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Brooklyn Blowhards Navigate the Free Jazz of Herman Melville

By [NATE CHINEN](#) JULY 19, 2016



From left, Jeff Lederer, Brian Drye, Jon Irabagon and Kirk Knuffke of Brooklyn Blowhards, at Herman Melville's grave in Woodlawn Cemetery.
Credit Gretchen Robinette for The New York Times

On Saturday afternoon Jeff Lederer could be found caterwauling with his tenor saxophone in an unlikely but meaningful setting: the grave of Herman Melville, in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. What brought Mr. Lederer there was the same confluence of interests that had created Brooklyn Blowhards, his newest band.

Performing near Melville's granite headstone, he and the band put those interests front and center, tearing through a handful of rugged old sea chanteys, like "Haul in the Bowline," and a few turbulent anthems by the 1960s free-jazz saxophonist Albert Ayler. If there's a thread that

ties all of that material together — while also roping in the great sweeping froth of “Moby-Dick” — it’s the byproduct of Mr. Lederer’s artistic temperament, which runs both frolicsome and determined.

“I definitely like putting disparate elements together,” he said in an interview the week before. “There’s no magic about it, but sometimes one thing can really inform another in ways that you didn’t see before.”

In the case of Brooklyn Blowhards, which made its self-titled debut on Mr. Lederer’s label, little (i) music, the elements come out of a tangle of associations. The album is not a formal Ayler tribute, precisely. Neither is it a full-blown conceptual analog to “Moby-Dick,” nor a jazz treatment of maritime folk songs.

Mr. Lederer is a jazz musician of far-reaching experience, an avant-garde wailer who has also logged countless hours with the salsa bandleader Jimmy Bosch, and in the fondly remembered house band at Showman’s Cafe in Harlem. For “Brooklyn Blowhards” he enlisted some of his closest peers, like the cornetist Kirk Knuffke, the trombonist Brian Drye and the percussionists Allison Miller and Matt Wilson. The accordionist Art Bailey sharpens the nautical connotation in the music, while Mr. Lederer’s wife, the jazz singer Mary LaRose, pitches in on several tracks.

This week Mr. Lederer and his crew are embarking on what they call an “avante-nautical tour,” appearing in New Bedford, Mass., on Thursday and in Nantucket, Mass., on Friday, followed by a homecoming show Saturday at the [Waterfront Museum](#), aboard a historic barge at Pier 44 in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn.

Mr. Lederer grew up near the ocean, in Santa Monica, Calif., but it’s not as if he spent much time around masts and rigging. At Oberlin College in Ohio he gravitated to religious studies, practicing his saxophone on the side. “My parents encouraged me to do something more practical than music,” he said. “So I ended up majoring in, like, Buddhism.”

The head of the Oberlin jazz department at the time, Wendell Logan, introduced Mr. Lederer to Ayler’s music as a freshman, steering him toward the 1968 Impulse! album “Love Cry.” Something about the fervency of Ayler’s tenor saxophone sound, and the rhythmic churn of his band, immediately spoke to him. He adopted Ayler as a touchstone.

Ayler, who would have turned 80 last week, is just the sort of figure to inspire such devotion, though not typically among aspiring young saxophonists. He was an incandescent hero of the post-Coltrane avant-garde, an improviser whose searing intensity could suggest a dispatch from the deep beyond or a sanctified howl from within. “It’s black music tied to black tradition, there’s no question,” Mr. Lederer said. “But at the same time his music feels really universal.”

Since Ayler’s death at 34 in 1970, ruled a suicide after his body was found in the East River, he has been lionized at least as much in punk and noise-rock circles as in any jazz orthodoxy. “A lot of people talk about how great Albert Ayler was, but I don’t really hear it in their playing,” Mr. Knuffke said. “I really hear it in Jeff’s playing. The whole concept is about this huge resonance.”

Mr. Knuffke, who plays alongside Mr. Lederer in the Matt Wilson Quartet, brought chanteys into this matrix. He had recently grown fascinated by a Smithsonian Folkways album, "[Foc'sle Songs and Shanties](#)." Recorded in 1959 by Paul Clayton and the Foc'sle Singers — a ragtag bunch of folk revivalists, including Dave Van Ronk — that album featured spirited emulations of English seafaring songs.

"I still think it is one of the best records I have ever been involved in making," Mr. Van Ronk said in "The Mayor of MacDougal Street," his 2005 memoir, "though it attracted very little attention then or since."

Mr. Lederer, taking a cue from Mr. Knuffke, rearranged the chanteys for two tenor saxophones, cornet and trombone. Some tracks, like "Haul Away Joe," feature voicings lifted straight from the vocal recording. Still, the results feel transformed, partly by way of the instrumental timbres and partly because of the heave of two percussionists, panned to either side of a stereo mix.

"These shanties have an inherent structure of call and response," Mr. Lederer said. "It's all geared around work and pulling ropes, but to me it also felt like the music is about the individual and the collective, and the inherent connections and tensions between them. I thought about that in terms of improvised music. There's a really strong parallel there."

The album's other parallel, to Melville, came just as naturally to Mr. Lederer, who said he has reread "Moby-Dick" twice just this year. But he felt the need to articulate its themes to the other musicians. "When we first started, it was like, 'Oh, we're doing a fun pirate band?'" he said.

"At one point in the session I stopped and said something like: 'Guys, you realize that the sea is terrifying. I really need to hear a little more of the terror in the music.'" He chuckled. "To me, when Melville talked about the horrors of the sea, he was talking about the dangers inherent in examining human nature. I'm imposing this vision, but it's kind of what Albert is doing in his music."

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