

Liberty Ellman understands the importance of documentation. He has played acoustic guitar with reedist Henry Threadgill's Zooid sextet on six albums since 2001, most recently *In For A Penny, In For A Pound* (Pi). More recently, saxophonist Joe Lovano deployed Ellman's electric guitar for a soon-to-be-released quintet album on Blue Note, while pianist Myra Melford wove his acoustic sound into the flow of her 2015 release *Snowy Egret* (Enja-Yellowbird). Before an October tour with Melford, Ellman would return to the studio to mix Lovano's recording, adding to a discography that includes post-production for projects by Threadgill, Steve Coleman, Vijay Iyer and Mike Ladd, Gregory Porter, Wadada Leo Smith, Tyshawn Sorey and Steve Lehman.

By his 35th birthday, Ellman, now 44, had documented 19 originals on two critically acclaimed dates for Pi, *Tactiles* (2003) and *Ophiucus Butterfly* (2006), each with a structure containing, as he puts it, "a beginning, a middle and an end rather than head-solo-head." He illuminated the stories with melodic statements on electric guitar—sometimes searing, sometimes reflective; sometimes percussive, sometimes legato—within a polyphonic, rhythmically percolating environment, articulated with a warm, burnished tone. Infused with a freewheeling attitude, Ellman's style amalgamates deeply studied funk, blues and hardcore jazz flavors into his own informed argot.

"I know it's a good idea to regularly release albums and update what you're doing," Ellman said in mid-September at his studio in the Brooklyn apartment where he lives with his wife and two small children. He was explaining the nine-year gap between *Ophiucus Butterfly* and his new release, *Radiate* (Pi), comprising eight bespoke compositions for a sextet that includes Lehman on alto saxophone, Jonathan Finlayson on trumpet, Jose Davila on tuba, Stephan Crump on bass and Damion Reid on drums.

"After *Ophiucus Butterfly* I was working with a lot of people, and once the kids were born I didn't focus on my own things," Ellman explained. "I was writing nuggets of ideas, but didn't have anything important to say, so I figured I'd wait until I was ready." He started off slowly during 2013, then kicked into gear after a grant from the Shifting Foundation enabled a self-imposed retreat in a Woodstock cabin containing a grand piano, a wood-burning stove, a kitchen and a bathroom. "When I came home, the creative juices were flowing," he said, "and I was able to get it done."

Various observers discern Threadgill's influence

in Ellman's writing. Lehman's tart alto tonality is a sonic link, as is Zooid member Davila's funky interlock with the rhythm section. So is the polyphonic orientation. But in Ellman's view, the connections are more methodological than linguistic.

"I think a lot of people who work in jazz would benefit from expanding their forms and letting go," he said. "Henry's incredible creativity in that regard is inspiring. But he has his own harmonic system, which I'm not trying to use at all. Everything I write is coming from a place of my ear, not from a formula."

Ellman won't dally with his next document. He's considering an open-form improvisational encounter (a process represented on *Radiate* by "Moment Twice") and a project that piggybacks from the electro-acoustic ambiance of "Enigmatic

Runner" (the final track on *Radiate*). But he also wants his sextet "to have a life."

"I enjoy writing for the format," he continued. "Part of keeping that going is to stay fresh and energized, to keep writing, and it's helpful to book a studio date and work towards it. I get pulled in so many directions, it's easy for me to spend time on something else."

"I spend many hours absorbing other people's music, and I learn something from everyone. They're all very creative, with something specific to offer. The people who drive them have found something personal that translates into their music, that makes you say, 'I've got to have this record.' We're all trying to find that thing for ourselves."

—Ted Panken

Players ›

LIBERTY ELLMAN

Creative Juice



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