' and kissin'...
One word...LISTEN!!”*

- Jon Hendricks, vocalese introduction to Manhattan

With Milt Hinton's string bass and Charlie Persip playing brushes on snare drum in the background, Jon speaks these poem-like lyrics on Manhattan, the opening track of George Russell's album New York, New York [Decca DL 9116].

Each time I listen to Jon's vocalese, the orchestral arrangement and the individual solos on this track, I am enthralled anew by the way all of these "moving parts" fit together so smoothly.

It is a magnificent piece of Jazz scoring.

"Manhattan" runs over 10 minutes and George uses the space well allowing for generous solos by trombonists Bob Brookmeyer and Frank Rehak, pianist Bill Evans, tenor saxophonist John Coltrane and trumpeter Art Farmer to be interspersed throughout his consistently swinging arrangement.

George's chart is constructed in segments which serve to launch each soloist. The band then drops out leaving the soloist accompanied only by the Milt Hinton's walking bass line for a chorus. The drummer joins in playing double time for the second chorus with the band returning to provide a background until the next solo is propelled forward.

Recorded in 1958, the arrangements on New York, New York were the first extensive showcasing of George's system of voicing instruments which he termed - "The Lydian Concept of Tonal Organization."

* * *

In his Visions of Jazz: The First Century, Gary Giddins provides the following background to, and description of, George Russell's Lydian Concept of Tonal Organization:

"Cycles and cycles within cycles are the meat of the matter. One could argue that jazz is a music based on cyclical motion, a strictly defined chorus, usually twelve or thirty-two measures, repeated until a musical statement has been made. Cycles are fomented by radical evolutionary movements, each of which contains the seeds of its own destruction. One example: during the ferment of jazz activity in the '40s, when modern jazz, or bebop, was born, the intoxicating harmonic ingenuity of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie blinded sympathetic fans from recognizing the anti-harmonic implications of George Russell's modal composition, Cubana Be/Cubana Bop written for Gillespie's orchestra. In a day when Thelonious Monk's clattering minor seconds and rhythmic displacements were dismissed as the fumbblings of a charlatan, Russell's work was appreciated as something of a sui generis novelty.

Russell codified the modal approach to harmony (using scales instead of chords) in a theoretical treatise that he says was inspired by a casual remark the eighteen-year-old Miles Davis made to him in 1944: "Miles said that he wanted to learn all the changes and I reasoned that he might try to find the closest scale for every chord." His concept, published as the Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization, is based on a perfect cycle of fifths generated by the Lydian mode, which sounds more complicated than it is. Russell was exploring relationships between chords and scales that would foster a fresh approach to harmony. Davis popularized those liberating ideas in recordings like Kind of Blue, undermining

the entire harmonic foundation of bop that had inspired him and Russell in the first place.”
[pp.5-6]

Richard Cook and Brian Morton explain Russell’s achievement this way in their Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD, 6th Ed.:

However important Russell's theories are, they are even now not securely understood. Sometimes falsely identified with the original Greek Lydian mode, The Lydian Chromatic Concept is not the same at all. In diatonic terms, it represents the progression F to F on the piano's white keys; it also confronts the diabolic tritone, the diabolus in musica, which had haunted Western composers from Bach to Beethoven.

Russell's conception assimilated modal writing to the extreme chromaticism of modern music. By converting chords into scales and overlaying one scale on another, it allowed improvisers to work in the hard-to-define area between non-tonality and polytonality. Like all great theoreticians, Russell worked analytically rather than synthetically, basing his ideas on how jazz actually was, not on how it could be made to conform with traditional principles of Western harmony. Working from within jazz's often tacit organizational principles, Russell's fundamental concern was the relationship between formal scoring and improvisation, giving the first the freedom of the second and, freeing the second from being literally esoteric, 'outside' some supposed norm. [pp 1282-83].

* * *

In his Jazz Retrospect, Max Harrison offers the following insights into Russell’s accomplishment:

Simply, he examined the entire harmonic resources of Western music, saw and systematized an entirely fresh set of relationships that had always been present within the traditional framework and which, as it were, only awaited discovery. Far from being a constricting set of regulations, Russell's precepts made available resources whose full possibilities, in the composer John Benson Brooks's words, 'may take as much as a century to work out'. And according to Art Farmer, trumpeter on many of these discs, the Lydian Concept 'opens the doors to countless means of melodic expression.

It also dispels many of the don'ts and can'ts that, to various degrees, have been imposed on the improviser through the study of traditional harmony.' Of course, it is necessary to remember Schoenberg's words, 'ideas can only be honored by one who has some of his own.' [emphasis, mine]

That is to say Russell offers no magic formula to transform mediocre soloists into good ones. But the gifted improviser is not the only one to benefit. These investigations led Russell to produce music that has strong individuality yet which is very subtle, that teems with invention but is absolutely consistent stylistically. And in the sheer variety of his thematic materials he surpasses all Jazz composers except Duke Ellington. [pp. 58-59; paragraphing modified].

In *Jazz Matters: Reflections on the Music and Some Of Its Makers*, Doug Ramsey offers this essay on George's work which he originally prepared in 1966 to air on *Jazz Review*, a program that Doug wrote, produced and broadcast on WDSU-FM and WDSU-AM in New Orleans:

“Over the next few programs we're going to consider the recorded work of George Russell, not only because his music is interesting, absorbing, listening, but because of his influence on the development of jazz in the sixties. Russell's impact, I believe, is more profound and widespread than is generally recognized, even by many musicians. It may well develop that he is having as great an effect on the course of jazz as any composer or arranger at work today, as important as that of such imitated innovators as John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman.

Russell believes that jazz must develop on its own terms, from within. He believes that to borrow the concepts of classical music and force jazz into the mold of the classical tradition results in something perhaps interesting, perhaps Third Stream music, but not jazz. Faced with this conviction that jazz musicians must look to jazz for their means of growth, Russell set about creating a framework within which to work. In 1953 he completed his *Lydian Concept of Tonal Organization*. The system is built on what he calls pan-tonality, bypassing the atonal ground covered by modern classical composers and making great use of chromaticism. Russell explains that pan-tonality allows the writer and the improviser to retain the scale-based nature of the folk music in which jazz has its roots, yet have the freedom of being in a number of tonalities at once. Hence, pan-tonality.

That's a brief and far from complete summary of Russell's theory, on which he worked for ten years. It's all in his book, *The Lydian Chromatic Concept for Jazz Improvisation*, published by Concept Publishing Company.

Freedom within restrictions, however broad.

Discipline.

* * *

Improvising Russell's way demands great technical skill. Listening to his recordings, one is struck by the virtuoso nature of the players. All that talk about concepts and theories and pan-tonality and chromaticism may have led you to expect something dry and formidable. On the contrary, there's a sense of fun and airiness in the music. The humor is subtle and, I should add, more evident after several hearings. ...

In 1959 there was a good deal of thought being given to the directions jazz would take and strong indications that one important departure would be along the path of freedom.

Russell was an invaluable guide along that path, providing the player a means of achieving greater freedom of expression without falling into licentiousness. The means was his *Lydian Concept of Tonal Organization*. It gave the improviser a theoretical base from which to play with fewer harmonic restrictions than in be bop. Even musicians who have never studied the theory have been influenced by it because it is a spirit that has moved through the music. In the close community of jazz musicians, new ideas spread rapidly. So, in a tangible sense, this was one of the first recordings of the so-called New Thing. It is a good demonstration of Russell's theory. But, theories aside, it is delightful music.” [pp. 266-267 and 269].

Particularly germane to New York, New York is the following commentary by Burt Korall which served as the liner notes to the original LP:

“New York, N. Y.... the most fascinating address.

New York, N. Y. is a world unto itself, a world of tumult and silence, love and hate, towering buildings and tenements, big people and small... and the gradations between.

New York, N. Y. is a look up and live town, or a sigh, cry, die town; the big juicy apple that tempts and magnetizes, nourishes or consumes, but is never forgotten.

New York, N. Y. has a face of concrete that menaces those who have not found the key to her heart. And she is a woman—fickle, sometimes cold, warm to those who know her ways. It takes time to know and love her. She is not easy.

New York, N. Y. is always on the move; motion is native to her torso, and whether good or bad, profitable or not, it's there, day and night, like the beat of a tom-tom or a heart — faster by day, slower by night; pushing, easing time along.

New York, N. Y. has many moods. She broods and all her glitter is but a well spring for sadness. She is just as frequently happy, even frivolous, fresh and new, depending on your view.

New York, N. Y. is a blues/dues town. She can take and forsake ... and without conscience. In no time, her beauty can become unforgivable to those to whom she yields nothing.

New York, N. Y., a compound of all those that live within her arms, is liberal and bigoted, probing and disinterested. She is affected, phony, and unstintingly real. All these things and more ...

She is rich and poor—Sutton Place and Harlem, Madison Avenue and "The Village", Park Avenue and "Hell's Kitchen"; Brooklyn, the Bronx and Staten Island, too; all the boroughs and sections, streets and avenues, in sum, are New York, N. Y. ... and contribute to her heart, body and soul.

In essence, New York, N. Y. is people; each one important, each one in need of the other.

* * *

New York, N. Y. is filled with the sounds of jazz.

Jazz musicians come pouring into New York, N. Y. 'Let's go to the Apple, man, that's where it is,' they cry, not realizing that the taste of it is reserved for only the equipped. Many return to their home hamlets disappointed; some, more than a little changed for being here.

New York, N. Y. is a cruel mistress. Bring her something new and she is torn between a desire to understand and an inclination to resist change. 'Prove it!' she tauntingly says to those who come to her bearing the future in their hands.

'New York, N. Y. is a challenge,' claims composer-arranger George Russell. 'Youth comes here to accept the challenge.'

'I've had a running love affair with this town since I first saw her as a child,' he continued. "I'd rather sink here than swim anywhere else."

Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, on June 23, 1923, Russell's first manifestations of interest in music occurred in early adolescence. At 15, he was earning his living as a jazz drummer in a Cincinnati night club. At 17, on scholarship at Wilberforce University in Ohio, he was studying music and playing with The Collegians, the college dance/jazz band.

Shortly after his twentieth birthday, Russell left school, joined the Benny Carter band on drums, and came to New York.

'I got to hear Max Roach. He was too much,' Russell explained. 'Max had it all on drums. I decided that writing was my field.'

Returning home to Cincinnati determined to learn all he could about writing, Russell culled as much as he could from jazz writers around town. Proceeding by the 'trial and error' method, the budding writer used the house band at the old Cotton Club as a laboratory for his work. The band would play his arrangements and compositions, allowing him to err and correct, to progress.

Benny Carter was the first person of significance to take an interest in Russell's writing. In the course of one of his tours through Ohio, Carter passed through Cincinnati, heard one of Russell's compositions, liked it. and made a request for an arrangement of it for his band.

'It took me five months and a trip to Chicago,' Russell recalled in an interview with Down Beat Magazine, 'but I finally caught the band at a downtown theatre, and they rehearsed it. Benny was very happy with it, and on top of that he paid me for it.'

On recommendation, the young writer then wrote for Earl Hines and shows at the Rhumboogie and El Grotto clubs in Chicago.

In 1945, the height of the modern revolution in jazz, everybody was talking about Parker, Gillespie, Powell and Monk etc. and 52nd Street, the center of it all. All who could came to New York to see and hear. Some came to learn.

George Russell arrived in New York in 1945. He took a room on 48th Street and Sixth Avenue, four blocks from "Swing Street." He met and became closely associated with many of the key figures creating the upheaval. Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker and Max Roach, among others, were frequent visitors at his lodgings.

'I began writing for Dizzy's big band,' Russell reports. 'I was learning. Just being on the scene and listening helped so much.'

Unexpectedly, illness interfered as the composer-arranger was getting his start with Dizzy's band, and he entered the hospital. Unfortunate as illnesses are, this one cannot be considered in a completely negative fashion. During the 16 months spent in a hospital in the Bronx, Russell evaluated his position, found himself in need of further education, and began an intensive research into tonality. This resulted in the coming into existence of elements of his Lydian Concept of Tonal Organization, a thesis that would eventually free him, lend the facility for full expression.

Upon discharge from the hospital, Russell accepted an invitation to live at the home of Max Roach. He continued his investigations, staying on nearly a year.

'While working on my theory,' says Russell, 'I lived all 'round town—East Side, West Side. John Lewis and I roomed together for a time. He helped me to truly appreciate traditional classical music.'

Until the Lydian thesis was completed, Russell composed infrequently, and for short periods, at that. He would run into problems while working within his concept that had to be ironed out before he could proceed further. As progression was made toward his ultimate goal of freedom within his own set of disciplines, he became more and more the master of his materials.

Today, Russell is not bothered by composing problems for long; he is able to make any needed adjustments within his concept. Through extended study of music and himself, the composer has found his way into the open.

'My Lydian concept has changed my whole mode of life,' Russell explained. "It took years, but I now feel that I function logically. At last, I'm organized and ready. I realize that music, like life, must have an inner logic. George Endrey, a scientist friend of mine, taught me how mathematics relates to life and music. Without him, I would never have understood logic for what it is.'

'There are many others to whom I owe a great deal. The Gil Evans composer conclave of 1949-50, composed of Gil, Gerry Mulligan, John Lewis, John Carisi and myself, opened my eyes to many things. Gil and John are special friends and have exercised more than their share of influence upon me. Composers Alban Berg, Bela Bartok, Igor Stravinsky and Stefan Wolpe are just a few of the others who have helped shape my thinking.'

Reviewing his output before completion of the Lydian Concept of Tonal Organization in 1953, we realize that the composer had a few fruitful periods. The results are memorable.

In 1947, he penned Cubano Be and Cubano Bop, a two part composition that successfully combined modern jazz and Afro-Cuban rhythms, for the Dizzy Gillespie orchestra. Bird In Igor's Yard came off his writing desk in 1949. It was performed and recorded by the Buddy DeFranco big band. Ezzthetic and Odjenar were created for Lee Konitz around the same time.

'I was hardly prolific,' commented the composer. 'Four compositions and a few arrangements for dance bands — Shaw, Thornhill and Charlie Ventura — is not much to show for six years, but I felt that I had to finish my thesis before I could say what I wanted to.'

Keeping body and soul together by working a variety of jobs in New York, N. Y., an ever evolving knowledge of self and the importance of his work, coated his senses and dulled extraneous pressures and annoyances.

In 1955, after two years of experimental writing employing all the facilities of his concept, Russell felt ready to make a statement. Jack Lewis, a jazz adventurer, provided the recording circumstance. Reception for the composer's first statement of policy was tremendously encouraging. Ground, at last, had been broken.

A commission to write an original composition for the Brandeis Music Festival, which garnered kudos for its author, followed. Offers to score albums for important jazz artists began to trickle in. An invitation to teach at the School of Jazz in Lenox, Massachusetts was extended and accepted.

George Russell's presence on the American musical scene is being felt; the avenues for his talent, only beginning to present themselves.

The extended musical statement herein is *New York, N. Y.* as George Russell sees, hears and feels it. In a sense, it is an expression of this composer's belief in the city, the city he feels is symbolic of life and culture.

The city is drawn in terms native to Russell's basic orientation. He is a jazz writer. His concept was born of jazz and its needs.

It was his intention to showcase many of the important jazz soloists on the New York scene in this program. He did so, pulling no punches in his writing, providing an intelligent, functional, dramatic frame for the soloists. The framework is not arbitrary, but a thematically controlled entity from beginning to end.

New York, N. Y. is important in that a statement of depth and scope is made. Never self conscious, though often quite impressionistic, it is challenging to the senses, yet has the feeling of emotional completeness.

A community project notable for the love and enthusiasm of all the participants, New York, N. Y. moves from old jazz territories to new and back again, breaking the barriers of tonality, presenting the jazz orchestra in a truly modern, linear sense, yet retains the earthy taste basic to the idiom.

An American composer, only beginning to tap his resources, is revealed."