

Bob Gluck's new compact disc *Electric Brew* features an eclectic mix of influences. The backbone of the disc is formed by four original compositions that were inspired by and use motifs from famous jazz compositions by Miles Davis and his collaborators, namely Joe Zawinul and Dave Holland. In addition, Gluck offers up two additional interludes that he describes as "collages" formed by editing together several live performances of his original compositions. Gluck mixes these jazz references with his eShofar, a twenty-first century take on an instrument typically used in Jewish religious ceremonies, and Stravinsky's infamous *Rite of Spring*. Unfortunately, these varied influences often yield muddled results.

Prior to hearing this disc, I had never heard any of Gluck's music although I knew of him by reputation. He has been director of the University of Albany's Electronic Music Studios since 2001 and currently serves as an Associate Director of the Electronic Music Foundation. He has studied jazz piano and holds degrees from a rabbinical college, aspects of his background that help contextualize the influences cited on this disc. These pieces helped me understand the concept of the disc, but I still felt like I was missing something after my first listen.

After reading about the musical works referenced in the liner notes, I knew I needed to get better acquainted with these recordings. It had been a long time since I had heard *Bitches Brew*, the album to which Gluck's disc title is an homage. I thought it was important to grab this jazz-rock masterpiece from the library and dive into the sound world that inspired Gluck's compositions. In addition to the titular track, Gluck also cites Zawinul's *Pharaoh's Dance* as source material that he has reworked in respective compositions. I also listened to Davis' *Is There Still Time?*, a similarly referenced work by Gluck, but could not get my hands on *Q&A*, a piece by Dave Holland, who also played bass on *Bitches Brew*. After listening to all these and a cursory refresher for *Rite of Spring*, I felt more prepared to dive back into Gluck's disc.

After all this extra listening, a logical question followed: Is it fair to compare Bob Gluck's work with that of Miles Davis and friends? My answer was yes. Gluck has invited this

based on where he drew his influence from and his admission to this source in the liner notes of the disc. In my opinion, you cannot write music that is inspired by another artist, draw motifs from his work and then absolve yourself from comparisons. The materials in Gluck are not obstructed and will be clearly evident to anyone familiar with the original recordings. I have no ideological qualms with him using these materials; sampling musical materials is par for the course in our post-modern world and I will concede that Gluck has done something unique and original with them. However, Gluck's compositions do not rise to the level of those works by his muses.

What amazes me about Gluck's disc is that out of references to such highly energetic, rhythmically impassioned and unmistakably exciting music, he produces mostly bland offerings. The original pieces are all about rhythms and grooves that propel the listener forward with such undeniable force that you cannot sit still. I want to move when Miles plays a solo and groove with the bass ostinato. I can't help but be energized by the intensity of the bass clarinet on *Bitches Brew* or the electric pianos on *Pharaoh's Dance*. All this is lost in Gluck's attempt to take motifs and ideas and pin them down under his microscope for reflection and study.

Admittedly, "energy" and "intensity" are vague musical traits that beg for more specificity. The biggest contributor is likely the percussion on *Bitches Brew*, which featured two drummers on sets plus additional players on congas and shaker. Together these formed a consistent, layered pulse. Gluck only gives us percussion on *Pharaoh's Spring*, and here it is a MIDI conga that is a poor facsimile of Don Alias. The keyboards on the originals feature a funky Fender Rhodes, so when these motifs are transferred to a concert grand by Gluck they seem to lose some of their edge. Gluck's eShofar with its chaotic processing system is no match for Davis' trumpet and his carefully placed delay effects. There is also something to be said for the recording quality on the originals where nearly everything was close miced, giving the sounds a stronger presence in the mix. When compared to Gluck's choice of concert-style recordings where the listener is kept at a distance and one could easily make the case for this being the biggest difference between the two discs.

I felt the strongest track on the compact disc was the last one, entitled *Is there still time?*. It's an odd realization that this was the only composition in which Gluck dispensed with all the electronics and treats the listener to some straight-up jazz piano playing. This provided the track with some clarity and identity and it was all the better for it. After hearing it, I wondered if this track would have been a better choice to start off the disc so that the listener could proceed through the rest with a better sense of how Gluck's piano stylings were extended by his electronics.

One piece that is not part of this jazz-rock milieu is *In the Bushes* for computer-assisted piano. It uses samples of George W. Bush to form what Gluck calls "a political commentary on the war in Iraq", very much a sign of the times. I am usually resistant to pieces that try to be overtly political, whether they are right or left in their ideology. Artists in centuries past had to veil their political commentary or risk being persecuted by their governments. Today there is no need to finesse and the freedom to be forthright coupled with the sampling from well-known media sources can lead to a situation where the artwork loses its relevance over time. The materials have meaning to us now because we have heard them in their original contexts. I have now heard several of these "Bush pieces" at various concerts and conferences. How will it all be perceived in 20 or 50 years when the speeches are a distant memory? I don't know for sure, but I'm guessing their impact will fade.

There are two additional compositions on the disc not composed by Gluck. *Akeda*, composed by Ofer Ben-Amots, is a simple, yet evocative setting of a liturgical lamentation for the departed. Here again, Gluck's piano playing is given the chance to shine without electronic intervention and listeners should be appreciative. Together with *Is there still time?*, we get a clear sense of the range of abilities Gluck possesses as a pianist. Shlomo Dubnov's *127 Digits* is described as "a duet for computer-assisted piano". Although I have worked with Disklavier and understand how one could go about the process of ornamenting the work of a pianist, I found myself a little lost trying to follow the duet in this piece. Perhaps it is the fact that the audio recording flattens the

two into a uniform sound field and any sense of the duet is blurred. This piece likely works much better in live performance, preferably up close so that you can see what the performer and computer are each adding to the music.

It should be clear to any listener that the jazz-rock elements dominate this disc, easily demanding more attention than these other compositions. Gluck obviously has a personal fondness for the material from this period in Miles Davis' career and has used these compositions to explore it for his own amusement. While the success of the results is debatable, a definite positive is that one has to listen first to *Bitches Brew* in order to have any chance of appreciating *Electric Brew*. And directing new ears to this masterpiece is perhaps the disc's most redeeming quality.