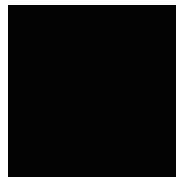


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Fred Lonberg-Holm Quartet

Bridges Freeze Before Roads
 Longbox
 2006
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In the moments before sleep, when the lights have all gone out and the world has settled in for the evening, the mind engages in an often exhausting game of composition. Without the manifold inputs of everyday life, the semi-conscious is confronted with a frighteningly vast array of new voices, new and strange personalities to the space where one feels most familiar and most comfortable. Through the bedroom door, the dark hallway stutters and flexes like an artery as the wood and plaster expand and contract. Hinges swing absently, only millimeters, enough to groan and whine their way into life. The walls seem to absorb the cast-off energy from the outside world, as wind and heat or cold conspire to rattle the shelter. The world we thought we knew, the world we see as our own is transformed into something completely alien. As we slide off into sleep, we arrange these previously unnoticed and unrelated sounds into a childish lullaby of unease and engage our own perception with new and deeper awareness.

The lullaby is natural, the improvisation of environment, only notable because it has been heard by human ears and presented in a way that stirs the emotions and challenges the way things are perceived. It's this true improvisation, the kind of minimal and inspired composition that draws from the ether, that the Lonberg-Holm Quartet practices on *Bridges Freeze Before Roads*. Its purity evades the common perception of improvisation as the rote, pentatonic fumbling of college hallway bluesmen or jam-wank randomness and elevates it beyond the strict, collared interludes in the middle of another blocky rendition of some jazz standard. There's a true spirit of ideas present, an interaction between players that flows like a conversation with all the lulls and moments of clarity that entails. The record is somber, often silent, difficult, working its way through that dark hallway to fall softly upon the ears like an unexpected draft.

Lonberg-Holm is an astute and experienced player, with dozens of ensembles and collaborations behind him and affiliations with avant-jazz legends like Peter Brotzman and Anthony Braxton. As a leader, he seems fully capable of guiding his quartet into realms of open, empty space without completely losing cohesion and control. "Exit: 3'27"" opens like a wheezing siren as Lonberg-Holm and clarinetist Guillermo Gregorio poke and prod one another with fricative contributions, resonant but strangled by the tempo-less structure of the piece. Glenn Kotche's percussion amounts to little more than a whisper, but it reinforces the mood expertly. Silence snakes through the notes liberally, and with it comes moments of calm that plateau the piece before plunging once again into the basement-depth of struggling groans and plaintive whispers. The remaining five tracks, all titled "Exit," continue to explore the subtle nuances of incidental tones and accidental discoveries through a range of sonic landscapes that recall sinking ships and rusty gates.

The heart of the album (and yes, though it may often seem remote and aloof, it does have one), is the relationship between the musicians. These men are tremendously creative and confident players, avant-all-stars; their on-the-spot composition is not simply treading over memorized scales and chord changes, but completely boundless and often risky leaps into the unknown. *Bridges Freeze Before Roads* is a strong testament to what improvisational music can be and can accomplish when the actors involved give themselves to their work and listen to the sounds that come to them rather than forcing it all through deliberative filters.



Reviewed by: Michael Patrick Brady
 Reviewed on: 2006-02-27
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