



Gerri Allen She Calls the Shots

By Peter Watrous

The way a bandleader sets up a context often gives a better clue to an underlying aesthetic than does her improvisations. What seems completely natural to an audience—that Betty Carter works with a highly arranged trio, that Henry Threadgill uses a cello—are all conscious choices with ramifications, an obvious enough idea that's easy to forget. Bandleading is narration: the way the story is told is as important as the story itself. And that's especially true nowadays, when the choices are endless; I don't envy the decisions a young leader has to make. What kind of 4/4 should I use, if any? How much arranging, how much blowing? Who should I use, and on what instruments—electric or acoustic? Should I be a postmodernist, a revivalist, a neoconservative, or an avant-gutbucketist? Choices, choices, choices.

Brooklyn-based Geri Allen, who's been ubiquitous in a minor way lately, on records and in clubs, gave notice recently at the Greenwich House that she knows a thing or two about ordering her context. It's clear from her albums, the trio *The Priitmakers* (Minor Music), and the wonderfully percussive solo date, *Home Grown* (Minor Music), as well as her improvisations on record with Steve Coleman, Oliver Lake, and Frank Lowe, that she's one of the few original pianists to emerge in the last few years. While most young players are busy shoveling other people's vocabularies down our throats, she sounds distinct, which at one time was the idea. That's good news; even better is that she can manipulate a large group to get her thoughts on acoustic jazz across. At the Greenwich House, each of her original pieces set up a different mood, each piece worked different rhythms, each used a distinct compositional structure, yet they all sounded homogenous, from the same pen. But even more importantly, in her catholicity of influences—ranging from r&b, to european classical and ethnic—and the subtle, abstract ways she uses them, she spoke eloquently on the possibilities available to an improviser in 1986.

For instance, the first tune opened with a near-minimalist piano introduc-

Carter role in Wynton Marsalis's group, started a dissonant bass pattern that was amplified by drummer Pheeroan ak Laff's rocked-out backbeat. The horn section—Steve Coleman, alto; Dwight Andrews, soprano; Allen's old teacher from Detroit, Marcus Belgrave, trumpet; and Gerald Savage, a good, young trombonist from Pittsburgh—played the chantlike main-theme, voiced in popish harmonies, which sounded like an imagined New Orleans tune. Coleman and Andrews took short solos, then Allen stomped out an especially melodic piano-as-percussion solo, backed by bass and drums. Coleman and ak Laff duked it out in a duet, with ak Laff moving from the brassy, wavelike swells of shimmering cymbals, to pure get-down thumping on toms and bass drum, and Coleman, horn singing, slashed his way through the sound with uncharacteristic abandon. Belgrave took a knotty solo, then the dissonant vamp wandered back in, so did the theme, and the tune ended. I heard Allen play riffs in her solos appropriate to Bernie Worrell, I heard a European sounding piano-flute-trombone trio, I heard a horn section split up to get unusual textures—Cassandra Wilson's voice doubled with bass clarinet, flugelhorn, and trombone voiced together for a melting butter sound.

And on and on through nearly two hours of completely assured arrangements with intricate moving voices; different rhythms occasionally insinuating r&b, longer forms and pungent melodies, all answering to her as a composer and arranger. But Allen's works parallel current popular music more closely than the sly use of r&b rhythms suggest. Their sophistication comes more from the structure, the variety of rhythms, the attention to texture and the layering of sounds, than from traditional harmonic and melodic movement. The way she builds her songs as suites, over varying vamps and more or less static harmonies has more in common with someone like Luther Vandross than it does with Rodgers and Hart. Less provable, the music sounded like the product of a sensibility that had grown up taking pop music as a friend and source, not as an enemy, and decided that aspects of it could be reworked into the-jazz language. That's nothing new, but since Allen grew up in the '60s and '70s, the result is music that sounds optimistic and undefensive, that accepts the simple fact that other musical worlds exist and that they have things to offer. If the show were meant to announce her arrival as more than an instrumentalist, it worked. The contexts Allen constructs shout out the pleasures and possibilities of being a musician in the modern world. Allen's is the sound of the intelligent yes, a yes on her terms, under her conditions.