

An ethos of sheer equality



Chris Searle on Jazz



Mark Sanders, John Edwards and John Butcher. Photo Dawid Laskowski

Last Dream of the Morning

John Butcher, Jon Edwards and Mark Sanders

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THE free drummer Mark Sanders (born in Beckenham in 1960) is the last musician to see himself as a leader. He will however, call himself the “instigator” of certain recorded sessions, but an ethos of sheer equality defines them.

No single soundmaker takes precedence or adopts a commandist role — all compadres inspire, move and steer each other as the essence of the music, with Sanders’ percussive artistry listening, provoking and responding to every note and change of sound of his bandmates, saying almost telepathically to each other, as Sanders puts it, “What sound will we create to put it right?”

Sanders's first boyhood vision of his drums was watching his dad play the bongos, and dancing in the aisles of the penny seats of the London Palladium to Brian Bennet's drums when, as a six-year-old, his mum took him to see the Shadows.

At 15 he saved up and bought a drum kit and as a teenager, he moved into a flat with his mum's friend's boyfriend, who happened to be the future jazz bass virtuoso Paul Rogers.

He played left-field rock in his late teens but was beguiled when he watched avant-garde pianist Cecil Taylor one night on the television.

When he was 22, he met an inspirational teacher and trumpeter, Brian Tieson, at Brixton College, who took him towards freer forms of music while he listened carefully and joyously to the great bop and post-bop drummers Kenny Clarke, Elvin Jones and Tony Williams, and later to more avant-gardists like the Sheffield drums genius Tony Oxley.

Sanders has drummed on scores of albums, but one of his prime "instigations" is *Lost Dreams of the Morning*, recorded in November 2016 at The Fish Factory studio in Willesden, north London.

Swimming in sound alongside him are the Brighton-born (in 1954) saxophonist John Butcher and the monster-bassist from Hounslow, John Edwards. Although they are all old confreres, this is the first album they have made together, and it is a rare musical achievement.

Sanders's clicking drums and Edwards's pulsating strings begin the first track *Lucid*, under the freezing notes of Butcher's horn, blowing through the sonic snow.

It is an astonishing sonic sound, as if the human sources of the music were born together: Edwards, Sanders, Butcher — heartbeat, bloodstream, nerves and breath, the same organism, one nucleus.

As Butcher's slap-tongue conclusion moves into the final notes of a deceptively effortless collective whimper, the brilliance of the work of recording engineer Benedict Lamdin makes the threesome a quartet.

The second track *Syphon* begins in virtual quietude with Edwards almost noiseless plucking and Sanders eerily draws a bow across his cymbals. Butcher's agile soprano preludes Edwards's uncanny bow-work as the hornman's notes sounds like frightened birdsong.

The longest track, nearly 18 minutes, is Sand Dance, where Butcher's tenor saxophone arrives almost momentarily before the trio reverts to their very own mollifying oneness, with Sanders seeming, sometimes almost inaudibly to strike a multitude of surfaces, every one as a grain of resonating sand as Edwards's plucked strings crack, groan, speak, gambol and rejoice as if the whole of life were in them. Butcher's final timbral cavort is where the dance of breath finds its unique pitch.

Signal is the briefest track, with Sanders's multilayered drumming and Edwards's leaping bass song creating the ambiance for what sounds like Butcher's cry of water birds at night.

Its four minutes pass in a superbly evocative instant, as the trio moves into their album finale, Gridlocks, which integrated into its musical freedom, discipline and beauty, is a lucid exposition of how the concept of musical chiefs and leaders becomes an irrelevance to this trio, so much are they as one with a sonic unity, a metaphor for a different kind of society expressed with so much clarity in the realms of free jazz.

Again, these three musicians and their artistry make you consider how close music is to quasi-soundlessness, so quietly do they play and how volume gradually ebbs away to uncover the very heart of sounds: a contradiction perhaps, but one that is achieved in many treasured moments of this album.

Last Dream of the Morning is more evidence of the British contribution to the true heights of free music — and if no-one has to lead, someone or other has to “instigate.”

So thanks to Mark Sanders for doing that and enabling the sheer sound artistry and beauty that ensues all through this recording.