

# JazzTimes

## Charlie Haden's Liberation Music Orchestra

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To the now happily relevant question *Where were you when America voted for its first black president?*, a roomful of music lovers can say they were at the Blue Note in Greenwich Village, as the politically fueled Liberation Music Orchestra was smack dab in the middle of its late set. Word came to the bandstand via pianist Allan Broadbent (subbing for the unfortunately absent pianist-arranger-mastermind Carla Bley), who passed it on to bassist-leader Charlie Haden (pictured), who ignited an ecstatic and extended roar of applause in the crowd and onstage. "I'm so happy," effused Haden. "Now I don't have to wake up depressed every day. Now it's time for 'Amazing Grace.'" Via Bley's bittersweet reworking (does any arranger do bittersweet better?), "Amazing Grace" sounded amazing in a whole new way, heard at the dawn of a hopeful, entirely new era.

Premiered in the summer of 2004 and not released on a Verve recording until 2005, the American Dream-turned-nightmare bent of the LMO project known as *Not in Our Name* was cooked up by Haden and his all-important arranger and co-conspirator Bley before the *last* election. Haden sadly recalls performing the songbook at the Village Vanguard on election night four years ago, as Bush's win deflated hopes far and wide. Cut to election night 2008, though, and the NYC club in question was a house of bliss. The band's strategically booked election-night gig, capping off a U.S. tour of the music, took the message on the campaign trail, as it were. Did the tour have any effect on the proverbial "undecided" demographic? Hard to know, but it's fair to say that the band's efforts have won some new votes of support for the band itself.

The title, of course, comes from a rallying cry of anti-war protest, and the phrase now seems antiquated—given the rapid-fire changes in the global situation in the past five years. But the music, an ambitious but also more accessible musical landscape than previous LMO projects, has settled into a kind of timelessness. Having heard this body of music four times now in various locales and countries (honestly, it sounded different in Montreal and Berlin than on American soil), the music has taken on a cohesive life of its own by now.

*Not in Our Name's* alternately twisted and soothing musical landscape runs from Haden's gentle, folkish title song—opening the album and also the set—to an expansive “America the Beautiful” medley. Here, Bley subtly alludes to the tactics of great American composer Charles Ives with her cross-stitching ingenuity, and then steers the musical ship into the world of another great American musician, Ornette Coleman, giving a multi-horned, sonorous massage-like reading of Ornette's “Skies of America.”

“This is Not America,” penned by David Bowie and Pat Metheny for the righteously indignant film *Falcon and the Snowman*, unfolds clad in low key reggae manners, but, toward the end of the chart, is subjected to Bley-ish polytonal dive bombs and subversive touches alerting us that we are definitely not in Kansas or old-school big-band land anymore. If there is a criticism to be leveled at the latest incarnation of this great American band, it's that the improvisational elements are tamer than before. The current roster of players is impressive—especially trumpeter Seneca Black, tenor player Chris Cheek, guitarist and trombonist Curtis Fowlkes, whose big-boned sound fell right in line with the traditionally trombone-favoring taste of Bley's palette as an arranger.

Broadbent, too, played some fascinating and left-leaning piano at the Blue Note, although the missing Bley factor seemed somehow disturbing to our sense of what's right: Her identity is all over this band's library. And yet in this lineup, the more outside-hugging tenor saxophonist Tony Malaby proved to be the most valuable player in terms of linking to the LMO's past emphasis on the juxtaposition of avant-garde notions with the calculatedly stirring sounds of revolutionary songs, anthems, folk tunes of the resistance and other tuneful elements brushing up against sonic dissent.

At times, this music can sound a bit too relaxed, a bit too close to an *SNL* band commercial break. This particular and unique band's deeper agenda is to find the magical balance between comforting the afflicted and also afflicting the comfortable. Such a blend has been achieved often enough over the past nearly 40 years that its integrity is intact. And on this night in this room in the Village, the music-cum-sociopolitical groove was almost overwhelming. At set's end, the band veritably floated offstage, and the crowd likewise floated out into the NYC night, wildly abuzz with a public gone understandably wild in the streets.