

Excerpts from what the press has said recently about the Microscopic Septet:
THE MICROSCOPIC SEPTET

THE HISTORY OF THE MICROS, VOL. 1: SEVEN MEN IN NECKTIES CD 2006 CUNEIFORM
THE HISTORY OF THE MICROS, VOL. 2: SURREALISTIC SWING CD 2006 CUNEIFORM

“DownBeat: Best CDs of 2007: Historical

Microscopic Septet, *Seven Men in Neckties: History of the Micros Volume One*, Cuneiform, 4 1/2 stars/5: June Issue

Microscopic Septet, *Surrealistic Swing: History of the Micros Volume Two*, Cuneiform, 4 stars/5: June Issue”

– “Best CDs of 2007”, *DownBeat*, January 2008, Vol. 75, No. 1

“...during their run from 1980-'90, they managed to record four albums of seminal, brilliant post-modern jazz as well as their best-known piece, the “Fresh Air Theme,” heard daily on NPR stations for more than 15 years now. All of this material plus previously unreleased tracks are on these two double-CDs, handsomely packaged with liner notes by co-leader Phillip Johnston, now-and-then photos of the band and cover art by Art Spiegelman.

The Septet...was a laboratory for experimentation for composers Johnston...and pianist Joel Forrester. Mixing the influences of the great early big band arrangers like Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington with the zaniness of Raymond Scott and Captain Beefheart, the edginess of Thelonius Monk and Charles Mingus with the theatrics and exploration of Sun Ra and the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and with references from “Hey Jude” to “Harlem Nocturne,” the Micros were dedicated to jazz that swung and was endlessly fun and inventive.

Volume One is superior because of the youthful up-all-night sense of discovery and sheer joy found on both their first studio album and only live recording. *Volume Two* finds the band becoming more nuanced and moody, though the irrepressible good times are always just around the corner. The playing is exciting throughout but the compositions are the thing here – with enough great melodies and ideas in each track to make an album. Together, these discs are a goldmine of materials that should delight and inspire a new generation of fans and musicians.”

– David French, *DownBeat*, June 2007, Vol. 74, No. 6

“Dusted Features: Derek Taylor fills us in on his favorite jazz releases (and more) from 2006.

...So much great music passed between my ears in '06 that a paltry Year End Feature seems hardly adequate in detailing all the discoveries, at least if the desire is to keep this essay in the realm of readable length. ...

Microscopic Septet “History of the Micros” (Cuneiform)

The Cuneiform label has... mined an unexpected source with its two-volume *History of the Micros*, beaming long overdue light on the recorded work of The Microscopic Septet, one of the Downtown NYC scene's most influential and celebrated bands. The pair of double-disc sets collects all four of the Micros commercially released albums along with a generous sprinkling of demos and outtakes... No coincidence that the release coincided with a couple of packed reunion gigs in their old Big Apple stomping grounds.” – Derek Taylor, “Dusted Features,” *Dusted*, www.dustedmagazine.com

“These two double CDs collect the output of the wildly inventive four-sax-plus-rhythm-section ensemble... Imagine Basie, Monk, and Beefheart tossed into a blender, swinging as one. A–“

– Larry Blumenfeld, *Entertainment Weekly*, #917, Jan. 26, 2007

“In 1980s New York City, the late, great Microscopic Septet were the greatest, swinging-est, coolest, hottest avant-anachronistic combo that ever was, only darn few outside of the Lower East Side knew it. ...the Micros were too earthy 'n' swingin' for the avant crowd, too "out" and/or humorously quirky for the sober/somber post-bop set, and certainly not sweet or bombastic enough for the fusion crowd(s).

In a nutshell, the Microscopic Septet... specialized in an inspired mélange of tightly arranged swing (a la 1940s big band), tastily twisty, wryly witty compositions inspired by Thelonious Monk and Steve Lacy, and the riff-driven jump-blues of Earl Bostic, Louis Jordan, and Willis Jackson.

Johnston's and Forrester's compositions were never mere frameworks for blowing, but distinctive compositions that displayed a knowledge & love for the entire jazz continuum (not just the post-Charlie Parker or post-Coltrane eras).

The classiness of Ellington and Gil Evans, the sardonic passion of Mingus, the urbane wit and economy of Monk and Lacy, the daring of Coleman, Aylor, and Carla Bley, the Saturday night riff-a-rama fever of Bostic and Big Jay McNeely, and the thoughtful romanticism of Gene Ammons and Stan Getz – all have made their marks on these fellows. The Microscopic Septet... was sadly unique in the world of modern music: Hepcats bent on performing music aimed at the mind, the heart, and the tapping foot – what *were* they thinking? You'd better find out. Both sets are fab...”

– Mark Keresman, *JazzReview.com*, www.jazzreview.com

“Spawned out of the avant-jazz loft scene but gripped by a passionate love of Fletcher Henderson-style big-band swing, the Micros had an irrepressible urge to take jazz back to its roots as music that was accessible, danceable, and above all, fun – all refracted through a pranksterish sensibility that had them drawing in elements of blues, R&B, tango, polka, klezmer and TV theme tunes. The result? A riotously irreverent explosion of fiendishly clever but infectiously swinging compositions that sounded like pop music from another universe where rock and roll had never happened. The Micros were primarily a live act...with a paltry recorded output that earned them the nickname ‘New York's Most Famous Unknown Band.’ This two-volume, four-CD retrospective attempts to put that right by releasing all four of the band's albums along with eleven previously unheard tunes. The band cooks on pretty much every selection but it's on 1985's *Let's Flip!* recorded live in the Netherlands, that we find them in their element, blowing hot to an enthusiastic crowd. ...It's everything you ever wanted to know about The Microscopic Septet but were afraid to ask. 3 stars.”

– Daniel Spicer, *Jazzwise*, Feb. 2007, Issue 105

“As purveyors of good times, exuberant wit and extremely subtle satire, their only real competition is genre-blending baritone sax-driven instrumentalists Moisturizer. Like that band, many of the Micros' songs – and they are songs, in the purest sense of the word – have a narrative feel.

...A typical number could start out as a slow blues, go doublespeed with a swing beat, morph into dixieland for a minute or two, build to a latin breakdown and then go out on a suspense film motif. ...By comparison, the early Lounge Lizards were conservative.

In a terrific stroke of good fortune, Cuneiform Records has reissued the Micros' complete recorded works on two double cd's, *Seven Men in Neckties* and *Surrealistic Swing*. ...

Take the Z Train was recorded live in analog to two-track tape in a Chinatown studio chosen because it housed a piano that reputedly once belonged to Eubie Blake. The digital remastering here is brilliant: it sounds pretty much like the collectible album that the original has become. It's the band's defining statement. Influenced by Ellington and Fletcher Henderson's ornate arrangements, founder and sax player Phillip Johnston added megadoses of his signature wit, and the band followed along...

Let's Flip! and the outtakes that follow it were recorded in concert in Europe. It's the Micros at their most serious, although their energy is undiminished. ...*Beauty Based on Science*...was originally released on Stash Records, who also did the Reefer Madness album... Forrester's latin and tango inflections come to the forefront here... Over the course of these four cds, the band steals licks from the Mission Impossible, Peter Gunn and Summer Place themes, rearranges the Ellington classic Harlem Nocturne as a tango, and quotes from everyone from Louis Jordan to the

Skatalites to George Michael. In all seriousness, as amusing as all this is, it's also virtuosic and absolutely brilliant. ...these two rediscoveries ought to vault them to the prominence they so richly deserve."

– "Very Devious News: The Microscopic Septet Is Back in Print!", *Lucid Culture*, Feb. 2, 2008, lucidculture.wordpress.com

"Most of all, I remember the Microscopic Septet. There is occasion to reminisce about this remarkable band...not only because all of the group's commercial recordings and many of its previously unreleased tracks were collected into two double-CD packages this fall...but because the band is doing a reunion tour..."

Co-led by two composer-instrumentalists...the Microscopic Septet were four saxes with piano, bass and drums – an instrumentation variously described as a saxophone quartet plus rhythm, or a big band minus brass. No other group comprised all four basic members of the sax family: soprano, alto, tenor and baritone. Mr. Johnston's primary influences were swing-era stalwarts such as Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington, as well as Steve Lacy, the postmodern icon of the soprano sax. Mr. Forrester was a protégé, somewhat, of Thelonious Monk...

...the Micros...simultaneously sounded like a retro swing band (though apart from the Widespread Depression Orchestra, the form had yet to be invented) and an avant-garde ensemble. Likewise, the band was at once capriciously whimsical and deadly serious, as if it were playing in a Fellini-esque circus and a New Orleans funeral at the same time, with intricately arranged original compositions that frequently incorporated long, free-form improvisations.

The Micros' pieces, which might, for instance, combine stride piano with Albert Ayler-like shrieks, were surrealistic in the same sense that a painting of a man with a tree growing out of his head is surrealistic. ...

The group emerged in 1982, around the time Wynton Marsalis was heralding what eventually became known as jazz neo-classicism, when younger players were encouraged to explore more traditional forms like bebop and swing. Early on, the movement was resoundingly denounced by the Chicago critic Larry Kart, who claimed that in trying to play older styles, musicians had to forget much of what they knew. ...

By contrast, the compositions written by Messrs. Johnston and Forrester did not involve forgetting, but remembering seemingly every piece of music they had ever heard. It wasn't just that the two musical directors merely mix-mastered various kinds of jazz, but that their grasp included rhythms from all manner of ethno-world music, classical, and lots of rock and R&B.

Typical is "the Dream Detective"... which begins as a baroque fugue and evolves into a bluesy feature for the baritone saxist Dave Sewelson, who quotes the "Get Smart" theme; it's also one of many pieces...that makes use of blues-derived stop time...

At times Messrs. Johnston and Forrester seemed to be reaching for as many different kinds of rhythms as they could possibly find...

The Micros also played polkas, tarantellas, and, on "Boo Boo Coming," grooved to a reggae beat. Mr. Forrester's two shellfish-oriented titles...both utilize Afro-Cuban rhythms...

Regretfully, the Micros never recorded more of their idiosyncratic treatments of works by composers outside the band, apart from Mr. Johnston's radical remake of "Johnny Come Lately,"...

The new Cuneiform packages also include a number of previously unreleased odds and ends... Like so much of the best music of the Microscopic Septet, it somehow manages to swing and to rock at the same time."

– Will Friedwald, "Microscopic Septet Micromanaging the Night Away," *The New York Sun*, Nov. 27, 2006, www.nysun.com

"Spread across four discs, this is not merely a history of The Microscopic Septet, but also of various strains of American jazz and popular music that chugged across the Twentieth Century. The Septet...plumbed the depths of the music they loved, fearlessly ignoring boundaries like a crazed pack of free-range chickens. ...the band embraced the musics of Jelly Roll Morton, Ellington, and Monk, on up through Captain Beefheart. The latter's non-jazz credentials notwithstanding, what they drew from him was the urge to take a form, disassemble it and see what the parts look like all laid out on the table (or the dance floor). What's contained on this pair of two-disc sets is all four of their original albums, along with nearly a dozen additional tracks. ..."

– David Greenberger, *Signal to Noise*, Issue #46, Summer 2007

"If you were a cool guy who loved jazz in the 1980s, then the Microscopic Septet was your thing, your special band... Here...were seven hip cats...who were somehow into all that "old music" but also had some cutting edge credibility. They played at happening downtown spots...but—they *swung!*

It was a weird and heady time to get hip to jazz. It seemed as though the whole historical cycle of the music had already passed—from traditionalism, through modernism, into atonal-freak-out-avant-gardism. What more was there to do? And so...you began to see creative recombinations of the past as the post-modern way to go. ...

That was the "Micros." Somebody called it "Surrealistic Swing," but Micro-music was always more collaged than surreal—a po-mo patchwork that concentrated with a determined fire on certain pet niches. ...

... just about the last thing the septet did before ending it was to record several themes for the show [Fresh Air] – all of which are included in this indispensable four-disc history of the band: *Seven Men in Neckties/Surrealistic Swing*.

The bottom line is this: time has been kind to this antic gang of jazzifying tooters. The band is even better and more musically serious than I remember. It is as if the times finally caught up to the Micros, with heaping doses of jazz musicians finally realizing what this septet knew as far back as Reagan's inaugural—that jazz lives most fully when it's celebrating and having fun, dicing and razor-slicing American musical history with aplomb.

... the tunes Jelly Rocked and Jelly Rolled. A Sun Ra Arkestra in New Wave suits and skinny ties, the Micros played with historically hip humourousness: tangos and even polkas peeked out. And given that the band initially included an alto player named John Zorn, it's fair to say that the group spurred some of the genre-shifting explosions that were to come from Naked City, Masada and Zorn's yet-to-be born Tzadik label.

Hey: these guys were *important*, plus they might all don a fez and march through the audience while playing.

In these four discs, you'll find all four of the Micros official releases...as well as the band's early tracks (with Zorn) and the "Fresh Air" themes. It's a healthy serving, but never tedious. Truly, the composing is the star, and so these records are always putting the moves on you, never beholden to long solos or a listener's tolerance for out-jazz noise. It's amazing to note that this material covers only a fifth of the Micros' 180-arrangement live book. ...

There's infinitely more to report about the music here: the devilish piano solos of Forrester, who is Monkian but also puckishly nimble and also key-rolling out; the consistently earthy and lush sound of Dave Sewelson on baritone ... the seemingly homemade tone of Johnston's soprano, which is gloriously uninfluenced by Coltrane or Shorter and therefore impossible to get tired of; the basement playroom drumming of Richard Dworkin, which seems particularly to delight in how this band can go from the '20s to the '90s in the blink of a hi-hat cymbal.

If you listen to the Micros... you'll find your own favorite moments, your own most-loved toys in this long-neglected closet of jazz fun. Just when you're tempted to take the band lightly, it plays something gorgeous. Just when the band seems like a novelty act, it plays something original and real.

... in this set (and for some gigs...)...they flicker back to life again, laughing, wearing those fezzes, amazing us again. Rating: 8/10 stars.”

– Will Layman, *PopMatters*, Jan. 12, 2007, www.popmatters.com

“Recommended New Listening: ... Microscopic Septet – Seven Men in Neckties, Vol. One & Two (Cuneiform)”

– David Adler, NY@Night Columnist, November 2006, *All About Jazz*, www.allaboutjazz.com

“...nearly everyone has probably heard them...because they were hired by NPR's popular interview show Fresh Air to create a theme song for the daily program, and they have used it ever since - broadcast to every home in the U.S. That makes it the most-aired jazz work in the world....

... fun they do have. There are elements of Spike Jones and Frank Zappa in much of their work. Another comparison was Charles Mingus playing Willem Breuker - or vice versa. Nearly all their tunes are originals... one reason the sound of the Micros appeals to me so much is that I'm a nut on all-sax quartets and sextets, and the Microscopic Septet is really a saxophone quintet with piano, bass and drums added. Don't misunderstand that this is a loft jazz, free jazz type of ensemble; not so. ...there are avant elements but it also very accessible. Their mixtures of swing, bebop, lounge jazz, trad jazz, New Orleans Second Line, tangos, you-name-it, are always intelligently and wittily put together and played with great gusto. ...just the titles... will give a good idea of where the Micros are at. ...”

– John Henry, *Audiophile Audition*, www.audaud.com

... Dedicated to bringing a sense of humor and fun back to jazz, by leaning heavily on pre-war styles, the Micros invoked the primal joy of those halcyon days.

...their legacy has remained strong...

...Featuring excellent arrangements and tight ensemble interplay, under Johnston and Forrester's tutelage the septet often sounded like an ensemble twice its size. With their parallel aesthetic, these two shared a worldview where the irregular harmonies of Thelonious Monk, angular melodies of Steve Lacy, caustic energy of Albert Ayler, tight arrangements of Fletcher Henderson and regal beauty of Duke Ellington all held equal sway. Borrowing from Dixieland, tango, polka, boogie-woogie, rhumba, cha-cha, swing and numerous other styles, the unifying focus always remained the same; the Micros existed to entertain, and entertain they did.

Looking back on the 1980s, the New York jazz scene quickly divided itself up between two opposing camps. ... The more extreme Downtown scene was a cauldron of experimentation, thriving with grass roots support. It was in this fertile and unrestrictive environment that the Micros flourished, playing everywhere from jazz joints to rock clubs, spreading their infectious tunes as far as they could reach. With snappy melodies, tight arrangements and virtuosic solos, the Micros easily shed the then limiting "fake jazz" tag so casually foisted upon their contemporaries, such as the Lounge Lizards and Jazz Passengers.

... Gone but not forgotten, these two double discs sets enable one to revisit what is easily some of the most celebratory creative swing music of the culturally oppressive Reagan-Bush years.

Both collections feature excellent cover illustrations from Art Spiegelman and re-mastered sound. ...it's difficult to pick one set over another, let alone choose a single record as their best. One thing the Micros always had working in their favor was consistency.

The History of the Micros, Volume One ... compiles their first two albums ...along with bonus material. ... The band's first record set the stage for the rest of their oeuvre, overflowing with manic energy, witty humor and surprising twists and turns. ...

Combining a mischievous streak with assertive soloing and infectious tunes, the Micros inoculated themselves against cornball post-modernism by virtue of their talent. As long as they were playing, they were on, whether live or in the studio. ...

The second collection, *The History of the Micros, Volume Two*... combines their third and fourth records...with more bonus material...

Their second studio record, *Off Beat Glory* proceeds without a drop in energy or enthusiasm. With a tighter, more cohesive sound, this album presents a somewhat more refined side of the band, including a nuanced cover of Thelonious Monk's "Crepuscule with Nellie." ...

... Their fourth and final album may be their finest statement. While their debut featured them at their ragged best, and *Off Beat Glory* captured them growing into their sound, their last record is easily their most fully realized statement. The writing is more melodious, the harmonies richer, the interplay tighter, the arrangements more intricate, the soloing more extreme and the sonic hijinks even more surreal. Endlessly surprising, the Micros occupied a niche all their own.

Finally available in total, these two sets gather all the recorded music the Micros released in their twelve-year existence. Johnston claims to have well over a hundred unrecorded tunes in their songbook. Who knows what the future holds...”

– Troy Collins, *Bagatellan*, Oct. 11, 2006, www.bagatellan.com

“...it's still a challenge to put The Microscopic Septet in context, mainly because they made a point of stretching context to the breaking point.

Principle stylistic ingredients included swing, jump r'n'b, and early modern jazz, but anything from klezmer to salsa to pretty much anything you could imagine on four reeds and three rhythm got into the mix. ...we aren't supposed to think too hard about “what it all means” anymore than we should let the tongue-in-cheek moments keep us from appreciating the musical intelligence that the micros brought to bear. Detailed notes by founder Philip Johnston and...previously unheard music are among the many attractions that attend...a History of the Micros...”

– Duck Baker, “Take Two: Reissues,” *Coda*, May-June 2007, #133

“...This eclectic band, co-fronted by saxophonist Phillip Johnston and pianist Joel Forrester, was the only combo that kept traditional jazz and new tendencies boiling in the same cauldron by playing music whose motto, according to Johnston, was "break all the rules and respect all the saints". Indeed they were doing just that. ...To say that the Microscopic Septet was made of musicians who can really play their instruments would be an utter understatement. This is a band that swings, yes – but it also rocks, tangos and polkas with the same ease... They sound like a cross of Glenn Miller, Duke Ellington, Stan Kenton and Thelonious Monk in Latin sauce – but they also quote “Hey Jude” and Frank Zappa’s “Zomby Woof” for good measure. The Micros are astonishingly coordinated, their sense of rhythm an ever-present teaching for those “virtuosos” who have no idea about what to do when an odd metre comes around. The pieces are tightly arranged and executed, sounding inextricable and relaxed at the same time; there’s an overall aura of divertissement that renders these four discs a must, much in the way of those fabulous Spike Jones albums...minus the honks and boings. ...Indeed, the Septet’s greatest gift (to us...) is their ability to further open the mind of poor “avant-only” anal retentives who won’t accept anything that came earlier than Albert Ayler... Jazz reissue of 2006, hands down.“

– Massimo Ricci, *Touching Extremes*, spaziowinwind.libero.it/extremes/touchingQZ.htm

“AAJ Publisher’s Picks of the Week: *Seven Men in Neckties*, The Microscopic Septet, Cuneiform Records (2006)

A nearly brassless little big band and a guitarless R&B group all at the same time, the Microscopic Septet was to the 1980s New York Downtown scene something of what the Art Ensemble of Chicago was to its own home town. Both bands were steeped in and respectful of the jazz tradition, but both deconstructed, recalibrated, juggled and played around with its component parts to create affectionate, often witty new amalgams of the old – and intimations of the future. ...

If anything, the Micros addressed an even broader cultural canvas than prime time AEC. As a jazz band rooted in swing and jump jive, albeit heavily mutated versions, Great Black Music...loomed large in the Micros' gumbo. But so did plain old Great Music from all corners of the 20th Century. Country & western, R&B, rock and roll, salsa, klezmer, bop, Dixieland, lounge jazz, minimalism, film noir, barrelhouse and free improvisation were all grist to the Micros, who frequently stirred three or four of these seemingly disparate ingredients into the same pot. ...The Micros certainly had a better developed sense of the ridiculous than just about any jazz outfit before or, so far, after them. ...

The lasting appeal of the music begins with the band's attitude. Soprano saxophonist Phillip Johnston and pianist Joel Forrester...didn't make fun of the music that went before them, or was happening on other scenes around them, they made fun *with* it. ...They keep it antic, but they keep it real too.

...Word is the band has reformed for performances... Will they still be crazy after all these years? That's probably a safe prognosis."

– Chris May, *All About Jazz*, November 07, 2006, www.allaboutjazz.com

"...New York's Microscopic Septet, formed by Sydney saxophonist Phillip Johnston, dared to stir a little anarchy into the arrangements and a little goofiness into the grooves. This double CD could guarantee your money back if you don't smile. 4/5 stars"

– John Shand, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Feb. 23-March 1, 2007

"The other night we had a small party at Lucid Culture headquarters... This is what we played just for fun, and to eliminate any doubt that we practice what we preach. In order: ... Microscopic Septet–Surrealistic Swing

We spun the first of the two brilliant and frequently hilarious cds in this reissue, which is their 1986 album *Off Beat Glory* plus bonus tracks... To some extent, they're the Spinal Tap of jazz, but so much more. A killer party album, as the other night reaffirmed. ..."

– "Party Mix," *Lucid Culture*, Feb 20, 2008, lucidculture.wordpress.com

"...If you are for some reason not familiar with the Microscopic Septet, then you have the lucky opportunity to catch up. The Monk inspiration behind all their work is evident, but is no longer radical. ...The Septet's wit still brings to mind Sun Ra, though the Micros always seem to be winking at us, while the most you ever got out of Ra was the arch of an eyebrow. ...the Microscopic Septet was really Zappa meets Monk, with Sun Ra sitting in on piano. Listening again to this music, I'm now impressed by the baritone of Dave Sewelson...this is at bottom a fine sax quartet with a clever and swinging rhythm section.

If you missed this the first time around, you are indeed in for a treat."

– Phillip McNally, *Cadence*, March 2007

"The theme music to NPR's "Fresh Air" is smart and accessible, its melody punctuated by tricky harmonies and unexpected overtones, its shuffling rhythm hard-swung. It suits Terry Gross's graceful and erudite on-air moves—from news of the day to nostalgia, serious inquiry to relaxed levity... The Microscopic Septet was a wildly idiosyncratic, devastatingly accomplished ensemble that, from first stirrings in 1980 through dissolution in 1992, built a small, devoted following and a big catalog of brilliant tunes.

The septet reunited at the end of November for a brief tour in celebration of two new double CDs. "Seven Men in Neckties" and "Surrealistic Swing," on Cuneiform Records, form a two-volume "History of the Micros"... ... "The Micros projected the fun and liveliness of early jazz." [Terry Gross] said, "but also the harmonic and rhythmic adventurousness of modern music."

... Until I first laid eyes on the group in 1980, I had never seen a frontline of all four saxophones in size order: soprano, alto, tenor and baritone—either a sax choir plus rhythm section, I thought, or a shrunken big band. Nor had I heard anything like this music—sturdily rooted in swing and bebop, yet fluent in the full history of the 20th-century American Music, from stride piano and New Orleans brass band music through free jazz and rock, with various Latin rhythms tossed in along the way.

... the group evolved out of a downtown Manhattan music scene in which stylistic doors were swung open; musicians blended influences without prejudice. ...the blend of disparate elements was seamless in the septet's music, and always within concise song structure.

Full of unexpected contrapuntal elements, the Micros' music offered conceptual counterpoint to late-1980s neo-traditionalists such as trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, who focused attention squarely on a narrow mid-century swath of jazz history. The group anticipated the neo-traditionalist embrace of Duke Ellington and Thelonius Monk as canonical figures and referenced less celebrated early jazz bandleaders such as Fletcher Henderson and John Kirby. It paid tribute to jazz of decades past—making use of early-blues rhythm breaks, for instance, or swing-era sax-section riffs—without losing affection for modern bebop harmonies and the avant-garde's atonal wail. Perhaps most radically, the band lacked both the artsy pretension of many so-called "downtown" bands and the high-minded sanctimony of "uptown" revivalists.

"The music of the 1920s and early '30s was very influential for me," said Mr. Johnston... "I love the concision of that music and the compositional way everything was woven together. The solos were part of the composition..."

"Phillip and I knew that there were various types of music that we both loved..." said Mr. Forrester. ... We both developed compositional styles that moved from one thing to the next strangely. Still, we're both melodist at heart." ...

In true Ellingtonian fashion, Messrs. Johnston and Forrester composed with the personalities of band members in mind. ...

...the songs were the real stars. ...

Mr. Johnston moved to Sydney, Australia, last year. ... Mr. Forrester had initial reservations about a band reunion. "I have my own vast memories of the Micros I can wallow in any time," he said. "Going back there in public didn't call to me. But then we had this rehearsal, and I realized that the music this band plays is singular. I can't make it with any other band."

– Larry Blumenfeld, "The Big Musical Legacy of the Microscopic Septet", *The Wall Street Journal*, December 26, 2006

"...A soprano saxophone player behind whom it's not too difficult to see the shadow of Lacy (in his Monk, and also...Dixieland mode), Johnston had the incredible luck to find musicians who were able to understand the music, and to perform it to perfection - but also in an appropriate way ... Recorded live in the studio in 1982/'83, *Take The Z Train* is the album that in my opinion best represents what I understand as being the initial impulse behind the line-up's origins: without a doubt, it's jazz, of a kind that in the 80s was bound to sound quite strange and decidedly out-of-time, with the reeds often playing in unison, as a section, and with a serious "swing" bent; but there are elements - such as the thematic variety, and a deep understanding of the activity of composing as being equal to "to put together" - which always prevent the music from sounding "revivalistic", and that in some ways underline the consciously "artificial" character of this music. Side One presents a very nice sequence... Side Two is no less beautiful..."

... *Let's Flip* has the Micros travelling the same path as their previous album... The CD gives us what amounts to another LP, presenting unreleased material taken from the same concert; it's stuff that doesn't pale when compared to the released tracks..."

...*Off Beat Glory* is for this writer the group's lowest point... The chosen recorded sound...makes the record sound like "your average jazz record": a round double bass, a big-sounding piano, drums with big toms; there's nothing really "wrong" with the material...but... "garden variety" repertoire.

...*Beauty Based On Science*... is... their last album before splitting up.... In some ways it's their best album alongside their first, from what it differs considerably. While it was always easy to tell one composer from the other, their styles now sound... really different... Forrester pens some very nice episodes with a quite rhythmic bent... and a "circular" melody which will enter your brain without mercy, *The Visit*. ...Johnston starts showing some of the features which will fully show up in his later work: check the "almost-soundtrack" air of *Rocky's Heart*... the Mingus/noir atmosphere of *The Dream Detective*...

... There's an unreleased track... for a planned 7" single. There are also three versions of the Forrester-penned, and Micros-played, theme to the National Public Radio program *Fresh Air*: a theme of great longevity which virtually makes The Microscopic Septet "the most listened-to unknown group in the United States". ..."
– Beppe Colli, *Clouds & Clocks*, Oct. 9, 2006, www.cloudsandclocks.net

“...this collection has got me pretty stoked on The Microscopic Septet as a whole. ... the jazz records that I...gravitate towards are...wedded to...a sense of punk or avant garde aesthetics... This isn't Ornette Coleman jazz, Sun Ra jazz, or Flying Luttendachers jazz: its general orientation is...more straightforward. Nonetheless, when it comes to my usual knee jerk reactions to the standard, normative sounds of relatively contemporary jazz (that despite its pretensions of “improvisation,” it regurgitates dead musical forms; that it lacks passion or a sense of abandon; that it's overly trained or academic; that it just fails to hold my interest), I find them largely inapplicable to The Micros whose music is not particularly new to me but is still innovative and generally engaging regardless.

My favorite example of this from *Surrealistic Swing* occurs with the track “The Dream Detective” ... a low-key ballad of brass/reed washes with a piercing emotionality that perpetually wavers between the haunting and sentimental, and the smutty and pornographic. The track “In The Mission”...also has a similar air of contradicted poignancy to it, oscillating as it does between the solemnity of its core musical themes and a few minor eruptions into hedonistic rumbas and swing-inflected interludes. With triumphs such as these under their belt, it would have been hard for me *not* to come to appreciate The Microscopic Septet.”
– Germ Ross, *Art Noise*, Nov. 30, 2006, www.deadmetaphor.com

“Two decades after the Microscopic Septet's heyday, their carnival-esque take on jazz — upside-down Monk and Dixieland Sun Ra, gutbucket R&B and oompah Latin — still turns heads. Back in the '80s, when Wynton Marsalis was turning back the clock and John Zorn was just “that guy who plays duck calls,” the Micros were completely out-of-step with what anyone expected “jazz” to sound like. Cuneiform's two-part (four-CD) reissue of the Micros' albums is a timely reminder of their inventiveness and fire. ...two things make every track worth hearing: Joel Forrester's sparkling piano, which is equally comfortable with Monkish angularity or Latin-jazz dazzle, and Forrester and Philip Johnston's compositions — labyrinthine jazz fantasias that turn corner after corner without succumbing to ADD jumpiness. ...”
– Nate Dorward, *Exclaim!*, May 2007

“... The Microscopic Septet, a great New York jazz group that blissfully blurred the distinction between "outside" and "inside" music for a dozen... Their *Seven Men in Neckties: The History of the Micros, Vol. 1* and *Surrealistic Swing: The History of the Micros, Vol. 2* are well worth checking out...”
– Richard Gehr, “Music for Grownups,” *AARP Blog*, July 27, 2007

“Meet the downtown New York jazz group active since the 1980s which manages to encompass an unfeasibly large swathe of jazz history — from Dixieland to experimental, Duke Ellington to Albert Ayler and beyond. A reissue of two of their 80s albums has just hit the market as *Surrealistic Swing*.”
– Brent Clough, *The Daily Planet*, December 12, 2006