

ONE DIVIDED BY FOUR EQUALS INFINITY: THE WORLD SAXOPHONE QUARTET (1992)

On a cold, early March morning, the World Saxophone Quartet gathers in New York's Clinton Studio. Their infectious theme, Hamiet Bluiett's "Hattie Wall," is about to become the soundtrack for a new Reebok commercial.

Warming up, Bluiett can't find a reed he likes. "This will be all right for today," he grumbles, more resigned than satisfied. Attaching the culprit to his baritone sax mouthpiece, he walks over to talk – about reeds – with alto player Arthur Blythe. Blythe, who is built like an NFL nose tackle, was checking out their new uniforms. "I guess you can tell which jacket's mine," he laughs. "The 'blanket.' " A photo shoot was scheduled for after the session, so alto saxophonist Oliver Lake made sure the jackets were there. In a professional, yet friendly, manner, Lake discusses the particulars of the session with the recording engineer and the commercial's producer. Meanwhile, tenor saxophonist David Murray drifts around the fringes of the activity, in and out of sight, until it's time to work.

After four effortless takes they are finished. "That was pretty painless," Blythe declares. "I think we got thirty seconds in there somewhere," Lake reflects. Bluiett smiles – the reed had held up. Murray silently packs his horn.

Donning jackets, they sit for the photos. Blythe has fun, joking raucously. Lake is eager to finish – his parking meter is expiring – so he takes his pose and remains still, always pleasant and cooperative. Bluiett, grinning and amused, plays the cagey observer. And Murray – well, he's there too, silent and grudgingly tolerant of the whole affair.

The World Saxophone Quartet is the sum of these four formidable parts. Each stirs a distinct musical flavor – Lake's bright atonality, Bluiett's full-bodied potency, Murray's searing passion, Blythe's raw-edged funk – into the group's rich sonic gumbo. But away from the WSQ, each has his own music to make and his own story to tell.

"All on One Plate": Oliver Lake

Oliver Lake got as late a start as a serious jazz player can get. He grew up around musicians – Lake has known trumpeter Lester Bowie, pianist John Hicks, and the late percussionist Philip Wilson since they all were in their early teens. He played the cymbals in a drum and bugle corps. He dug the jam sessions that the other corps members would have. A friend used to give him jazz records.

But it was not until high school that he picked up a horn – and then put it down. “I kept wanting to do it,” the fifty-year-old St. Louis native recalls, “so I did join, when I got into high school, the beginning band. I don’t think I got any further than a C scale on the alto sax. I was more into chasing girls and trying to be real cool at that time. I enrolled in college and majored in biology and in elementary education, and that lasted about a year and a half because I proceeded to flunk out. It was then that I really got kind of frightened and said, ‘Well, what am I gonna do, ’cause obviously biology isn’t it for me?’ I was looking through microscopes and not identifying anything.”

Short on options, Lake returned to music. “So then I said, ‘OK, I gotta do it.’ And I had the fear that I was starting too late. I’m nineteen years old, I only know a C scale. But I was hanging out with Lester [Bowie], and he said, ‘Well, in ten years, man, nobody’ll know when you started.’ That really stuck with me.”

Lake studied privately, and after a year he had made enough progress to enroll in Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri, as a music education major. “I just stayed in the practice room, ’cause everybody was ahead of me there. I was into five, six hours a day practicing and trying to get it together.” In two years he was playing weekend gigs with a rhythm and blues band in St. Louis.

After college, Lake returned to St. Louis, formed his own band, played in a local coffee house, and taught music in the elementary schools. He also helped found the Black Artists Group (BAG), a multidisciplinary organization of about fifty local musicians, dancers, poets, visual artists, and more. BAG provided them a much-needed outlet. “We were playing so-called ‘experimental music,’ ” Lake recalls, “or ‘avant-garde’ or whatever, and the local jazz clubs in St. Louis, which there were only a few, were only featuring ‘mainstream’ type jazz. After we formed our group, we had a building in which we could do concerts – that was a godsend.

“We were able to support ourselves, present our music, and have a chance to grow by being involved in these different elements. I mean, we had a big band going. We had poetry-music groups, and we had plays going on as well. So I would be composing for a play or playing music behind a poet or writing a piece for the band or playing in my small group – it was great.”

After three years in the public school system, Lake felt restless. “You have a yearly meeting where the new teachers come in and meet all the older teachers – maybe it was in my second or third year. This young teacher comes in, and he sees a teacher about sixty years old and

said, 'You taught me when I was in the first grade!' And then I said, 'Oh God, this is me!' So I was like, 'I gotta get out, travel, and see if I can make it playing music.' In order to do that, I had to quit teaching. And after the third year you get tenure, and I had all these things weighing on me, kids and family and everything, but I was still determined to pursue that dream of making music."

So in 1972 he pursued it all the way to Paris. "I took my whole family with me *and* my group," Lake says, shaking his head in wonder. "The whole family at that time was four kids – the youngest was three months and the oldest was about five. When we went there, we didn't have one job. We just had phone numbers that we had gotten from the Art Ensemble of Chicago, 'cause they had lived in Paris a couple of years prior to that, and that's what made me really want to go. I heard about how people really dug the music there. So we went there and we fought through it. We had some rough times, but we got to play on a lot of major festivals."

He played and taught in France for almost two years, until moving to New York in 1974. After six tough months, the resourceful Lake realized that he could apply the lessons of BAG to the competitive New York environment. "I formed a group," he explains, "I wrote the music, I rented a space to present myself, I made the posters, I printed the tickets, sold the tickets, and paid the musicians. We were producing ourselves in St. Louis, so I said, 'OK, if I want to make some kind of inroads here, I'm gonna have to do the same thing.' And that's what we did. That experience in St. Louis helped."

As more and more of New York's new musicians, like Lake, began performing in inexpensive downtown spaces – or lofts – a movement was born. "During that period, they were calling it the 'loft thing,' " Lake observes, "but it just turned out that these were the places that we could present ourselves, where we could rent the space." Fighting for their survival, the loft players helped keep creative music alive during the dismal, discofied 1970s.

Lake takes artistic nourishment from a wide range of projects, infusing each of them with his angular, atonal brilliance. "I like to do a lot of different things simultaneously, that's what really excites me about being in music today and about the music I'm involved in. I might do a gig with Jump Up [his reggae/jazz/funk band], then World Sax might happen the next week, then I might do a solo concert, and I might do something in duo or big band."

With so much going on at once, he feels free to display the many facets of his music, as well as explore new ones. For instance, in 1991

Lake recorded an album of original ballads – *Again and Again* – and revealed a seldom-heard lyrical side. “The record company, actually, suggested that I do some ballads. I don’t think of myself as a ballad player, so it was a big challenge for me to slow my fingers down,” he says with a laugh, shaking his long braids.

Lake’s latest recording with his current working band – Anthony Peterson on guitar, Santi Debriano on bass, and Pheeroan akLaff on drums – is a hip, hard swinging cornucopia titled *Virtual Reality (Total Escapism)*. He also has recorded in duo with pianist Donal Fox, plays in a collective group, Trio 3, with bassist Reggie Workman and drummer Andrew Cyrille, and has been working on some big band projects.

And as if all that were not enough, to satisfy his restless muse, Lake also writes poetry: *Put all my food on one plate! / What kinda music U play? / Good Kind!*

* * *

In December 1976 New Orleans-based saxophonist-educator Edward “Kidd” Jordan invited Lake, Murray, Bluiett, and alto saxophonist Julius Hemphill to his hometown to join him in two now-legendary concerts. “I had been in New York that summer,” he explains, “playing in the lofts with different musicians, and I had played with all of them. When I got back home, I had an idea of putting them together.

“We had five saxes,” Jordan goes on, “and at some points we would use a trumpet player along with a rhythm section, but at different spots we would do duets and trios, different kinds of things, like we had done in New York. And at certain times they would be on the stand by themselves, without me and without the rhythm section.”

The audiences were electrified. “The response totally caught us off guard,” Lake recalls. “I mean, people were screaming and hollering, jumping up in the aisles, and we were like, ‘What’s happening?’ ”

“I’ll watch children and old people a lot,” Bluiett explains. “They’re a little bit more honest. If they like you, they like you, and if they don’t, they don’t. So the old people liked the group, and the children, and we were *blowing*, we weren’t holding back. The group was *gone*, and I said, ‘*Damn*, they like this!’ ”

“There was so much positive response,” Lake adds, “that after we came back from New Orleans, we said, ‘Look, we have to keep this together. This is magic!’ We couldn’t make up our minds who we wanted in the rhythm section. Then either me or David said, ‘Well, why don’t we play with just the four of us, without a rhythm section?’ And that’s how the group started.”

Deep, Deep Melody: Hamiet Bluiett

Born in Lovejoy, Illinois, in 1940, Hamiet Bluiett has been making music, he claims, “ever since I was little, since I can remember. I started out trying to play piano. That didn’t work. Then the trumpet – that didn’t work – and eventually wound up on clarinet when I was about seven, eight, I guess.”

Bluiett took up the baritone “when I got big enough – about nineteen. When I first saw one, it fascinated me. I had never seen a horn that size. I wanted to play a saxophone, but the alto and the tenor? No. Then I saw the baritone – *that* was the saxophone I wanted. The guy that just froze me in my seat was Harry Carney [with Duke Ellington]. I had no idea from the records that his sound was that immense. You had to see it – or hear it. Harry Carney was as big as the whole band by himself. It was the most amazing thing I ever witnessed.”

Bluiett’s first gigs were with an R&B group. “I didn’t make *no* money – I worked with them for about six, seven, eight months before I made \$5, ’cause I could hardly play. It didn’t make sense – I couldn’t play and knew it. I was reading and all that kind of stuff, but I had to learn how to play blues. So going out on the stage was real embarrassing for half a year or so – sometimes it’s *still* a little embarrassing.”

In 1966, after a stint as a Navy musician, Bluiett joined the St. Louis/BAG scene. He met future WSQ colleagues Lake and Hemphill, played constantly, and also worked in pickup bands behind performers like Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye. By 1969 he decided to move on. “I talked to [saxophonist-composer] Oliver Nelson,” he recalls, “and asked him where he thought I should go. He asked did I want to play or did I want to work? I said, ‘What do you mean?’ He said, ‘Well, if you want to work a lot, get all your doubles together – flute, oboe, clarinet, all the saxophones – and go to California. If you’re just interesting in playing, then go to New York.’ I said, ‘Oh, I think I’ll just go to New York and see what happens.’”

Very little happened until Bluiett lucked into a semi-regular gig with Tito Puente. “I ran into [saxophonist] Mario Rivera on a subway one day with my horn,” he explains, “and he frantically needed a sub. He was getting all this extra work, and he needed somebody to sub with Tito while he went and made more money somewhere else. I needed a job, so I did that for a few years.”

In 1972 he was hired by bassist Charles Mingus – then fired, and hired again two years later. “The music had a very feverish pitch, man. It was ferocious. And all the music was real spiritual and very intense. Man, you might see some music when you hit the bandstand or maybe

on your way to the bandstand or in the airport on the way to a job in another city. Then when you hit the bandstand, you had to play it. And it wasn't easy music. He was a true avant-garde type of person. He was *out!*"

Bluiett and the temperamental genius finally decided they had enough of each other. "We cursed each other out, and I went my way and he went his." Out of a gig, Bluiett struggled. "That was a real, real rough time period. After Mingus I didn't work for – shit, man – a year, I guess. Things were real bad and real horrible – wasn't nothin' goin' on."

Then Bluiett became active in the downtown loft scene. "It was a wake-up call," he maintains, "cause a lot of the people were going to the so-called 'jazz festivals' and they were bored. And the clubs were just geared to doing one or two directions. So when the lofts came along, people came from all over, and all of a sudden, they were stunned by all this new music. We were writing music and playing it the same day that we were writing it, learning it overnight and going and woodshedding and sometimes rehearsing four, five, and eight hours to play one concert. The creativity level was real high – not only the music, it was the effort that was going into the music – so it was extremely exciting. The writers, the artists, everybody, they saw this activity going on and it made everybody jump. The World Saxophone Quartet was born out of that era."

Bluiett feels that he brings a unique, and much needed, melodic sense into the WSQ. "Tunes like 'Hattie Wall,' " he explains, "I wrote those tunes to have something that we could come out and play, that people could catch and go home with, as opposed to some of the other stuff that's written. I love it, but when you get through it, nobody can remember a note 'cause it's not melody-oriented. That's what makes music. Like 'Round Midnight' [*he sings the first two bars*] – you know it's a melody, right? The chords are one thing, but you gotta have some melodic entity."

Like the bass singer in a street-corner doo-wop group, Bluiett's instrument is the harmonic anchor of WSQ. In his own projects, he is trying to transcend that necessary, but limiting, function. "My idea is to revolutionize the role of the baritone saxophone," he proclaims. "It's really a melody instrument, and we haven't brought that out yet. That's what I'm in the process of doing now."

To showcase the horn's melodic character, Bluiett prefers small, unencumbered settings, like his current working group, the Gnu Trio – with bassist Tarik Shah and percussionist Okyema Asante – and his introspective 1991 CD, *If You Have to Ask, You Don't Need to Know*. "I got three different kinds of trios on there," he notes, "a trio with a bass

and drums, another with bass and African drums, and another with African drums and guitar. See, I'm trying to make this my trio year – and maybe the early part of next year. Then I think I'll start a quartet – do it one at a time."

Bluiett's baritone timbre is, like the title of one of his compositions, "Full, Deep, and Mellow," richer and more resonant than the prevailing, tenor-oriented approach favored by, for example, Gerry Mulligan. "Basically, what everybody's done is whatever the tenor players have already done, anyway. I'm saying there's another way of thinking. I got a completely different sound." Simply put, Mulligan's playing brings to mind the easy, gentle voice of Nat King Cole, where Bluiett's sound is closer to the more sonorous and resonant timbre of Billy Eckstine.

"The melody," he believes, "for me, is in the bottom – deep, deep melody. That's the best way I can say it."

* * *

The World Saxophone Quartet is a collective, a delicate balance of four independent musical personas. There is no musical director, no de facto leader. "If it's your piece," Lake points out, "you call the shots, but everybody's open to suggestions. So we just work together."

Through the group's early and middle years, Julius Hemphill emerged as the WSQ's chief composer. When he left the group in 1989, according to Murray, "it put more of an emphasis on composing by the rest of us. That's a void that we have to work harder to fill." Bluiett feels that the post-Hemphill quartet is more spontaneous. "With Julius," he observes, "we were dealing more with Julius' compositions and doing more stuff that was written. With Arthur, we read less music."

In the nonmusical areas there is a division of labor, of a sort. "Yeah, Oliver and I do most of the work," Bluiett announces dryly. "Bluiett likes to do the travel," Lake explains. "I handle some of the business from time to time. And Arthur, when we're out on the road, he may take care of the sound checks. So it is broken up in that kind of way."

And Murray? "Yeah, David has responsibilities that he handles as well." When asked what they might be, Lake chuckles, as if, after all these years, he's still not really sure. "Uh – have you interviewed David? Well, he'll tell you!"

Murray feels that his responsibilities are primarily musical. "On the bandstand, I'm like the guy who, if you run the 400-meter relay, the guy who gets out of the block first, who starts the excitement. Then somebody else says, 'All right, that's David's energy. Now I can bring mine up.' When we're all tired, they usually look to me to throw a spark – and I can't always do it – but I'm the starter."

Signature Sound: David Murray

He plays loud, yet speaks in a hoarse whisper. His music is passionate, but he affects a cool, disinterested posture when he's not playing. It's not that David Murray is rude or reticent—he can be quite accommodating and surprisingly talkative. He just seems to be talking to himself while you happen to be in the room.

The youngest member of the WSQ, Murray was born in Oakland, California, in 1955 and grew up in Berkeley. “My mother was a pianist,” he begins, slumped in his seat, looking away, “a great pianist, in the Church of God in Christ. My father played guitar.” All the Murrays played instruments, and young David soon joined the family band. “My first instrument was piano. I picked up the alto when I was about nine and then the tenor when I was eleven.”

Gospel was his family's music of choice, but Murray turned toward rhythm and blues – “Maceo [Parker], King Curtis, who's this other guy?” He sings, “*What does it take*’ – the guy who made ‘Shotgun.’ Yeah, Junior Walker. When you're growing up, if you're black, you go through that. It's like a learning process. Then you graduate to jazz, and that's what I did. Turned out to be about thirteen or fourteen when I started getting into jazz. By the time I was eighteen, I was into jazz heavy.” How heavy? “Sonny Rollins was, at one time, my idol. I remember I cut my hair in a Mohawk so I could be like Sonny Rollins. If you're gonna get a role model, get one who can really play,” he reasons.

Murray enrolled in Pomona College and turned the place upside down. “Well, they never had anybody like me in the stage band,” he says with a smile, “and the director there was kind of corny, so I got him fired, basically. They were into arm bands and straw hats.”

Trumpeter and ex-Ornette Coleman sideman Bobby Bradford replaced the square and became Murray's mentor. “Immediately I could tell that he had the most knowledge of anybody I'd ever met,” Murray says with admiration, “and it just made sense to cling to him.” Through Bradford he met other California modernists like Arthur Blythe, clarinetist John Carter, and cornetist Butch Morris, who today conducts Murray's freewheeling big band.

In 1975 the twenty-year-old Murray came to New York to research an independent study project on jazz saxophone styles. “I was interviewing Dewey Redman one time and he said, ‘Man, why don't you put down that pencil and pick up that saxophone?’ One thing led to another. The next thing I knew, I had a trio and things just went from there.”

He leaped into the loft scene, started assembling bands, and hasn't stopped. How many groups does Murray now have? “As many as it

takes,” he insists. He plays solo, in duos – often with flutist James Newton or pianist Dave Burrell – and with various trios and quartets, an octet, and a big band.

With nearly 120 albums to his credit – not including WSQ dates – Murray may be the most recorded (or as some might argue, overrecorded) musician of his generation. His 1992 releases alone include *The David Murray Big Band*, *The David Murray Special Quartet* (with pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Fred Hopkins, and drummer Elvin Jones), and two albums for producer Bob Thiele’s Red Baron label – *Black and Black* (another quartet date) and *MX*, a musical homage to Malcolm X. He also appears on three more Red Baron releases: Tyner’s *44th Street Suite* (which also features Blythe); *Softly I Swing*, an inconsequential outing behind 1950s pop singer (and Thiele’s wife) Teresa Brewer; and *Sunrise Sunset*, a lush set of deep purple ballads by something called “The Bob Thiele Collective” (Murray, pianist John Hicks, bassist Cecil McBee, drummer Andrew Cyrille). And there’s more in the can for 1993.

But the gem of Murray’s vast 1992 output is *Shakill’s Warrior*, featuring Don Pullen on the Hammond B-3, a soulful swinger in a vintage 1960s tenor-organ groove. It was an ideal project for a player with his sense of history. “Don and I began to talk about the tradition of the organ and the tenor saxophone, and of course, the first thing that I think about is Gene Ammons in regard to that. That’s the kind of music that a lot of people who are in their fifties or sixties now grew up on. That ‘pass-the-greens,’ chitlin circuit kind of organ sound, *à la* Chicago or Oakland or wherever – that’s a big influence on a lot of people’s lives.

“And I’m trying to sell records, too, I guess,” Murray adds unapologetically. “Sometimes I want to make a record that my aunts’ll listen to. I want to make something that they might snap their fingers to.” You can’t help snapping your fingers to *Shakill’s Warrior*, and its funkiness would do Gene Ammons and Brother Jack McDuff proud. But Murray and Pullen have used this well-worn format to create music that is totally fresh and new. Here’s proof that jazz’s past does have a place in its present, *if* you know what to do with it, how to build on it. It’s a lesson that Murray feels the under-thirty generation of neo-boppers needs to learn.

“In jazz today the concentration is too much on the past and not enough on the present and the future. When a player comes out of college, he’s not ready to record. He’s ready to start going to the ‘New York School of Music’ in the street or in the clubs or wherever – the process that’s always been handed down. A guy coming to New York, he’ll sound like somebody else, like a lot of us did. But then he won’t strive to find that personal sound in himself.”

Murray has. He studied the masters and absorbed what they had to offer. Every solo pays tribute to the tough tenors of the past – Hawkins and Webster, Dexter and Ammons, Paul Gonsalves and Lockjaw Davis, Rollins and Trane, Albert Ayler and Rahsaan Roland Kirk. They're present in Murray's huge sound, sensuous vibrato, and fluent altissimo, distinct influences synthesized into a highly personal and contemporary approach to the horn

"I think it's important for each musician to establish his own signature sound," Murray maintains. "A person should be able to listen to you for five seconds and say, 'Oh yeah, that's David' or 'That's Bluiett' or 'That's Arthur' or 'That's Lake.' "

* * *

The World Saxophone Quartet works together a total of three to four months out of the year. "During most of the time," Murray notes, "everybody's doing their own thing." And that can lead to scheduling conflicts.

"You can't not accept a gig," Blythe insists, "cause you need the money. So whenever I get an opportunity to work for myself I put it on the calendar, and then I put their stuff on the calendar. And if they have something coming up, and I'm working with my thing, maybe I can get a substitute. But so far I've been able to juggle it. There hasn't been that much work where it's been bumping heads too much."

"It happens sometimes," Lake admits, "but it usually works itself out. Usually we're booked pretty well in advance, so I can block off the time I'm with World Sax and fill in doing my projects. If one of us has a conflict, we have to try to get someone to change those dates. And that's why sometimes you see us with a substitute."

New York saxophone guru John Purcell has been the WSQ's most frequent sub, filling in on alto, tenor, and baritone. "I'm kind of a 'floating-chair' member," he jokes. "One of the first things that became very obvious was that I had to become my own 'rhythm machine.' I subbed for David Murray about four or five years ago. When I went to the first rehearsal, it wasn't really about reading the notes. It was about becoming rhythmically connected to the band. I was really taken 'back – I never had an experience of working with four saxophone players that were so rhythmically independent and yet connected to each other.

"Hamiet Bluiett's chair," he continues, "I think, is the most physical chair in the group, because you have to play the harmony, the melody, and the rhythm, and it basically never stops. And then you have to solo, too! Bluiett really anchors it. I used to take him for granted until I had to take his chair over. I told him it took me about a week to pump up

what he does everyday. But one of the most thrilling experiences that I've ever had in music was to cover his chair, and to try to develop my own individual sense of what the baritone should do. I think that's one of the most difficult things in subbing in the group – each member has such a strong personality.”

Julius Hemphill was a strong personality. After his less than amicable departure – which the remaining WSQ members prefer not to discuss – Hemphill's spot was filled by another strong personality, Arthur Blythe. “I think David was mostly responsible,” Lake recalls, “in terms of saying, ‘He's the most obvious choice – we gotta get Arthur.’ When he brought it up, Bluiett and I were like, ‘Sure! Of course!’ ‘cause he's a fabulous player.”

Blythe knew Murray from California, had been active in the downtown loft scene, and, on one occasion, subbed for Hemphill with the group. “We were coming out of some of the same concepts or ideas or attitudes, musically,” he points out, “so it didn't pose too much of a problem. I did have to do some readjusting, 'cause they had been playing for thirteen years together. But then, they didn't have Julius, so they had to make some adjustments for me, too. It's been working out OK.”

Blythe's first recording with the WSQ was their joyful 1991 release, *Metamorphosis*, in which a trio of African drummers augments the quartet. His combination of fire and funk ignites the group, and his straight-from-the-gut rhythmic drive cuts right to the music's core. “It's really nice to have Arthur in the band,” Murray says, “because he brings a new kind of energy.”

“Yeah,” Blythe agrees, “I bring in my own flavor, add this spice to it, change the taste up a little bit. It's still the same roast, but we put a couple of bay leaves in it.”

“Find Your Own Notes”: Arthur Blythe

Rhythm and blues is woven through the fabric of the WSQ. All four members have deep R&B roots – in fact, their last album with Hemphill was titled *Rhythm and Blues*. And Arthur Blythe may be the rhythm-and-bluesiest of them all.

Blythe was born in Los Angeles in 1940 and grew up in San Diego. He began music at the age of nine on an alto saxophone that he got for Christmas. “I had heard a lot of music all along,” he recalls, “but when I got at this age, it seemed like I heard it in another way, and I really got inspired to play. When I had a desire to play the music it was trombone that I heard first, and I told my mother I wanted a trombone. But she thought I should get a saxophone – an alto, like Johnny Hodges. She

used to have records with Louis Jordan, Earl Bostic, Tab Smith, and Johnny Hodges – she liked to hear the alto sax. I said, ‘Well, *cra-azy*, Mommy.’

“So I got the alto, and that’s been the horn ever since. My first gig was when I was thirteen, a little group with my peers. We made about thirteen cents apiece and,” he adds with a guilty laugh, “a couple of beers.”

Back then, Blythe was strictly into R&B. “I felt that jazz was separate from rhythm and blues,” he explains. “I didn’t understand the cultural connection of the music – gospel, rhythm and blues, jazz, rock and roll, spirituals. I didn’t understand how it all was part of one pattern, ’cause the jazz I was hearing out on the West Coast was very weak to me.”

At that time the West Coast jazz scene was dominated by the so-called “cool school.” And it left him cold. “I went, ‘I don’t want to play that jazz, I’d rather play rhythm and blues.’ It had more feeling. Then I found the connection after hearing Thelonious Monk one time. I said, ‘Oh, I see. Rhythm and blues and jazz are brother and sister of the same family.’ Then Trane inspired me to start pursuing it a little bit more. Charlie Parker’s jazz is gutsy and John Coltrane’s jazz is gutsy, ’cause that’s the rhythm and blues in there, I believe. That element, that thread, goes through all the music, to some degree.”

Enlightened and inspired, Blythe, then in his early twenties, moved to Los Angeles, worked with pianist Horace Tapscott for the next decade, and started working under the name, “Black Arthur.” “It was during the black awareness period in the ’60s,” Blythe recalls. “I was becoming aware of my culture and my heritage. In the environment that I was in, some black people would be ashamed to be called ‘black’ – that was like a negative. I said, ‘Fuck it. I’m black and I’m proud of it and I love myself and I know who I am. I’m not ashamed.’ So it was a statement, but it wasn’t hostile. I was just asserting my reality. But a lot of people misunderstood that.

“In the marketplace during that period of time,” he continues, “it was intimidating for black people to be talking that ‘black talk.’ It was like, ‘You don’t like white people.’ No, man, it’s nothing like that. I love myself. I’m trying to assert my identity. But it was getting to be a problem, so I just threw it on the side and went on, ’cause I didn’t want it to hinder me in pursuing my music. But I still feel the same.”

By the mid-1970s the southern California jazz scene – already limited – began to dry up, so Blythe split for New York. “Out there, it was so difficult,” he laments. “I mean, no fulfillment musically. No rewards.

No fruits at harvest time. There might not even be a harvest time. That happens – you’ve ended up with next year’s season, and you haven’t even harvested last year’s! I just got fed up and frustrated about not being able to be involved in the music to a greater extent.”

In New York he worked with drummer Chico Hamilton and arranger Gil Evans and, of course, in the lofts. Then in 1979, for reasons that are not completely clear even to him, Blythe was signed by CBS Records. He was with the label for ten years, a good, long stay. “It was a long one. I don’t know how good it was. It could have been better, but it can’t be negated, and it did give me more of an edge than I would have had.

“I seemed like I was there for a tax write-off,” he believes. “Some of it might have been prestige for the label, too. They had from Michael Jackson to Arthur Blythe – ‘the pop to the avant-garde,’ or something like that. I really didn’t consider myself avant-garde, but ‘avant-garde’ puts some mystery on the music. It makes people go, ‘Oooo, you play that weird stuff!’ I don’t think my music is weird at all.”

Actually, Blythe’s music is uncommonly accessible, a leaner, contemporary take on the Louis Jordan–Cleanhead Vinson–Earl Bostic “collard greens” school of alto saxophone. It’s a greasy, gritty approach to the horn derived, in large part, from listening to tenor players, and Blythe did plenty of that – “Coleman Hawkins, Chu Berry, and Ben Webster,” he remembers. “Tenor players were the ones that inspired me more than alto players. I liked the bigness of the sound and the way it projected, so I had the tendency to listen to them. But I was playing alto.”

Blythe’s big sound, relentlessly aggressive drive, and pungent, blues-based lines are showcased on his latest CD, *Hipmotism*, which finds him fronting a uniquely configured ensemble: alto saxophone, guitar, tuba, vibes/marimba, drums, and percussion, plus Hamiet Bluiett’s baritone. (No stranger to unusual instrumentations, during the loft days Blythe would perform with various combinations of tuba, congas, cello, trumpet, guitar, flute, and drums.) As this release makes clear, Blythe’s music, however “hip” it seems, however “out” he takes it, is never out of touch with the basics, the roots.

But at the same time, he insists, you have to cultivate those roots, make them grow and flower and bear your own kind of fruit. “It’s like the *Webster’s Dictionary*,” he analogizes. “You learn the words of the dictionary, but it is incumbent on you to be eloquent with the words. I know the words, now I gotta learn how to put it into my own voice, my own terms, my own expression.

“You look at the various elements, what other fellows have done, but then you have to find your own notes. And that’s when you get out into the real world.”

* * *

In its sixteen-year history, the World Saxophone Quartet has evolved from an assembly of four rugged individuals into a tightly knit musical collective. “The first album that we did,” Murray remarks, “*The Point of No Return*, was like *Star Wars*, you know. We were just trying to see who could blow the loudest or the longest. It was OK, but that was in the ’70s, when the idea was to play a half-hour solo.”

But while the WSQ has matured, it has not mellowed. It has not diminished its original sense of adventure or “boldness,” as Murray likes to call it. “The boldness to step away from the rhythm section. The willingness to play with African drummers. To perform with Max Roach. Our boldness,” he maintains, “is our *forte*.”

Boldness *and* commitment. “You know,” Lake muses, “from that first concert in New Orleans in ’76, there was a commitment that said, ‘We are gonna keep this together’ and that the music is the leader of the band. It may change personnel, as it has, but I don’t see this group ending.”

* * *

Since this article first appeared, the World Saxophone Quartet has undergone – and survived – further personnel changes. In 1993 Arthur Blythe left the group and was replaced briefly by James Spaulding. Later that year Eric Person took over for Spaulding. Then, in 1995 longtime supersub John Purcell joined Lake, Bluiett, and Murray as a permanent member of the WSQ, introducing a new palette of sound-colors (saxello, flute, alto flute, English horn) into the mix. And so, more than a quarter-century after the World Saxophone Quartet’s founding, its commitment and boldness endure.