

THEY ALL LAUGHED WHEN I SAT DOWN AT THE PIANO...

By Michael J. Kramer



"I THINK A LOT OF THE MUSIC, IT DOESN'T HAVE ANY HUMOR. DIZZY AND MONK AND SATCHMO, THESE WERE FUNNY CATS. AND I DON'T SEE IT. I KNOW GUYS: THEY ARE FUNNY, BUT WHEN THEY GET ON STAGE, THEY'VE GOT NO HUMOR."

COOPER-MOORE NEARLY STOLE THE SHOW AT NEW YORK'S 1999 VISION FESTIVAL WITH A PERFORMANCE OF "THE HOKEY POKEY."

Transforming the goofy wedding favorite into a piano workout, he seemed to make a statement about the ways in which many avant-gardists are oblivious to the audience.

"It's about humor," says the 53-year-old New Yorker. "I think a lot of the music doesn't have any humor. Monk was a funny cat. Dizzy and Monk and Satchmo, these were funny cats. And I don't see it. I know guys: They are funny,

but when they get on stage, they've got no humor. Like you can't laugh and talk to people. So the 'Hokey Pokey' had to do with 'Lighten up, people!'

"I think a lot of us forget that even though what we do can be wild and crazy at times, it's still show business. Duke Ellington knew that. Dizzy knew that. Satchmo knew it. It's show business. And they were the greats."

Another great Cooper-Moore draws inspiration from is Jaki Byard. On *Deep in the Neighborhood of History and Influence* (Hopscotch), Cooper-Moore pays tribute to the

late pianist, who was known for his adventurous spirit and humor. But the inventive combination of classic boogie-woogie riffs and stuttering, dissonant, lines on "Blues for Jaki Byard," speak as much of his own approach. On "Blues," on the thunderously roiling "We Who Labor," and on the loping Latin-inflected "Waltz," Cooper-Moore works essential materials of jazz into forceful articulations of future directions. He does much the same when playing his handmade instruments in downtown ensembles such as drummer Susie

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Ibarra's trio. In these settings or solo, Cooper-Moore's one-string diddley-bo, tree-branch harp, and wooden flute aren't gags; the sounds he creates are far too beautiful, too elemental for that.

As part of Ibarra's trio, as a member of bassist William Parker's recently dismantled In Order to Survive, as storyteller, or choreographer, Cooper-Moore has combined humor with pain, comedy with seriousness, agony with transcendence, one artform with another. His is a deeply resonating blues for modern times.

He did not always have this perspective. When he came on the scene in the early 1970s, playing with tenor saxophonist David S. Ware and drummer Marc Edwards in the group Apogee, Cooper-Moore — then known as Gene Ashton — focused on hard, take-no-prisoners free jazz. Now, he explains, "I have a different sense of myself and of how to project my art now. I'm an older person. I still have a lot of energy, but my sensitivities have sharpened."

That's not to say Cooper-Moore can't burn with the best of them or that improvisation is no longer central to his aesthetic. "Players these days have this sense of concert-ness," he says, "where you rehearse and then you get up in concert and you play it, and it's played. That's not how the music developed and that's not how it's supposed to develop. This is creative improvised music. This is not us interpreting what's on the page."

The performance captured on *Deep in the Neighborhood* — recorded at Canada's 1999 Guelph Jazz Festival — finds Cooper-Moore casually chatting it up with the audience as he works through a highly improvised set that is part performance, part workshop, part history lesson. He explores dissonance and volume enough to make the owner of the club complain that he is destroying the piano. "Agony! Agony!" he wails on the closing track, "The Agony of These Feelings Felt," sounding like a man lying awake in bed on a sweltering city night, paralyzed with worry. The audience is silent. When Cooper-Moore explains that he's vocally imitating David S. Ware's over-the-top saxophone style, the room lets out a collective chuckle.

Giving us a tortured scream but also an ironic wink, he crafts an ancient blues that propels the listener forward on a tearful noise, part laughter, part cry, all catharsis.

— MICHAEL J. KRAMER

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