

COMMITMENT and UNITED FRONT: Review of two new albums
by Asian and African-American music groups

By Fred Wei-han Houn

With the disco craze being replaced by punk, it becomes difficult for the serious listener to sift through all of the repetitions of mass media fad music to find something truly creative and new. But it is there, occasionally found on the major record labels but more often presented in the smaller, independent, non-monopoly recording companies and independently produced records. Two new releases by Commitment and United Front, the former album title is the group's name, and the latter, entitled Path With A Heart, are self-productions of uninhibited creativity and progressive political sentiment.

There are certain similarities between the two groups. Commitment, based in New York City, and United Front, working in the Bay Area, both have Black and Asian American members which contributes a unique sensibility to the music. As clearly indicated by their respective group names, both groups view their music as having a progressive political content.

"Just as artists utilize the materials available to them to make challenging, uncompromising works, so must we all be creative in the world around us to resist oppression and dehumanization..." (Path With A Heart)

"Commitment is the spirit and the tradition of music...The tradition is revolution because the tradition is love-- Sidney Bechet, Charles Parker, Billy Strayhorn, John Coltrane, Eric Dolphy, Dewey Redman--this is the tradition we encourage and hope to express." (Commitment)

Both groups also adhere to a vital and militant tradition of African-American instrumental music (a.k.a. "jazz") while expanding upon this tradition by their own individual statements. Furthermore, as Lateef, Dolphy, Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders, etc., had explored Eastern musical sources, these young musicians continue this and

page two

thereby attest to the "international character" of jazz--while arising from and based on the specific conditions of the African-American nationality, it belongs to all freedom-loving people who refuse to accept the domination and monolithic primacy of European culture.

Both groups also do not use either piano or guitar, and thus are not necessarily bound to chord changes. This enhances collective improvisation and elevates all instruments to a melodic role.

Commitment's music utilizes atonality a great deal which may be difficult to deal with for listeners acclimated to the major-minor tonalities of most music played on the radio, television, in supermarkets, etc. The musicians, Jason Huang (violin), Takeshi Zen Matsuura (drums), William Parker (bass violin), and Will Connell, Jr. (winds) feel off of each other well--an organized expression of colors and emotion. There are folkish rubato (free tempo) sections, intricate ensemble passages and fierce collective improvisation. Harmonic references are often alluded to if not at times discarded. The improvisation and melodic line becomes the *raison d'être*. The selection "Famine" is a fury of energy, a dialectical metaphor--while starvation spreads, rebellion boils.

The break loose swing sections erupt in sharp contrast with the undulating rubato segments. Both alto sax and violin vary intonation, rejecting the European tempered quality, celebrating the emotive lyricism of their instrumental voices. The struggle for individuality of expression has always been the quest of the art improviser, denying the objectification of music (music being made into artifact, homogenized, replicated *ad infinitum*). Yet his individuality is not anarchism, i.e., the disregard of tradition and conscious creation.

page three

Indeed, free form playing, or collective improvisation, is as old as the music--the dialectical relationship between the individual and collective statement--from Louis Armstrong's Hot Five to the Bebop insurrection to the New Thing of the 1960's.

While Commitment develops the free form aspect of the music, United Front stays involved with more familiar traditional forms, from marches to straight-ahead swing. The playing is complex and down to earth--crisp, punctuated melodies, walking bass, shout choruses, riffs, blues scales. Trumpeteer George Sands has a clear, crackling tone and fluent expression and versatile improvisational conception. Percussionist Carl Hoffman provides solid propulsion and an envelope of energy. Lewis Jordan has a penchant for modal, scalar lines in his sax solos. Sansei Mark Izu's muscular bass lines anchors the ensemble. Listen to his solo in "Don't Lose Your Soul." The pentatonic mode employed by United Front lends an Eastern color(hear "And So It Goes"). Izu's composition, "Forgotten Spirits" raises his Asian musical heritage, using Asian percussion instruments and Izu playing the sheng(Chinese mouth organ) in duet with trumpet and then alto sax--creating gut-wrenching harmonics. The piercing, meditative dissonance infers a classical Chinese opera.

There two Asian-African-American instrumental groups impart high aesthetic standards--from the attractive album cover photographs to the incisive linear notes to the invigorating music. A continuous flow of message, enlightenment, spiritualness. These records are a refreshing alternative to the current vogue of chop suey, East-Meets-West fusion music such as Shogun, etc.--meant to cash in on the fad with things-Japanese. Rather, United Front and Commitment proceed from high artistic principles and the desire to bring enlightenment.

page four

The Asian musical heritage remains to be developed more--Asian American musicians need to explore and present the rich pentatonic modes, the earthy timbres of traditional instruments and the pristine folk melodies of Asian cultures. This, of course, can be incorporated into existing American-originated forms, such as jazz, rhythm and blues, etc. Uncompromising artistic principle involves the raising of the culture level of the people. The musician must seek to draw from and in turn inspire his people. Instrumental music is necessarily abstract (without lyrics) but it is freer, with more possibilities for innovation, yet it must not fly off to esotericism but be truly popular--not in a crass, vulgar commodity culture sense--but essential to the needs of the people.

(To order records, please inquire with the following:

for Commitment--Flying Panda Records, 62 St. John's Place, 1st Floor, Brooklyn, NY 11217;

for Path With A Heart--RPM Records, P.O. Box 42373, San Francisco, CA 94101.)

--end--