

## Elliott Sharp Aggregat Feat. Barry Altschul *Dialectrical*

CLEAN FEED 386

★★★★★

## Elliott Sharp *Port Bou*

INFREQUENT SEAMS

★★½

Elliott Sharp has been an all-around avatar of downtown New York ambition for decades, as genre-shredding guitarist, leader of multiple bands and composer vaulting among avant-jazz, postmodern blues and art-house chamber music. His “Octal” series documents his freakazoid pieces for solo electric guitar, while the recent *Sharp Monk? Sharp Monk!* album of Thelonious Monk interpretations on acoustic six-string is a thought-provoking—or maddening, depending on where you’re coming from—blend of straight and far-out. For some bands, he puts down his guitar and picks up various horns; other times, he’s conducting an orchestra or designing a soundscape. You can’t pin Sharp down, except that you can bet his music will challenge one sensibility or another.

Sharp’s Aggregat is what he calls his “jazzy”

vehicle for horns, including the leader on yowling soprano and tenor saxophones as well as B-flat and bass clarinets. He defines the band’s method as mixing “composed materials with instruction sets and free improvisation, traditional solos with rhythm section, as well as free-floating cross-talk.” *Dialectrical*, the third Aggregat release, has the advantage of free-jazz veteran Barry Altschul at the drum kit. Sounding far more youthful than his mid-’70s, he adds imaginative authenticity to the kinetic hijinks at every turn, though trumpeter Taylor Ho Bynum, trombonist Terry Greene and bassist Brad Jones are also utterly at home with Aggregat’s night-at-the-circus sound.

With the passing of so many heroes over the past couple years, Sharp dedicated “BBB” to the late David Bowie, Pierre Boulez and Paul Bley, though its wild polyphony feels more like Charles Mingus in a funhouse mirror. The off-kilter hooks of “Oh See (For Ornette Coleman)” allude to its dedicatee more directly. In “Off-Objekt,” the headlong keening of the horns can take on a Doppler effect, evoking Manhattan traffic in a vintage noir movie. For those who dig out sounds of the honking variety, *Dialectrical* is an enjoyably head-spinning ride.

*Port Bou*, an electro-acoustic chamber opera, presents Sharp as avant-garde composer-librettist. The tale he tells is of German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin’s final hour in a hotel room at the border of France and Spain in 1940, the Nazis in pursuit. The minimalist orchestration—pairing just an accordionist and a pianist with Sharp’s pre-recorded menagerie of coloristic instruments and treatments—is ideally atmospheric, with the overture setting a tone that mixes tune-laced nostalgia with claustrophobic foreboding. The vocal scenes that follow feature bass-baritone Nicholas Isherwood as Benjamin, the opera’s lone character, ruminating on philosophical questions as his end looms—the stressed vibrato in his voice not inappropriate.

Like any opera, *Port Bou* would be best both seen and heard, even if the album has an undeniable aura. Leaving nearly a minute-and-a-half of applause at the end of the live recording is an egregious touch of creator ego, though, spoiling the effect of the music’s fade into silence.

—Bradley Bambarger

**Dialectrical:** Off-Objekt; We Control The Horizontal; Ununoctium; BBB; Oh See (For Ornette Coleman); Firm Away; Tile The Plane. (46:48)

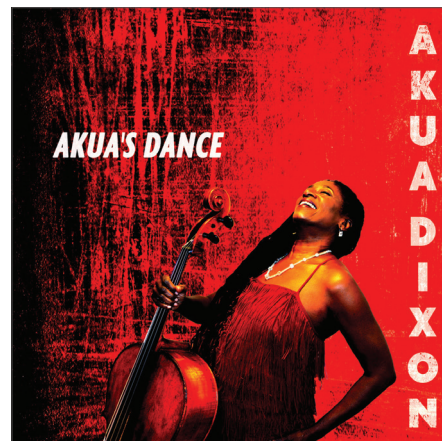
**Personnel:** Elliott Sharp, soprano and tenor saxophones, B-flat and bass clarinets; Taylor Ho Bynum, trumpet; Terry L. Greene II, trombone; Brad Jones, bass; Barry Altschul, drums, percussion.

**Ordering info:** [cleanfeed-records.com](http://cleanfeed-records.com)

**Port Bou:** Overture; A Room; Sh; Words; Ajsa; Creation; Reproduction; Translation. (49:04)

**Personnel:** Nicholas Isherwood, bass-baritone vocal; William Schimmel, accordion; Jenny Lin, piano; Elliott Sharp, bass clarinet, trombone, viola, cello, guitar, percussion, electronics.

**Ordering info:** [infrequentseams.com](http://infrequentseams.com)



## Akua Dixon *Akua's Dance*

AKUA'S MUSIC

★★★★★

Baritone violin is Akua Dixon’s instrument of choice for the bulk of *Akua’s Dance*, her third album as a leader.

The power Dixon projects may indeed owe something to her ax. But as she flows through repertoire that ranges from her own compositions to Abbey Lincoln’s “Throw It Away,” Sade’s “The Sweetest Taboo” and the spiritual “I’m Gonna Tell God All Of My Troubles,” it’s clear Dixon could make music from sheer depth experience if she were limited to a diddley-bo.

Two sets of accompanists frame and interact with Dixon’s noble tone and elegant pace. Fleet guitarist Freddie Bryant, solid bassist Kenny Davis and drummer Victor Lewis are members of her standing quartet; also abetted by Lewis, generously attentive guitarist Russell Malone and bassist Ron Carter are guest artists with whom she enjoys comfortable rapport. The shift from one group to the other is seamless, although Carter’s low-octave arco/pizzicato part on “Afrika! Afrika!” is supplied with unmatched aplomb.

Warmth and decorum suffuse much of *Akua’s Dance*, although the title track conveys an air of mystery and tango-like tension, too. Throughout the musicians proceed with due self-confidence, freely imaginative but never flinging themselves or their material to the winds.

In all combinations, the strings step lively to Victor Lewis’ nimble rhythms. Dixon is fortunate to have such partners, who naturally follow her lead.

—Howard Mandel

**Akua’s Dance:** I Dream A Dream; Dizzy’s Smile; If My Heart Could Speak To You; Orion’s Gait; Akua’s Dance; Throw It Away; Afrika! Afrika!; The Sweetest Taboo; I’m Gonna Tell God All of My Troubles; Don’t Stop. (58:59)

**Personnel:** Akua Dixon, baritone violin, cello, voice; Victor Lewis, drums; Freddie Bryant, guitar (1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10); Kenny Davis, bass (1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10); Russell Malone, guitar (3, 4, 7); Ron Carter, bass (3, 4, 7).

**Ordering info:** [akuaixon.com](http://akuaixon.com)