

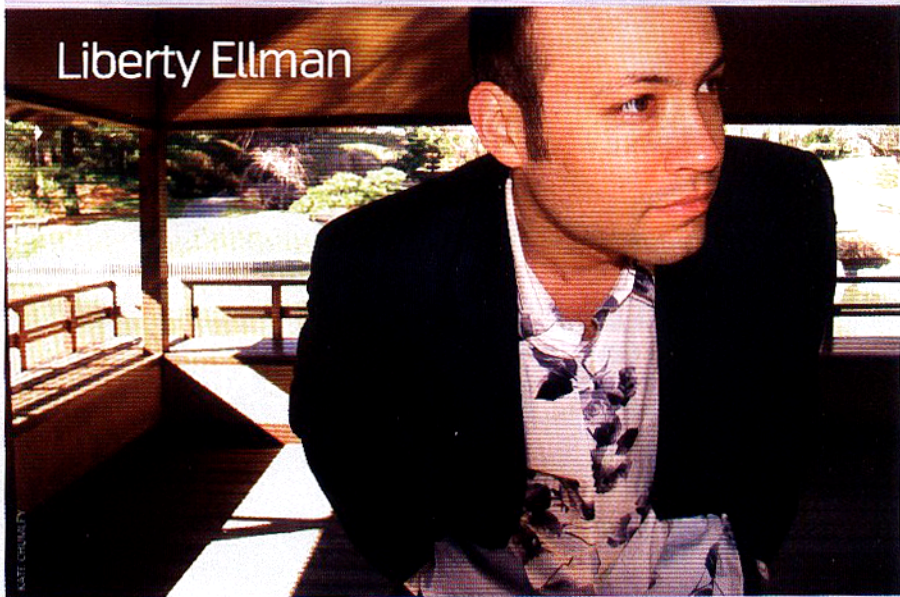
DownBeat

August 2006

Backstage With ...

By David Adler

Liberty Ellman



Guitarist Liberty Ellman leads an offbeat sextet on his new CD, *Ophiuchus Butterfly*, his second release for PI and his third as a leader. He's also in the midst of a fruitful apprenticeship with Henry Threadgill, six years and running. Distinguished by his clean, unembellished guitar tone and knotty improvisational vocabulary, Ellman has made appearances with Vijay Iyer and Mike Ladd, Joe and Mat Maneri, and many others. He spoke backstage at the Cutting Room in New York, where he was performing with singer-songwriter Jen Chapin.

HOW DO YOU RECONCILE THESE DIFFERENT MUSICAL WORLDS, WORKING WITH EVERYONE FROM JEN CHAPIN TO MAT MANERI?

I don't see them as different worlds. There are different skills you use. When musicians are sincere about their art, you engage them on the same level—you just flex different muscles. If you look at my iPod you'll see Willie Nelson and Autechre. It's the music at hand, that's the thing. What's the goal of the performance? What's the concept of the writer? Then you give yourself up to it.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM HENRY THREADGILL OVER THE YEARS?

I've learned that anything can be an inspiration if you let it. You can break free of regimented material, especially in terms of form and arranging, turning things upside down, condensing them. It helps you shake things loose. It's about being open and doing a lot of work, and not being afraid to try even the craziest idea. When

you keep things fresh and somewhat tentative, you bring out a certain energy in the performers. Henry is willing to try new, untested ideas in front of several thousand people at a festival. But his intuition is always correct and his timing is deliberate.

THE TITLE *OPHIUCHUS BUTTERFLY* REFERS TO A CONSTELLATION. WHAT IS ITS SIGNIFICANCE? ARE YOU INSPIRED BY ASTRONOMY?

Yes. I've spent a lot of time looking at things like Hubble [Telescope] images. Red Giant, the label I formed 10 years ago, took its name from astronomy. I like the fact that Ophiuchus was a healer in Greek mythology. He got so good that he could raise people from the dead; Zeus didn't like that, so he killed him.

I've also learned about the butterfly nebula, a gravitational event that allows gases to form mirror images in a sort of butterfly shape thousands of light years wide. There's a butterfly nebula that resides in the constellation Ophiuchus.

WHAT OTHER IDEAS BEYOND MUSIC HAVE INFLUENCED YOU?

The second piece on my record, "Aestivation," comes from botany. It refers to the period just before a flower blooms. The interior of the bud forms specific shapes and patterns. A lot of the music my friends and I make involves patterns and number systems. I didn't take any specific information from the flower images, but I looked at the patterns of all these different buds in aestivation. What drew me in was the idea of something that's about to happen, about to reach its beautiful state. DB