



# ROVA Saxophone Diplomacy

# Saxophone Diplomacy

## Part One

The Rova Saxophone Quartet earned a reputation as innovative communicators before journeying to the “Communist East.” Rova already had distinguished itself with uplifting strength of sound, humanized application of extended techniques, and challenging metamorphic arrangements of breathtaking range in the 1980’s phenomenon of like-instrument ensembles. This California group undertook a mission transcending art on *Saxophone Diplomacy*. Larry Ochs, when I interviewed him over the phone, saw the 1983 tour addressing, above all, the hostile period after Ronald Reagan’s “evil empire” speech: Rova felt it important “to become diplomats with a message not being conveyed by the U.S. government.” The group also sought exchange with resident musicians, an element on which Ochs thought Rova’s visit had major impact, where past American “jazz” (not “new music”) emis-

saries typically squeezed in lone festival appearances then split, Rova toured Russia, Latvia, and Romania straight up; and performed with the local artists. (“Detente or Detroit”, a 25-minute uneven collaboration with Vladimir Tarasov and Ivers Galeniaks, is not reissued here.) That *Saxophone Diplomacy* introduced Eastern Europeans to four unbelligerent creative Americans who were not Ronald Reagan is obvious. I detect another, deeper meaning as outre as the ensemble’s radical esthetic: the six live performances, in themselves, juxtaposed the music of the quartet against prevailing politics of place. I hear the performances – their unfolding, note by note, phrase by phrase – as essays on politics in vivo (Ochs’s “messages”?) being expressed on Rova’s own formal terms. Indivisibly com-



posed and improvised, the performances continually, portentously blur familiar distinctions: melody/noise, sound/silence; theme/variations; soloist/ensemble; individual (personal) expression/collective (group) expression; discipline (order)/freedom (spontaneity); et al. Rova's art symbolically confronts the controlled authoritarian societies where these concerts took place by contrasting permissive RSQ procedures with the limiting absolutist ideas at the core of the societies.

Lest the previous paragraph mislead, Rova sounds like no "stuffy turkey" I know. (It's Charles Ives at the barricades!) The longer arrangements, at 16 and 19 minutes, owe part of their success to a subversive sense of humor, which is frequent Trojan Horse to Rova's open methods. Fidgety soprano saxophone phrases jerk-start "Flamingo Horizons", like the title bird or a nervous creation by Paul Klee. The dizzying turns include intent reading of a circular theme with tenor counter melody; a staccato unison unleashing fluent free commentary; and a high-note episode for quartet to exit on. In the other long piece, "Paint Another Take of the Shoot-pop", whirligig lines gyrate with such force that a baritone-tenor duet (sounding like a preposterous fused horn) seems their logical "wonderland" conclusion.

Rova's versions of "The Throes" and "Sidelines", Steve Lacy pieces with comic subtexts, are my personal favorites. Evocative "Throes" imprints hilarious images: for one example, the shuffle of a weary Beckett-character vaudevillean, doddering before shorted-out footlights; introductory baritone saxophone giving way to chugging collective until a "that's all, folks" theme drops curtain. "Sidelines" fantasizes on a tight structure: one player's theme shards extended by colleagues before the (mostly improvised?) cycle is renewed. Rova's reading of this Lacy piece preserves a cohesive beauty, for all the hit-and-run thematicism.

Go talk about culture shock! Rova's lyric-free music communicated, every performance won loud approval (even the two studies in contrast unmentioned here). The symbolism of saxophones blowing what freedom sounded like struck a responsive chord in Eastern Bloc audiences. "We felt every note we played was important," said Larry Ochs, but not without "the sense there was a low ceiling and it could drop on us."

## Part Two

That was 1983: pre-glasnost, pre-perestroika. Rova Saxophone Quartet returned in 1989 to a changed Soviet Union. "It was eerie how different it was, really retro," Ochs remembered, "churches reopening... a sense of total confusion, nothing there anymore." Previously, he explained, "The System was like this great power everyone had to deal with." Once that crux – that energizing paradox in opposition to which attitudes were defined – was removed from people's lives, a vacuum set in. Ochs described how political change must have struck the average citizen: "Everything you based your life on was invalid." The new vacuum extended to Rova's 1989 concerts which the public almost treated as commercial shows. Saxophones returned to being saxophones. Gone was Rova symbolism, or public acknowledgement of politics within the music. Concertgoers "knew" in advance what they would be hearing, and held back emotionally. (A "super-enthusiastic" response in the Tartar Republic, east of Moscow, was the exception.) As for native musicians, they were away "earning hard currency," like in New York City! So, Heraclitus and the popular song were both right: Everything must change.\* Everything did, if not as we expected.

\* Always heed notational symbol for distended melismatic on the word "change."  
(Ignore at own risk.)

**Musically speaking at least, “things ain’t what they used to be” has its good side.**

**Peter Kostakis, Chicago August 2018**

Music doesn’t have to be programmatic to have political and social context. How it was made, and where, is sometimes message enough. Today we awaken to a world far different from when original notes were written in the Cold War twilight of 1990. Back then the face-off between East and West felt different, especially with respect to 1983 when this music was captured. *Saxophone Diplomacy* remains a joy in its own right. It’s also still important for playing on and to the differences between state systems with clashing ideas on free expression and rights of the individual. The shock of recent events is by many indicators altering the latter half of that equation. Things ain’t what they used to be.

It’s not unthinkable anymore that the original album cover’s phalanx of square-jawed soldiers marching in Red Square could be reenacted one day in Washington, D.C. on Pennsylvania Avenue. Back then I wouldn’t have dreamt a personal punishment loop playing itself out in the relocation camp set up for domestic “enemies of the people.” I wouldn’t have had a recurring nightmare of lying flat on my back like Gregor Samsa hit by an apple in Kafka’s *Die Verwandlung*. I wouldn’t have dreaded a musclebound fascist in “Keep America Great” t-shirt heaving a medicine ball that knocks me down over and over again. I wouldn’t have had to find my feet before the next salvo. To borrow Frank Zappa’s song title, “It Can Happen Here.” Prove me wrong. Please prove me wrong.

While the Iron Curtain is no more, its once-overhanging “low ceiling” of state repression and mind control feared by Rova’s Larry Ochs drops a little lower every day

where it was never expected. Present-day regimes of East and West arguably have become shape shifters, exchanging best and worst qualities between them. “Frenemies” is a cringeworthy word—but there it is. [ *Apply hard brake here.* ]

Rova has changed too but for the better. “Grown” is more like it. The ensemble very much remains a growing concern on its 40th anniversary with personnel all but intact. (Alto and soprano saxophonist Steve Adams replaced founding member Andrew Voigt—the “V” in Rova—in 1988.) So what’s new? Rova’s discography of some few-dozen albums shows no sign of slowing up, only of shape shifting itself thanks to the band’s urge to surprising reinventions. The recent release of *In Transverse Time*, its first quartet album since 2012, calls attention to Rova’s penchant for ambitious collaborations spanning across decades. These have ranged from saxophone quintet recordings made with Anthony Braxton and John Zorn, to leading 11+ piece large lineups using Lawrence “Butch” Morris’s conduction method, as well as refreshing John Coltrane’s music on *Electric Ascension*. Terry Riley, Fred Frith, Satoko Fujii, Henry Kaiser, and Nels Cline Singers are among other names on the long list of collaborators.

Whoever they partner with, Rova’s talent for negotiating new forms of musical “diplomacy” is a boon to everyone with ears.

**R O V A**



Live recordings from the historic 1983 tour of Russia, Latvia, and Romania signaled Rova's talent for musical diplomacy, a boon to whomever they have partnered with.

Peter Kostakis

Les enregistrements en direct de la tournée historique de 1983 en Russie, Lettonie et Roumanie ont démontré le talent de Rova pour négocier de nouvelles formes de « diplomatie » musicale – une aubaine pour tous ceux qui s'y sont associés.

Peter Kostakis, translated by Benjamin Moullits

## ROVA Saxophone Diplomacy

Jon Raskin *baritone, alto & soprano saxophone  
and clarinet*

Larry Ochs *tenor & sopranino saxophone*

Andrew Voigt *alto, soprano &  
sopranino saxophone and flutes*

Bruce Ackley *soprano saxophone & clarinet*

- |                                  |   |       |
|----------------------------------|---|-------|
| 1                                | <b>Flamingo Horizons</b><br><i>by Jon Raskin</i><br>ISRC CH 131.1901619                     | 17:25 |
| 2                                | <b>Sidelines</b><br><i>by Steve Lacy, arr. by Jon Raskin</i><br>ISRC CH 131.1901620         | 5:41  |
| 3                                | <b>Paint Another Take Of<br/>The Shootop</b><br><i>by Larry Ochs</i><br>ISRC CH 131.1901621 | 19:57 |
| 4                                | <b>Escape From Zero Village</b><br><i>by Larry Ochs</i><br>ISRC CH 131.1901622              | 5:27  |
| 5                                | <b>The Threes</b><br><i>by Steve Lacy, arr. Larry Ochs</i><br>ISRC CH 131.1901623           | 5:59  |
| 6                                | <b>Strangeness</b><br><i>by Jon Raskin</i><br>ISRC CH 131.1901624                           | 9:49  |
| Total Time DDD <sup>24</sup> Bit |   | 64:23 |

*All recordings in June 1983 by Robert Shumaker; CD-master by Peter Pfister; Cover photo by Luca Buti; Liner notes by Peter Kostakis; graphic concept by fuhrer vienna; Recordings produced by Eva Soltes & Larry Ochs; Executive Production by Bernhard „Benne“ Vischer, Christian C. Dalucas and Werner X. Uehlinger.*

*Special thanks to: Eva Soltes, Robert Shumaker and the Ideas In Motion Crew of Jim Rogers, Jim Mayer and Dimitri Devyaktin.*

*This recording is dedicated to Alexander Kan, whose 1982 invitation to perform for the Leningrad Contemporary Music Club was the first step of many that eventually led ROVA to The Soviet Union.*

**2018, 2nd edition remastered**

Printed by Gantenbein AG, CH-4144 Arlesheim

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File under: Jazz/Free Improvisation



Myra Melford Trio  
Alive In The House  
Of Saints  
Part 1 : hatOLOGY 707  
Part 2 : hatOLOGY 708

Ran Blake  
Something To Live For  
hatOLOGY 711

Anthony Braxton  
Quartet (Willisau) 1991  
Studio : hatOLOGY 2-735

Matthew Shipp  
Invisible Touch  
At Taktlos Zürich  
hatOLOGY 743

Samuel Blaser Trio  
Taktlos Zürich 2017  
hatOLOGY 747



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