

FRED ANDERSON
QUINTESSENTIAL BIRTHDAY TRIO Vol. II



Fred Anderson + Tatsu Aoki + Chad Taylor

We all have fond memories of the Velvet Lounge—moments spent there, concerts heard there, conversations that began at the bar, then migrated out onto the sidewalk (or to Fitzee’s Serious Ribs and Chicken next door), and continued at the Velvet later that night, or the next weekend, or the next year. If Fred Anderson was your conversation partner, those discussions were as serious as Fitzee’s barbecue and more fulfilling, for a late-night meal might hold you through tomorrow’s breakfast, sometimes lunch, but you could chew on Fred’s words for days.

You can only contribute, and your reward is the fact that you can contribute.

Even folks who never made it to 2128 1/2 South Indiana Avenue (1982-2006) or 67 East Cermak Road (2006-2010) got to know the Velvet through Fred’s fine series of live recordings, not to mention the surreptitiously-taped bootlegs that continue to circulate on the internet. Those Velvet recordings carry the sonic signatures of cymbals reflecting off dusty brass chandeliers, saxophone notes soaking into that curious floral wallpaper, and bass lines “dialog[ing] with an audience whose quiet intensity of listening can be felt...a phenomenon of emotional transduction that transcends the known limits of digital reproduction” (George Lewis, liner notes to Fred Anderson

Quartet: Volume Two, Asian Improv 0054).

Lewis could have written the very same words about Fred Anderson Quintessential Birthday Trio: Vol. II, for I can hear the Velvet Lounge on this recording. I hear the Velvet community that welcomed me during a crucial period in my musical development, and I hear the extraordinary sounds made by three inimitable improvisers: Fred Anderson, Tatsu Aoki, and Chad Taylor. I attended nearly every concert Fred played in Chicago from 1998 to 2002, and of his many ensembles, this particular trio was my favorite (despite the distinct appeal of Fred’s “other” trio with Tatsu and Hamid Drake, and of the post-2002 groups with Harrison Bankhead). To understand what made the Anderson-Aoki-Taylor combination so special, just listen to how they play with tempo and feel on the first track, “It’s Us.” Chad sets the pace, Tatsu contributes an asymmetrical ostinato in half time, and Fred finds his own tempo-space somewhere in the middle. It is no mean feat to swing—not New York hard, but Chicago loose—for more than twenty minutes while your bandmates are maintaining different tempos. Imagine a long-distance race where the runner in the next lane starts one step ahead of you and runs the entire race at double your speed, but arrives at the finish line only when you do.

The remaining tracks are briefer but no less compelling. “Prime Moment” is all about color and texture: Tatsu’s bowed-bass tremolos and open-string drones, Fred’s characteristically deep tone and subtle vibrato, and Chad’s creative application of hand-drumming techniques to the trap set. In the third track, the group transforms a simmering slow-drag feel (just under a relaxed South Side shuffle) into a brisk, constantly-changing groove enlivened by brilliant interplay between drums and bass. The album concludes with “Wandering,” a piece that Fred composed around the time of his proprietorship of the Birdhouse performance space (1977-1978) and often revisited in the decades hence, especially during the last years of his life, when he was considering his legacy. The unaccompanied introduction played by Fred in this performance is incredibly touching to hear (for me at least), not because of any lingering romantic associations with tenor-saxophone balladry, but for the poignant notion of such a forward-thinking musician returning, if only for a few minutes, to the past. Fred understood, of course, that his legacy was not exclusively defined by his music, no matter how special this version of “Wandering” (and the album as a whole) may be. Rather, we all remember Fred Anderson because none of us—not Tatsu Aoki, Chad Taylor, not me—would be the same without what we learned from him, in music and in life. This is the paradox of the educator: Fred encouraged each of us to make our own way, but it was through his influence that we came to know ourselves.

Paul Steinbeck
St. Louis, Missouri

FRED ANDERSON QUINTESSENTIAL BIRTHDAY TRIO VOL. II

- 1.It’s Us
- 2.Prime Moment
- 3.Hoistin’
- 4.Wandering

Executive Producer Tatsu Aoki &
Francis Wong
Associate Producer Lenora Lee &
Vinay Patel

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Asian Improv Records Inc.
44 Montgomery St., Suite 2310
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