

JAMES NEWTON

ABOVE IS  
ABOVE ALL

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James Newton's

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"The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all."

- John 3:31

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## The Concept

### Above is Above All

The world of *Above is Above All* is the world of the African Diaspora. This music is also informed by Asian and European music, but its heart is African. Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, and Chucho Valdes played important historical roles in rejoining various kinds of African music from Cuba, Brazil, Belize, Jamaica, Nigeria, Senegal, Martinique, and many other places that have African populations. I have attempted to take their approach in the field of electronic music which, among other things, makes it possible to draw various forms of music from chronological periods and put them together in a seamless fashion.

From beginning to end, this CD is primarily about dance. Some works are about West African and South American dance, and others are inspired by hip-hop. My intention was to take a wide view of dance and its integral role in African culture all over the Diaspora.

—James Newton

### About the music and the messages contained therein...

#### <sup>1</sup> Entre La Mascara Y El Cielo

This work was originally part of the score written for the play *The Correct Posture of a True Revolutionary* by Los Angeles playwright Theresa Chavez. This work is a lament about masks being lifted off the faces of dead soldiers who fought in the Nicaraguan revolution; sometimes the faces underneath the masks were those of young children. I also thought about standing at the Hector Petterson Memorial in Soweto and remembering all the young lives that were taken in the struggle against apartheid. During the compositional process I also found myself slipping back to my childhood and hearing the quiet yet intense nighttime sounds of my grandparents' farm in rural Arkansas.

#### <sup>2</sup> Jeannelle's Dream

This work was written for my daughter, Jeannelle Newton. This composition tries to capture the strength, beauty and complexity of her persona. One of the many defining characteristics of her generation is a lack of naiveté that comes from confronting the urban American tragedy. There is a remarkable strength of character in those who survive, and their development of a new aesthetical approach to beauty (and a new rhythmical perspective) is something that older generations can learn much from.

#### <sup>3</sup> Above is Above All

John 3:31 states: "The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all." This work tries to glimpse what is unseeable, to view God's relationship with the human race. Here and in other recent works of mine, one can hear abrupt chronological time shifts (a sort of nonlinear chronological time-morphing), which range from Pygmy influences in the second section to the harmonic influences of Wayne Shorter, Toru Takemitsu, and Witold Lutoslawski in the last section. This conceptual approach involves not merely the grafting of different styles onto one another, but a breaking of the time constraints of linear logic, providing a way for an idea or germ to manifest itself on numerous chronological planes, shifting yet retaining its character within various environments. These environments stimulate the germ and cause it to evolve. Each shift demands a readjustment of the micromaterial's relationship to the macro form. This approach is meant to express the interconnectedness of all of the creations of God, including time.

#### <sup>4</sup> African Cyborg

Represents the shift from the time of the drum's central role in West African culture to the current situation in which samples of drums play a key role in African-American musical life. Of course, samples will never replace Max Roach, Ed Blackwell, Klook, Cindy Blackman, Sonship Theus, Jeff Watts, Terri Lyne Carrington, or Baby Dodds. But samples are given an Africanized sensibility based on the use of signal processing to create an auditory illusion of heightened vibrancy. The younger generation's acceptance of samples and their physical responses to them have moved dance into a new realm. In African-American music, dance has often been the catalyst for rhythmical innovations. This work tries to capture some of the moves I've seen when young people are dancing to hip-hop. "African Cyborg" combines Hendrix-influenced sound textures, snatches of inner-city landscapes, and a celebration of funk-influenced dance music. The chiaroscuro of layered rhythms reflects the role dance plays in the struggle for survival in a complex society in which disenfranchisement rather than equality is the norm. The playing of master drummer Billy Hart has left an indelible imprint on my rhythmical language. His spirit exists throughout this work.

#### 5, 6, 7, 8 & 9 Gumbo YaYa

In early 1993 the great African-American choreographer Donald McKayle asked me if I would be interested in composing the music for a collaboration with the San Francisco Ballet. In the summer of 1993 this work was composed with the gracious help of Thomas Stones III. Thomas' sonic conception of electro-acoustic music is an integral part of this suite. About five years before composing this work, I heard Salif Keita at the Zelt Muzik Festival, outside Freiburg, Germany. While we were working on this project, Thomas brought Salif's masterpiece, *Soro*, to the studio, and its seamless integration of traditional African music, instruments, and technology spoke volumes. That work, along with the music of Hendrix, *Miles Live at the Fillmore*, and Los Munequitos De Matanzas and electro-acoustic work of Arturo Marquez, strongly influenced this material.

#### <sup>10</sup> Floor On Up From Where?

This work was sketched out after the passing of my dear uncle Louis Garner. "Floor on Up From Where?" tries to create the image of a surrealistic funeral procession in which the realm of the angels merges with the realm of the everyday. The title suggests the significance of prayer in one's life. Fall on your knees and ask the Lord, and your prayers will be heard. Without prayer, where?

#### <sup>11</sup> Baboyé

"Baboyé" is dedicated to the great multi-instrumentalist and composer Pedro Eustache. Pedro has mastered many different styles of music and amalgamated them in a way that is truly visionary. He is my close brother in Christ, and our friendship is one of the great treasures in my life. "Baboyé" is ritualistic and highly polyrhythmic. Pedro orchestrated about 95% of the percussion on this track. His deep understanding of the African presence in Venezuelan music, along with his voluminous knowledge of African music from all over the world, has constantly inspired me to expand my musical horizons. Pedro and Cuban-American master flutist Danilo Lozano have opened up my music to the fact that Latin music is absolutely essential to the African experience.

—James Newton

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<sup>1</sup> Enter La Mascara Y El Cielo	2:21
<sup>2</sup> Jeannelle's Dream	5:17
<sup>3</sup> Above is Above All	8:49
<sup>4</sup> African Cyborg	4:27
Gumbo YaYa (tracks 5, 6, 7, 8, & 9)	
<sup>5</sup> Prelude	3:25
<sup>6</sup> Senegalese Dance	7:53
<sup>7</sup> Safe Harbor	4:41
<sup>8</sup> Finale (Part 1)	4:42
<sup>9</sup> Finale (Part 2)	4:43
<sup>10</sup> The Floor on Up From Where?	6:20
<sup>11</sup> Baboyé (Part 1)	4:38

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