

# Oregon Comes Out of the Woods

By David Breskin

Too much prettiness gives me the gout. When subjected to large doses of refined lyricism, tonal purity, and postcard melody, my ears swell up. And when they do the pain is almost exquisite: even the slightest hint of prettiness hurts like hell. As you might imagine, I have almost no tolerance for the kind of overproduced prettiness that's shot full of preservatives (strings, horns, synthesizers, and background vocal syrup). But after a half-hour of even the most acoustic comeliness my ears close right up.

Which brings me to Oregon, the end of the trail for those seeking classically structured clarity along with improvisational elegance. They've certainly been—with the Art Ensemble of Chicago and Weather Report—one of the decade's three visionary improvising ensembles of any permanence. And if less consistent than the other two, Oregon has been equally committed to novel instrumentation, collective improvisation, rhythmic exploration, and a communal aesthetic. This last feature—the development of a musical world-view—is exemplified by the AEC's "Great Black Music—Ancient to the Future," Weather Report's "We always solo and we never solo," and Oregon's vehement fondness (check out their album covers and song titles) for the natural, the rural, the *organic*.

And here's where the gout comes in. Oregon's insistent purity becomes overbearing at times; their songs like poems stuffed with so much beautiful language that even the most elegant phrases are trivialized. When their focus becomes too soft and their rustic ruralism too romantic, their group sound—bereft of a trap set and usually led by an oboe to begin with—produces little more than weightless, almost formulaic, delicacy. This, I think, was the problem with *Out of the Woods*, Oregon's last group record and their first for Elektra. Inside the LP's fold-out sleeve was a full-color picture of the smiling yet meditative quartet sitting not just knee-deep but waist-deep in a green, green meadow by a pond by a mountain etc. And that's the way the record sounded: mostly sunny (for Oregon), luxurious, a bit tired and more than a bit boring. Their evolving attention to detail was impressive, but it seemed Oregon could not play the forest for all the lovely trees.

Their most recent record, *Roots in the Sky*, is an altogether different affair. By balancing their buoyant, almost penumbral lyricism with a well-rooted weightiness, they manage to get out of the woods. Whereas some of Oregon's records seem to fly off the turntable and out the window on the wings of soaring oboe and floating tablas, this one stays put, and in so doing ranks with *Distant Hills* (1973) and *In Concert* (1975) as their finest recorded work.

Though the lack of free improvisation is regrettable—Oregon's moody, intuitive playing in this mode has been grossly underrecorded—the album nevertheless presents a supernal collection of more heavily structured, orchestrated material. Not that solo space is disappearing; rather, the comping has come up front and some of the composition extended. Indeed, Glen Moore's venturesome, autumnal bass support and Collin Walcott's three-dimensional (space-motion-pitch) percussion are sometimes more absorbing than Paul McCandless's upper-register oboe excursions, and always more interesting than Ralph Towner's blatant pianistics. His pin-prick guitar stylings, however, continue to play off of the now expected strong/fragile paradox with great success.

As for the songs, there are nine of them, and not a polluter in the bunch. "Vessel," oared along by Walcott's lusciously recorded slow-motion tablas, features metronomic variations of sound and space and almost transparent instrumental textures; at one point Towner chords softly on piano and McCandless drones on bass clarinet to provide the foundation over which Moore solos on contrabass. "Orrington's Escape" is a 49-second angular sprint that even has a unison-riffed kick left for the finish. And "House of Wax" provides pure illusion: warped mirrors of voice-violin lines, fluttering and diving flutes, and the opium-den ambience of Walcott's slithering sitar.

*Roots in the Sky* is a dramatically sensual record, and perhaps its most sensual piece is "Sierra Leone." Rattling bells—sounding almost like a full field of crickets—underscore arcing wood-flute trills and then the distanced calls of a wistful horn and then a muscular thumb-piano (?) melody and then more and more percussion until we're in a rolling trancelike jam that's all skin and wood and metal. Not the sort of music one might expect from Oregon, but then again, certain whites do what they wanna, too. ■