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REISSUES

by James Hale

Globetrotting on the Fringe

The mid 1970s were suffused with the DIY spirit. In the Italian town of Friuli, drummer Andrea Centazzo caught the fever. The result was ICTUS, an imprint devoted to fulfilling the motto: "The creative label for creative music." By 1984, the gas was out of the tank. Centazzo closed the label and shifted his focus to orchestral composition and percussion work, but not before he had documented himself interacting with some of the thorniest improvisors of the era, including Derek Bailey, Alvin Curran, the nascent ROVA Saxophone Quartet and a 24-year-old John Zorn.

Thirty years after Centazzo's first recording with Steve Lacy—the lauded *Clangs*—the drummer returns to the world of improv with a new live trio recording, bundled as part of **ICTUS Records' 30th Anniversary Collection** (ICTUS 141;40:48/67:10/57:00/38:59/68:19/59:20/66:17/58:30/47:09/73:57/72:45/64:00) ★★★ ½. While the bulk of the limited-edition 12-CD set is taken from concerts in Centazzo's homeland, both early in the label's existence and in its later days, many listeners will likely hone in on the recordings made during his American tour of late 1978, and an additional trip to California the following July. Centazzo recognized that exciting new collectives were forming in New York's Lower East Side, Birmingham, Ala., and the San Francisco Bay Area, and he was anxious to collaborate with as many of these U.S. musicians as possible. *The New York Tapes*—released originally as *Environment For Sextet*—finds Centazzo in a radio studio with the prime movers on the burgeoning Downtown scene and Japanese trumpeter Toshinori Kondo. Remastering has restored much of the depth missing from the earlier releases, but some fidelity issues remain. Zorn fans looking for insights into his transformation from duck call-loving nerd to compositional genius will be disappointed, as his snaky alto work seldom stands out; but Kondo and string players Tom Cora, Polly Bradfield and Eugene Chadbourne show good group dynamics.

Travelling south to Alabama, the drummer found simpatico partners in violinist LaDonna Smith and guitarist Davey Williams. Their 1978 duets and trios are lively and interactive, with Centazzo playing more than he does in other combinations.

In San Francisco, ROVA was a year old when Centazzo joined the group for eight

pieces co-produced by Henry Kaiser. *The Bay* represents the earliest of the saxophone quartet's work currently available and captures its shifting harmonic combinations and distinctive sonic intersections. Centazzo's drums are terribly recorded, but Jon Raskin's baritone is full of bite.

Seven months later, Centazzo was back on the West Coast for two of the set's highlights, featuring clarinetist John Carter and saxophonist Vinny Golia. "Trio West #1" features some beautiful free playing by Carter, with his attractive tone and playful approach on full display as he shifts easily between pastoral passages and atonal shrieks and intervallic leaps. Carter's sense of space and tonal control are links to Centazzo's main muse, Lacy, who is caught on three of the set's discs. While the 1976 duets, which Lacy dominates, are relatively well-known from their release on LP and CD, a trio concert with bassist Kent Carter and six additional duets from 1984 are also excellent representations of where the saxophonist was in those years.

The later Lacy recordings also show how Centazzo had grown in the intervening time. A somewhat reluctant duo partner on his earliest excursions into the free music arena, by the mid 1980s he was willing to lead as much as follow. A cassette tape of an interesting band featuring Lester Bowie, Evan Parker, Tony Oxley and others from June 1977 is the nadir—the rapid movements of the soloists blurred together and the performance fairly undistinguished.

Despite the allure of mixing it up without a script, formal composition and more melodic themes began to pull Centazzo back to orchestral music, and *Doctor Faustus*, which includes seven pieces recorded over four years by the Mitteleuropa Orchestra, is an effective document of his embrace of chamber orchestration. Sparked by distinctive soloists like Enrico Rava and Albert Mangelsdorf, the orchestra provides Centazzo a good vehicle for blending elements like French horn, bass clarinet, violin and arco bass.

There are times on these recordings when one might wish for a more forceful, technically adventurous drummer. Those are the table stakes on this vanity project. The payback is a lovingly collected diary of an under-documented period in improvised music.

DB

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