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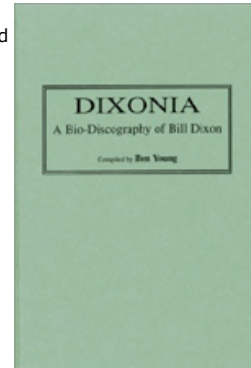
The Odyssey To Dixonia

by Derek Taylor
October 2002

Most musicians hunger for public recognition of their work. It's commonly an integral part of the passion to create—the need to be seen, heard and appreciated. Very few can operate independently of these desires, but in the field of creative improvised music it can be a necessity. Audiences are historically specialized and small. Critical recognition outside the music's at times insular circle is difficult to come by and is frequently based on extra-musical assumptions. Bill Dixon is an artist who, by a combination of his own volition and the circumstances that have characterized his career, has contended with these potentially debilitating forces of anonymity and ambivalence. His discography of compositions and performances numbers well into the triple digits, but only a comparative handful of his recordings are available to potential listeners and even these are often hard to come by.

Recognizing the persistent paucity of available material, Dixon took matters into his own hands in the mid-1990s. His ambitious plans found fruition in two documents—one musical, the other literary—that seek to be both a summation of work to date and a beacon to future endeavors. *Odyssey* encompasses six compact discs of sound and two carefully crafted booklets. Of the printed material, the first contains several essays by a small collection of writers close to Dixon's cause and an interview segment conducted by Graham Lock. Comprehensive discographical information is contained in the first text as well. The second offers a collection of full-color lithographs celebrating another side of Dixon's creative process, painting. These detailed reproductions in turn correspond to several of the compositions contained in the musical portion of the set, and offer up a visual vista into Dixon's internal sound world.

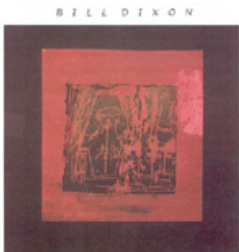
The second document finds form in Ben Young's *Dixonia: A Bi-Discography*, written in close collaboration with Dixon. The 418-page tome traces Dixon's career in music from his earliest sideman appearances through a myriad of musical incarnations. It differs markedly from certain other discographies in that every recallable performance is included, whether the results were recorded or not. Personal anecdotes and/or reminiscences by Dixon accompany each discographical entry and here is where the real meat of the book resides. The exhaustive (and often tantalizing) session details are impressive, but it's Dixon's own opinions on his career and musical relationships that really stay in one's mental craw. Young conveniently organizes the book into thirteen distinct chapters. Ten chronicle Dixon's own performances, while the remaining three chart his efforts as producer, educator and source of music for peers. Important collaborative relationships with Archie Shepp, dancer Judith Dunn and many others form the crux of later chapters. Young even goes as far as to provide exhaustive rosters of Dixon's students and the years in which they studied with him.



The book also raises the regrettable reality that most of the recordings documented reside on storage shelves, waiting for the resources that could vault them into widespread circulation. Many of the lineups are so impressive as to conjure awe and expectant conjecture. For instance, the string of duet dates Dixon did with Wilbur Ware at NYC's Speakeasy Café in the summer and fall of 1961, or the 1962 concert in Stockholm where Dixon teamed up with Perry Robinson, Albert Ayler, Don Moore and Howard McRae. Then there's the Cecil Taylor and guests evening at the Take 3 Coffee House in NYC where the pianist held court with Dixon, Roswell Rudd, Jimmy Lyons, Albert Ayler, Carla & Paul Bley, Gary Peacock and Sunny Murray. And this is just in the first 70 or so pages. Why weren't the tapes running on any of these nights?

What does exist on tape is quite impressive and leads directly into the importance and frustration inherent to *Odyssey*. Dixon had originally intended for the box to document his group work, but constricted finances coupled with a resolute insistence that all of the musicians on the group recordings be compensated for their work necessitated that he focus almost solely on the solo facet of his oeuvre. Dixon voices his frustrations in the text of the accompanying booklet but, listening to the music, it's difficult not to simply give thanks that he found the patience, resources and courage to put this thing out.

An obvious and easy complaint can be levied at the set's size and density. Five discs of largely solo trumpet appended by another of monologue voice musings is a daunting prospect, even for the dedicated listener. Digesting the set in a single sitting leaves much room for folly. Its monolithic stature can quickly tax the staunchest auditory senses and it is far better approached in increments. Dixon seems to recognize the challenge he's placing on his audience and as such the set is broken down into programmatic fragments by disc. The review that follows favors an analogous tack by tracing the musical developments of each disc separately.



DISC ONE

Dixon makes savvy use of space on "When Winter Comes" and "Webern Work Study", creating Doppler frequencies that smear and smudge across the sound floor in rapid-fire bursts. "The Long Walk" perambulates to precisely placed tones that float and echo in the air, forming a spectral structure, tinged with a delicate cerulean patina. At one point he pinches a line into a sustained renal whistle narrowing the pitch to a pinpoint just short of the inaudible range. A ghostly rasp inculcates his lines, like the aural equivalent of the finest grain of sandpaper scraped against a coarse metallic surface. Overtones lurk at the edges, adding weird harmonic undercurrents to his central undulating trajectories. Dixon possesses a flavor and approach to his instrument that can truly be considered wholly unique in the recognized canon of brass improvisers.

There are shades of *Sketches of Spain*-era Miles in his tone at times, but even these instances are not implicitly referential and instead appear independently arrived at. "Momenti" is punctuated by Dixon's moist breath sounds, which creep to the fore in the pauses and further color the cast of his creations. Rifling through a litany of high velocity notes at the piece's close, Dixon generates the illusion of a single battery of sound. "Stanza" contrasts beautifully, a series of languorous legato streams, rounded off by the porous rasp that Dixon channels so expertly through his embouchure.

The "I See Your Fancy Foot Work" series juxtaposes whistling voice with whistling trumpet, the latter seeming to be the victor in terms of breadth of tonal variation and volume. Curt, obliquely rendered blasts contrast with a trailing counterpoint of squiggling flurries. Dixon's adolescent son interjects various exclamations into the action, which seem to fuel his father into even more extreme exhortations on his horn. An unusual duet develops with Dixon, Jr. returning with questions and random vocal noises that are laced within his father's improvisations. There's a space where the whole effect skirts the edges of white noise static in density and intensity. On headphones and even at modest volumes the salvos approach the edges of uncomfortable listening. The set's notes make no mention of electronic manipulation even though the cavernous echo Dixon achieves seems to suggest otherwise. Huge humming drones vie with gauze-like ribbons of more recognizable trumpet. The series nears completion with a telling exchange from father and son. "Dad, can I go get my trumpet and play the things I know?" "No, cause you've played too much today, you have to save your chops, you know."

In Dixon's grasp the trumpet becomes a vehicle for seemingly any and all brass and breath born sounds. Those typically associated with the instrument enter the vernacular along with droves of others that seem the province of everything from piccolo trumpet to bass tuba. "Mosaic" and "Albert Ayler" are but fragments, the former sounding like the industrial grinding of gears and the latter seeming an odd reference to its dedicatee. "Summerdance- Part I" features the percussion of David Moss and Laurence Cook in a convergence that rises gradually out of silence and into a broad, dynamically-charged colloquy of sputtering brass and malleted skins and metal. "Tracings" offers a stellar encapsulation of the litany of tonal and pitch properties at Dixon's disposal as he traces variations on a thematic center through a series of discrete voicings. Conversely "The Long Line" adheres to essentially the same tonal voice, a warm, plushly rendered intonation fused with an underlying fuzzy rasp.

DISC TWO

"Requiem for Booker Little" proves a fitting homage to the hardbop trumpet icon, heartfelt and highly lyrical and linear in conception. "Masques I"'s frequent use of space and silence coupled with vocalizations into mouthpiece creates an environment of shifting textures and ominous overtones. Later comes a rush of roller coaster lines that juxtapose with the somber, but sadly interrupted journey undertaken on "Odyssey/Interruptus". "Murmurs" picks up the path where its predecessor left off, following a similar circuit of solemn phrases to fruition. The softness in Dixon's palpable tone is also laced with an astringent underside, which keeps an edge sharply honed and wistfulness willfully at bay. Saxophonist Stephen Horenstein, a student of Dixon's, suggests in his accompanying essay that the closing section of "Flame" is "like looking down the throat of Death". Dixon favors a brittle, wafer-thin tone with mute, dusted with another strain of his signature rasp and ghostly legato lines. Silence plays heavily into the presentation and adds portentous weight to what are otherwise airy locutions. The contemporaneous "Meta-Pedal" continues the train of thought, but adds biting bursts and foghorn mutters that open the dynamics up even further. Keyboardist Leslie Winston joins Dixon for a luminous duet on "Elegantissimo", matching her amplified DX-7 ivories in tandem with his bilious cloudbank of lines. The result is one of the most resolutely lyrical excursions on the entire set and an intriguing detour from Dixon's usual solitary musings. "Changes" sounds almost as if birthed from a bugle with Dixon's tone taking on a constricted cast as if channeled through battered tin. His breath strokes sound more labored in this setting, but he sacrifices nothing in the way of speed or articulation.

DISC THREE

"Jerusalem", recorded in concert in the eponymous city, finds Dixon dispensing a brief introduction before loosing a flood of eructative sounds from the bell of his instrument. Call and response patterns develop out of the natural and intentional echo of his instrument. Later sections of the long-form piece plumb a deep reservoir of rich ideas built on wide tonal variants and an exquisite use of sound space. His phrases trace the full spectrum of audibility from near quiet to boisterous volume, but it's a gradual progression requiring patience and trust on the part of the listener. The second half explores another facet of his signature style—that of lofty lyricism, as legato tones spool into the air only to disperse like luminous vapor trails. Later, mouthpiece pops and a returning stream of moist, muffling breath sounds dismantles the reverie. But through it all, Dixon's ability to completely hypnotize his audience through unrelenting virtuosity manifests in the absolute silence, which greets his creations from beginning to the curious fade that robs from a feeling of resolution. Slight tape hiss is audible through most of the performance, but even in the spaces of near silence Dixon's presence commands convincing aural attention.

Given the girth and diversity of the concert piece the other entries on this disc can't help but appear anticlimactic. "Umbra e Luce", performed in homage to a deceased colleague, is more linear in scope as Dixon moves through a maze of ferrous phrases, rarely pausing long enough for the sounds to completely dissolve from his valves until the final streaking exit. "The Somnambulist" initially affects a sluggish pace, much in the way its titular subject might before gaining velocity through a spray of fast-clipped phrases stained with coarse-grain rasps. A distant ghostly echo is discernable just around the edges, but its source remains a mystery. "Conncordde" is at once lyrical and queering as Dixon pursues a high pitched, but polished tone from his brass that effectively cleaves through auditory cobwebs and spotlights how emotively direct he can be when the mood strikes him. Delay and sustain reappear on the lengthier, but spatially diffuse "Fortunata". "Graffiti Sui Soffiti" caps the disc off with another terse slice of his trenchant side.

DISC FOUR

A crowd of short pieces, all culled from 1973, a fruitful year for Dixon, comprise the program on disc four. Though miniature in individual duration, the compositions trace a varied path through Dixon's approaches and preoccupations. Many barely breach the two-minute mark and while they stand alone as discrete entities and intriguing snapshots, their overarching focus is necessarily sound production over extended thematic development. They offer proof that Dixon can find ample creative purchase whether it's long-form or extreme economy in which he's working. "Postcards" consists of rapid-fire clusters of notes, parsed by quick chasms of silence. "For Wallace Thurman", yet another dedicatory piece, makes use of a phantom second voice that sheathes the central thrust of Dixon's primary lines. "Chalk Circle—Blue" experiments with flanging segments across the static stereo floor, as Dixon's flutter-tongued tones move from left channel to right in slippery smears. "Shadowland" is calming by comparison, a contemplative string of conjoined phrases that uncoils at a relaxed clip before veering off into a sputtering burst of speed. A string of snippet-sized sketches follows, each one demonstrating a specific sound property of his horn. "Spaces", for example, matches guttural breath gusts with moist salivary mouth noises. They work more as showpieces rather than fully fleshed statements, but combine together as telling testament to Dixon's virtuosity. "Sketch for Ernie Chritchlow", works as a miniature tone poem of legato shapes that swirl about the sound space. Ghostly drones of what sounds like microphone feedback enter the fray on "Manuscripts for Fathers & Sons", retreating to whence it came in the crystal clarity of Dixon's delicate constructions. "Chalk Circle—Red" employs a technique akin to its earlier sibling, swinging between stereo channels and parsing into simultaneous twining lines. Dixon's sequencing of the disc, and the larger set in general, diversify moods in a manner that keeps the spoiling specter of tedium from materializing.

DISC FIVE

Working in a reverse chronological order, the set's fifth disc documents Dixon's art circa 1970, another exciting year from this standpoint. The interlocking work that takes up the bulk of the program builds and recedes in a fashion that is both beautiful and challenging. For some unknown reason, "Dance #2" is plucked out of natural sequence and deposited at the series' close. On the opening section, tandem trumpets, laced together through the magic of multi-tracking, float through a forest of verdant melodicism. It's a striking contrast from the largely single-voiced excursions that characterize the rest of the set, with Dixon deploying a dialogue of tightly spun lines in close confluence that move from mellifluous reveries to more strident streams of notes. Later sections showcase Dixon's piano in duet with his brass. His touch on the ivories is sensitive, but often oblique. The pairing of instruments creates a welcome and involving respite from the solitary nature of most of the set's music.

DISC SIX

Comprised completely of commentary, the sixth disc serves as the Rosetta stone of the set, a lens through which Dixon explains his designs in his own terms and at his own pace. His rich baritone voice speaks clearly into the single microphone, opening up an intellectual journey that is both logical and freely associative. Dixon's monologue is both exhaustive and intensely informative. Some might interpret his eloquent musings as overly pedantic or introspective, but the wealth of information into his creative process and experience speaks for itself.

The trip begins with Dixon addressing a set of questions posed by the Parisian *Jazz Magazine* in a survey sent to various improvising musicians. Dixon recites his answers to each one with a measured sureness. Piano chords rumble and tinkle away softly in the background as he touches up on his transformation from 'jazz musician' to 'black musician' to simply 'musician' and the changes that were initiated by each transition. Dixon discusses how his music is principally for himself and acknowledges the overt absence of outside influence on it. His process of improvisation, his feelings toward performance and his responsibilities toward his audience all come into fascinating play. He also addresses constructed genre distinctions in music and how they specifically affect approaches toward a given instrument and the designation of mastery/virtuosity on an instrument.

Moving on to other matters, Dixon discusses future projects including large orchestral works, preferably performed in European locales. Tied into these plans are an underlying perception of hostility to his work in the U.S. and, more specifically, in New York City. The exploration of these slings and arrows serves as a springboard into an elaboration of *Odyssey* and into other associative areas including his teaching methods and experiences. The halls of academia became a refuge for Dixon's creative spirit and he used those resources to full advantage.

His student ensembles became Petrie dishes for new compositions and ideas. It was also in this environment that Dixon was able to hone his personal philosophy toward music, wrestling with such variables as personal (solo) music versus public (ensemble) music, composition versus improvisation, and teaching as a means of escaping the necessity of creating with commercial constraints in mind. Constraints come in many guises and Dixon also touches upon his inherent limitations of both his instrument (i.e. a propensity for sticking valves) and his own physiology (finite breath) and the ways in which these strictures have shaped his quest to realize the sounds and structures in his head.

Dixon's adversarial relationship with the critical press is something that dogs him to this day. It's no surprise then that he uses this forum to launch a few barbs including memorable quotes such as "So many writers end up critics because they can't do this writing." But far from the reactionary and vitriolic reputation that some have boxed him into, he comes across as highly articulate and logical in his arguments. In other words, his many complaints carry an air of genuine legitimacy. He is a man who has been wronged in various ways and his ability to shrug off these slights and center himself on the validity of his own actions is worthy of admiration. Dixon repeatedly substantiates his positioning as an artist who has never had to "wonder whether people are going to like it or not or buy the record". An expected audience is necessarily specialized and small and, once one comes to grips with this reality, the result can be emancipatory.

Two halves of a monumental whole, the tandem package of *Odyssey* and *Dixonia* present Bill Dixon's art as it has never been presented before. Both documents demand careful diligence and scrutiny to map. Nearly thirty years of work compressed into a span of five plus hours should not be easily consumed, and it isn't. Both symbolically and realistically, this set realizes the promise and precedence of its title—one man's search for himself and the meaning of that to which he's chosen to devote his life within a larger historical context that continues to unfold.

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