PORTRAIT OF A REVOLUTION:
THE MUSICAL REVOLUTION OF FREE JAZZ

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With the usual, chronic Italian delay - this time of only, so to speak, forty-seven years - and deprived of the beautiful photographs included in the original edition, *As Serious As Your Life*, by the English photographer, journalist and critic Val Wilmer, has finally been published in Italy by Shake Edizioni (which nevertheless deserves considerable credit for undertaking this project). Born in Yorkshire on 7 December 1941, Wilmer became passionate about jazz, and African American music more generally, at an early age. She soon began writing articles and reviews and interviewing a large number of musicians, establishing frank and sincere relationships with many of them and managing to draw out their distinctive traits, passions, secrets and difficulties. Equally important has been her work as a photographer, which led to many of her photographs being exhibited at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Over the years she portrayed some of the most important musicians on the jazz scene (and beyond), complementing her work as a critic and journalist with images of the highest quality. This brief introduction is simply to underline the importance of Wilmer and the serious gap that has existed in Italy over all these years - and still exists - not only because this fine book remained untranslated for so long, but also because other works of hers have yet to appear in Italian, first and foremost *Jazz People* (1970), *The Face of Black Music* (1976), and her autobiography, *Mama Said There'd Be Days Like This: My Life in the Jazz World* (1989). We wait in hope. *As Serious As Your Life* is a fundamental book, not only for jazz enthusiasts but also for a wider readership, because it investigates the scene of the 1970s on several levels, exploring aspects often neglected by other books while maintaining a narrative that is passionate and rigorous at the same time. It allows the musicians to speak in the first person while placing them within a historical and social framework of unquestionable value.

The Collective Dimension

One of the book's first fundamentally important aspects is its political vision. It certainly reflects the climate of those years, but precisely for this reason it acquires particular significance and, one might finally say, offers an overall reading of the free-jazz revolution by emphasizing its collective dimension: the difficulties of the relationship with the African American community, the struggles against racial discrimination and the music business, all intertwined with artistic and musical questions and with the relationship and connections to tradition.

> *“Harper's involvement in the concept of collective music runs deep (Billy Harper, the African American saxophonist born in Houston, Texas, in 1943 - ed.), because he is convinced that it is the only way musicians can change their situation - ‘especially Black musicians, because they're the ones who are starving.’”*

In the final part of the book, Val Wilmer devotes considerable space to the many forms of collective action and organization undertaken largely by Black musicians, not only to counter the growing marginalization of the most creative area of American jazz, but also as forms of struggle, education and collaboration. This is a dimension that is often treated only in passing in jazz narratives, almost as if the musician were a kind of monad, scarcely or not at all influenced by social and political dynamics. Wilmer instead offers a passionate account, frequently entrusted to the voices of the protagonists themselves, without concealing the difficulties and contradictions of certain forms of action. From Amiri Baraka's Black Arts group to the Jazz and People's Movement established by Rahsaan Roland Kirk; from New York's Collective Black Artists, led by bassist Reggie Workman, to Chicago's AACM; from the Black Artists Group in St. Louis to the Jazzmobile Workshop, an educational project for young students funded by the Harlem Community Council: beginning in the second half of the 1960s, collective organizations of musicians flourished. They moved beyond the individualistic aspect often inherent in the jazz musician's activity, placing artistic practice within a broader context, attentive not only to the difficulties of finding work and surviving, but also to the political and social conditions of the community to which the musicians belonged. It is impossible not to point out how contemporary this issue

remains. At the same time, these experiences provide an example of a concrete response in a world shaped by capitalist realism, entirely oriented toward competition, self-promotion and the removal of art's social character in favour of an absolutely individualistic dimension: the pursuit of one's dream at any cost, followed by self-blame in the extremely likely event of failure.

> *"In the past there was certainly a kind of bar-room camaraderie among musicians, but they tended to be reticent about work. They would not share news about their activities for fear of losing their personal contacts in the business. The tendency to 'grab the gigs' is still widespread among musicians who lack a community spirit, but things are changing toward a more collective way of thinking."*

Unfortunately, in this case Wilmer's words did not prove prophetic.

The Feminist Perspective

Another important aspect of Wilmer's book is her attention to the role of women in music, particularly in jazz. Besides emphasizing the fundamental contribution of musicians such as Alice Coltrane, Melba Liston, Mary Lou Williams, Fontella Bass and many others who have been even more undervalued and omitted from jazz histories and books, the author does not conceal the contradictions within the new-music scene: the persistent sexism - unfortunately still present today - among African American musicians (though obviously not only among them), despite their opposition to racial discrimination and their struggles against the establishment and state policies.

> *"The number of women - Black and white - who pick up an instrument and start playing is increasing, but prejudice against them persists. However great their talent may be, this discrimination is more pronounced in so-called jazz than in rock."*

The contradiction between men and women transcends identities and skin colour, bringing the experiences of white and Black women musicians together in this respect. For Black women, class and racial oppression are compounded by gender oppression, although, according to Wilmer, a series of attitudes among Black men - amounting to a kind of generalized respect for Black women - means that the position of white women musicians is slightly worse. The valuable chapter significantly entitled *You Sound Good, for a Woman!* shows the difficulties women musicians, especially in jazz, face in being genuinely considered for their art rather than for their role or sex. Despite these obstacles, they nevertheless make their way forward with strength and dedication, fighting on several levels: political and social, but also personal and familial. The pressure on Black women to be confined exclusively to the role of supporting their male musician was strong and involved even some of the most significant expressions and personalities of Black nationalism, from Stokely Carmichael to Malcolm X. In its early days, the Black Panther Party held an utterly subordinate view of women, seeing them as indispensable to male self-esteem, and only later modified its position somewhat. Wilmer's perspective is wide-ranging: she provides vivid testimonies from the partners and wives of jazz musicians, caught between claims to independence and self-determination and the role of constant support for the artistic activity of a husband or partner - not only psychologically and organizationally, but often economically as well.

Free Jazz and Its Artistic Coordinates

Equally valuable and effective is the book's more strictly musical discussion of the New Music, the term Val Wilmer often uses for free jazz.

> *"...the musician no longer had to remain confined to a single key or be forced to use a predetermined chord sequence as the basis for improvisation, nor did the musician have to adhere to a given time signature or even, in the absence of a regular pulse, observe the division into bars. The New Music, as it came to be known among musicians, opened new horizons for everyone."*

A series of chapters devoted to some of the most important jazz musicians of the 1960s and 1970s - John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, Sun Ra, Albert Ayler and Chicago's AACM - together with a special

chapter entirely devoted to rhythm and drummers, examines the innovations and experiments that characterized the free-jazz revolution. The story is told by the protagonists themselves, casting a different and often surprising light on the musical scene of those years. Cecil Taylor's atonality, Coltrane's modality and trance, Ornette Coleman's improvisation freed from restrictions, Sun Ra's infinite canvas and intergalactic journeys, Albert Ayler's Great Black Music: all are described with remarkable clarity, accompanied by countless testimonies from across the free-jazz scene and placed within the American social, political and economic context. It is difficult to find anything as accurate and at the same time as inspired and artistic as Wilmer's book, particularly its “musical” chapters. This is why the book should be recommended to anyone who intends to play, or simply listen to, jazz - or indeed any other kind of music.

Among the many ideas and suggestions arising from the book is the complexity of the relationship with the fathers of jazz: an intense confrontation in claiming a musical inheritance without necessarily repudiating one's past, one's roots and the experiences of those who first began to play this music, while at the same time maintaining the will and determination to defend one's own choices and moments of rupture, and also understanding the difficulties involved in gaining acceptance for the boldest experiments. From this point of view, the author's intention is clearly to regard the vast universe of African American music as indivisible, beyond and despite its strong stylistic differences. Also important are the testimonies of many figures from the free-jazz scene concerning their search for direct contact with the African American community, their desire to bring the New Music among the people despite the obstacles created by its demanding nature, and their conviction that this music could nevertheless resonate with and move a non-specialist audience. There is also the emphasis on rhythmic spirituality and on the central role of drums and percussion, in the search for a now tenuous link with Africa, combined with a conviction in the uniqueness of the drummer and of the drummer's role in the New Music. In short, this is a rich and vibrant book that should be read more than once in order to be fully appreciated. Leaving aside a few naive elements and some views and statements that inevitably show the effects of the long passage of time, Wilmer's vision remains closely relevant to the present and still offers ideas and reflections that are anything but commonplace. As Richard Williams writes in the introduction:

> *“It is a book that carefully documents, investigates and celebrates the New Music, sustained by a radical political consciousness that included socialism, feminism, opposition to racism and gay rights, and shaped by encounters with African American poets, playwrights and essayists such as Langston Hughes, Jayne Cortez and Amiri Baraka. It records the complex and intricate creative relationships that developed as the music underwent its rapid evolution, and the invention of platforms on which that music could present itself in the struggle against exclusion from the mainstream, while reconciling the professional and personal demands of those playing music pushed to the margins. All this is examined in a wealth of fascinating and often moving detail.”*

English translation of Alberto Popolla's article published in *Quaderni d'Altri Tempi*.