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William Parker
Mayor of Punkville/Painter's Spring
Aum Fidelity/Thirsty Ear

CURRENT RATING:



Regardless of *Mayor of Punkville* 's title, and despite the fact that he lives in New York's rough-edged East Village, William Parker is no punk. The bassist/composer is a kind of mayor, however: a benign minister overseeing his portion of the quasi-utopian community known as the "downtown" avant-garde jazz scene. The only thing is, Parker doesn't label his music avant-garde, or even jazz.

Instead, he connects his work to what he calls creative music, tone music, or cosmic music. It is a sound and artistic approach deeply rooted in blues, jazz, and gospel traditions, filtered through the adventures of 1960s and '70s free jazz. But, as his refusal of the terms "avant-garde" and "jazz" suggests, Parker aspires to create much more than one genre will allow. *Mayor of Punkville* 's high-rolling sound features his big band, the Little Huey Creative Orchestra, and the pinpoint execution of *Painter's Spring* , a small-ensemble effort with saxophonist Daniel Carter and drummer Hamid Drake, offers majestic liturgies given by a hard-grooving musical preacher who picks up on the John Coltrane, Charles Mingus, and Sun Ra spiritual/political tip.

Mayor of Punkville captures the Little Huey

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Creative Orchestra at full tilt, a potentially unwieldy big band throttling into high gear with a raging sweet-and-sour cry of despair and hope, pain and pleasure. But this monster of a band turns out to be a gentle giant weeping tears of joy. Recorded live during the group's weekly gigs at New York's Tonic club, it features high-flying solos such as Chris Jonas wailing on his soprano saxophone on "James Baldwin to the Rescue" - the only piece that features Parker's poetic lyrics sung by vocalist Aletta Hayes. *Mayor* also features stellar section work, such as the alto sax trio solos by Rob Brown, Ori Kaplan, and Charles Waters on "Oglala Eclipse." But the best songs, like "3 Steps to Noh Mountain" and the title track, are more than frameworks for individual statements: These pieces become almost programmatic journeys, with story lines brimming on the steam of Parker's steady, loping basslines and the beautiful themes he writes for each instrumental section to work with.

While *Mayor of Punkville* is a rangy affair, *Painter's Spring* is a more tightly focused affair. Hamid Drake's taut drumming pushes Parker to focus - the grooves are more concentrated. Instead of Little Huey's locomotive propulsion, the rhythms poke ahead like a string expertly threaded through a needle. As these rhythms dip with a quiet precision, Daniel Carter's fluttering saxophone, clarinet, and flute haunt the album with spirits from afar. Carter channels disembodied angels to the needle's eye; they seem to watch over the music, lending it grace, keeping it from tangling.

Short, elegant, on target, *Painter's Spring* contains a series of discrete musical miniatures. In comparison, *Mayor of Punkville* presents a gallery of massive sonic canvases. They're two artful, spirit-filled rooms in the many-chambered cathedral that is William Parker's cosmic music.

Michael J. Kramer

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