

Bruford's Beat Evolution

When evaluating the musical history of drummer Bill Bruford's various Earthworks groups, one need only check the clothing, hair styles and drum sets to know exactly where his head was at. Earthworks was launched as an outgrowth of Bruford's extraordinary debut albums, *Feels Good To Me* (1978) and *One Of A Kind* (1979). Featuring the albums' original, envelope-obliterating cast of guitarist Allan Holdsworth, vocalist Annette Peacock, keyboardist Dave Stewart and bassist Jeff Berlin, the concert CD *Rock Goes To College* (WinterFold 009; 41:35) ★★½ documents how powerful, kinetic and relevant Bruford's opening salvos as a composer remain.

As Holdsworth plays the mind-blowing, web-spinning wizard, Bruford prods the group beyond the heights of the original recordings: faster tempos, exhilarating solos and impeccable, inspired cohesion at every turn. Peacock's contributions add an avant touch of humor and a bit of the bizarre that was unique to Bruford's oeuvre, while the performances of *One Of A Kind* selections "5G" and "Sample And Hold" provided a way forward for the genre, which no one has ever furthered (or bettered). No wonder a DownBeat review of Bruford's finest put the band in the same league as Weather Report and Mahavishnu Orchestra—this jazz fusion/prog rock powerhouse sounds absolutely stupendous 28 years later. One of only two appearances by the original group, the concert was recorded by the BBC at Oxford Polytechnic on March 7, 1979.

By the time Bruford introduced the first eponymous Earthworks album in 1987, his drumming was still rock, but his players clearly possessed traditional jazz language skills. Earthworks successfully melded an instrumental jazz approach with odd-metered fusion rhythms and the melodic fragrance of world music. Earthworks also heralded Bruford's compositional prowess delivered via a sample-loaded set of eight Simmons electronic pads.

In Earthworks' first edition, Bruford typically played a rhythm from his pads that recalled a marimba melody, over which saxophonist Iain Bellamy, brass player/keyboardist Django Bates and upright bassist Tim Harries intertwined ambitious



Bill Bruford: taking the drums to school

arrangements and improvisations. Heady and daring, this Earthworks could also sound horribly synthetic, but such was the nature of early-'90s progressiveness. Bill Bruford's *Earthworks Video Anthology Vol. 2—1990s* (SummerFold 017 DVD; 115:00) ★★★ documents three concerts by the first two Earthworks groups. The Culture Club hair styles and eccentric (and individual) personalities of the first group are offset by the hardcore acoustic blowing of the second. As Bruford jettisoned the pads and realigned his approach to resemble a conductor playing a level set of one snare, four toms (spread equally left and right), parallel cymbals and bass drum, Earthworks became a hard-bop-inspired pressure cooker.

The last concert of *Vol. 2* is fuelled by tenor saxophonist Patrick Clahar, who plays with a debt to Michael Brecker as well as some inner demon that gives his tone superb bite and balls. This band came to play, and Bruford's Max Roach-ian splendor when performing traditional jazz rhythms is (sadly) only briefly touched upon. More recently, Earthworks has entirely abandoned straightahead for compositions more grounded in Bruford's fleshy 16th-note combinations. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

The three concerts of Bill Bruford's *Earthworks Video Anthology Vol. 1—2000s* (SummerFold 016; 85:00) ★★★ bring the group into the modern era. Tenor saxophonist Tim Garland adds richness and warmth to Bruford's still evolving music, while the drummer seems somewhat content to let his increasingly static beats serve more as textural background than rhythmic firestarter. Earthworks 2008 doesn't breathe in the same way as earlier incarnations, but the group still has an adventurous, free-thinking spirit.

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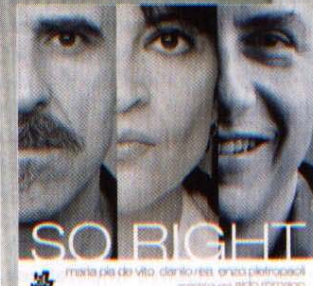
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