

what the press has said about:

WADADA LEO SMITH

SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS

CUNEIFORM (RUNE 290/91) 2009

GOLDEN QUINTET (Disc 1) Lineup:

Wadada Leo Smith (trumpet), Vijay Iyer (piano, Fender Rhodes and synthesizer), John Lindberg (bass), Pheeroan AkLaff (drums), Don Moye (drums)

ORGANIC (Disc 2) Lineup:

Wadada Leo Smith (trumpet), Nels Cline (guitar), Michael Gregory (guitar), Brandon Ross (guitar), Lamar Smith (guitar), Okkyung Lee (cello), John Lindberg (double bass), Skuli Sverrisson (electric bass), Pheeroan AkLaff (drums)

"*Spiritual Dimensions* is a two-CD set by visionary trumpeter, composer and musical thinker Wadada Leo Smith. ... The musicianship is of the highest calibre, with the likes of Vijay Iyer, Pheeroan AkLaff and Don Moye involved, and Smith has one of the more gorgeous trumpet sounds on the planet. There is a depth to the music that is bracing almost beyond words. [4.5 / 5 stars]"

- Mike Chamberlain, *Ottawa Express*, January 7, 2010, www.ottawapress.ca

"... A notable exception to this read-before-you-listen approach to avant-garde music is the extraordinary musical legacy of composer/trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith. ... Smith has somehow managed to wed an elaborately idiosyncratic aesthetic theory, social philosophy, and system of musical notation to a body of music with the directness, loveliness, and immediate appeal of more traditional forms of music.

... On my favorite Smith recordings—*Divine Love* (ECM, 1978), *Yo Miles!* (Shanachie, 1998), and *America* (Tzadik), last year's spirited duet with percussionist Jack DeJohnette—he presents a collection of compositions and performances worthy of comparison (in both their compositional innovation and technical mastery) to the finest recordings of John Coltrane and Miles Davis. And like the work of his distinguished antecedents, Smith's best work requires little or no formal conceptual orientation to appreciate. All you have to do is listen.

Smith's newest release, *Spiritual Dimensions*, may be the strongest and most enjoyable recording of the lot. ...the double-CD release includes separate performances by two of Smith's favorite musical cohorts, the Golden Quintet ...and the ten-piece big band *Organic* ... In combination, the two performances provide a fairly exhaustive catalogue of Smith's range as a composer and instrumentalist, and an ideal introduction to the various sources of his musical appeal.

One major source of Smith's appeal is the fullness and purity of his instrumental tone. In the proud, muscle-and-finesse tradition of Louis Armstrong and Miles Davis, Smith masterfully balances deep, powerful, diaphragmatic propulsion with the restraint and precision with which he articulates individual notes. ...It's a level of technical mastery and tonal precision that is all too rare in both experimental and non-experimental music—and one that provides Smith's most challenging and seemingly avant-garde performances with a directness and clarity ...

For examples of Smith's tonal mastery on *Spiritual Dimensions*, check out...the lush, lonely, elegantly Davis-like theme that opens "Joy: Spiritual Fire: Joy" (on the *Organic* disc). The...performance is the singular instrumental achievement of the recording, with the broad, muted drones of the cello and guitars sprouting from Smith's clear, lovely phrases like blossoms from a vibrant stem.

Another reason for Smith's broad appeal is the playful, engaging nature of his foundational aesthetic theory and compositional technique, which he calls Ankhramation. For Smith, all music can be traced to the vital life force through which the seemingly disparate pulses and voices of nature miraculously converge into a vibrant whole. The cohesive force behind this transformation is the "spirit-drum," a primordial rhythm ...

In Smith's compositions and performances, rhythm as such is not dependent on traditionally percussive instruments or techniques but is inherent in the natural patterns through which sounds and silences collect...

... The form and the spirit of Davis are all over the place on *Spiritual Dimensions*, particularly on the funk-driven improvisations of both the small and full ensemble treatments of "South Central L.A. Kulture." ... Smith and his respective crews masterfully employ Davis's trademark technique of threading the same musical phrase...across multiple movements and tracks. ...

Smith's spirit-drum aesthetic is illustrated most convincingly on "Organic" ...where the dense, incrementally accruing improvisation suggests the organic cacophony of insects, birds, bullfrogs, gusts of wind, and splashing water in and around an isolated pond at night. Each of the instruments...momentarily rises to the surface of the mix, before emptying back into the overall rhythmic blur. ... For Smith, the roaring wails and fierce rhythmic phrases that emerge and disappear and eventually emerge again are simply selective amplifications of the animating rhythm that was always already there, just waiting to be heard and followed by both composer and musician. ...

A final critical factor in the appeal of the music is Smith's refreshing enthusiasm for earlier musical traditions. Unlike many other musical innovators and experimental theorists, Smith stubbornly refuses to favorably contrast the merits of his own theories and compositions with the ...more conventional forms. Instead, he draws aggressively and joyfully from the past—from popular to classical forms—finding corroborative evidence of the rhythmic life force in even the most seemingly pedestrian musical traditions."

- David Shirley, *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 2010, <http://www.brooklynrail.org>

"... *Spiritual Dimensions*...presents Smith in a context that takes in the furthest reaches of his imagination even as it thrills via its precisely articulated group sound. The first disc features a version of his Golden Quintet, ... The second features his *Organic* group...

...there's a freshness and vitality to this music that makes these two live dates more than simply a nod to small group records like *Tabligh* and to the Yo Miles projects. The Golden Quintet recording...smolders from the outset. But nothing about it sounds content to settle into dark... this group's sound is all about subtle inflections and gestures that resonate hugely, the well chosen word that alters the page as it were. Iyer's contributions are crucial in this regard, with tons of space in his playing and really intense (but never overbearing) electric incisions. Smith absolutely thrives in a context like this, his trumpet a generator of roiling color, at times sounding like molten ore or like sun strafing. He's absolutely riveting on his long feature at the beginning of "Pacifica," muted and ominous as he wends his way sinuously through the tension-filled space. ...it's a music that's defined by context and a shared commitment to the sound. The most powerful moments are the ones where the players seem to melt into each other, like the hush of "Crossing Sirat" or the outrageous raveup "South Central L.A. Kulture," ...

... the *Organic*...tracks...are filled with swirling electronics and deep, nasty funk. Sverrisson's huge flapping bass anchors "Angela Davis," which in some ways is the standout from this band. ...Okkyung Lee sounds absolutely sizzling here, with overtones and slashes flying around all over the place. ...it's an absolute delight to listen to the three very different guitarists. ... It's pure lightning, with seamless interweaving of themes, color, and harmony, as different sub-groupings join Smith and Lee as they wander the tune's swaggering thickets. ...

Spiritual Dimensions is about as authentic as you could hope for, music that brims with possibility and reveals new dimensions on each listen. A marvelous crystallization of what makes Smith's music so fantastic."

- Jason Bivins, *Dusted*, February 3, 2010, www.dustedmagazine.com

"For a long time, trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith has pushed the boundaries of experimental jazz. ... *Spiritual Dimensions*...finds him exploring two

different pathways: meditative free music and electrifying experimental funk. What the two approaches share is a deeply spiritual bent, and the fact that both bands were recorded live helps to propagate the feeling of an intense musical congregation.

...The Golden Quintet...create hypnotizing rhythmic patterns, which are punctuated by Smith's transcendental lines. ...

If the Golden Quartet focuses on pure percussive rhythms, then Wadada Leo Smith's *Organic*, with its overwhelming line-up...is an exploration of the texture of strings. The music owes something to Miles Davis' electric recordings of the seventies...but the trumpeter still manages to carve his own sonic territory.

From the elegiac opening on the second version of "South Central L.A. Kulture" to the spaced out soundscapes and spiky funk of "Organic," Smith creates a unique world of sound where rhythms are more than mere earthly creations, but rather something which aspires to a beauty of metaphysical proportions." - Jakob Baekgaard, *All About Jazz*, www.allaboutjazz.com

"The exploratory trumpeter follows up last year's triumphal *Tabligh* with a reshuffled quartet and goes himself one better by adding an excursion into electronic territory. The first CD...employs his compositional skills in ways that leave the listener unsure what is written, what is suggested and what is pure spontaneous invention. That is as it should be when this kind of music succeeds. ...

CD 2...introduces a phalanx of electrified strings commanded by the formidable guitarist Nels Cline. It begins not with an onslaught but in a continuation of the trumpet soliloquy, full of introspection, with which Smith concluded the first "South Central L.A. Kulture" track on CD 1... Smith continues to build the sound with the slow assurance of a practiced hypnotist, allowing each player enough individual expression to add interest without detracting from the whole. ...CD 2 unfolds, with wit, taste and restraint in the use of resources. In his later years, Miles Davis led the way to this kind of music... he lifted a veil to show younger artists a new landscape. Wadada Leo Smith is one who transmogrified that vision into a personal and highly effective way of making music. ..." - Doug Ramsey, *Riffides*, November 2009

"...Smith possesses an innate sense of note placement and playing the silence between the notes as much of the notes themselves. He's got a full, rich tone that just short of Lest Bowie brassy. And while there's are traces of the blues in his vocabulary, Smith has got technique by the bucketfuls; his breath control, mastery of sonorities and range exceed most anyone else wielding a trumpet who has come before him or since. ... It's not at all an exaggeration to say that the guy is visionary.

...Smith unveiled...the ambitious double-CD *Spiritual Dimensions*... Much as Ornette Coleman had given us two sides of himself on one album by presenting two distinct bands on it...so is Smith giving his fans more facets of his art. ...

The first gig...showcases his Golden Quintet. ... The second performance...featured Smith's Organic band. ...

The nimbler Golden Quintet is mostly acoustic and its abstract articulation uses sound, rhythm and silence effectively for improvisation that's most likely scored, using the principles of Smith's "Ahkreationvention"...ideas are allowed to fully develop, but rarely repeat. "Akl-Ahdhilli's Litany of the Seas: Sunrise" set the tone with a boiling cauldron of probing folk tones, Cecil Taylor swells (by Iyer) and unsettled African rhythms. Smith's clear-toned trumpet cuts through the din like a spear, feeding off the band and staying above it. That sets the tone for the entire disk. ...

Smith not only invites comparisons of his two bands, he practically forces the issue: the closing Golden Quintet track "South Central L.A. Kulture" is performed again as the first track of the Organic side. ... Smith sculpted two opposing personalities for the same song. ...

... Wadada Leo Smith explains, "the experiment is with ensembles, as opposed to musical style and language. I use the same language. All of the music I ever write can be played by any one of my ensembles." Smith's musical vision is constant, but the way his band members react to it so differently makes the music a living, evolving organism. That's hardly a new concept, but you probably won't find anyone carrying out that concept any better than either of Wadada Leo Smith's bands did for this album."

- S. Victor Aaron, *Something Else!*, December 13, 2009, www.somethingelsereviews.com

"...*Spiritual Dimensions* is a two-disc set with the Golden Quartet (expanded to a quintet)...on the first disc, and his *Organic Group* live...on the second. ...the adventurous first disc...features Smith's concepts of each individual player as an autonomous improviser existing in a naturalistic world in which time is an element of space. It is fascinating listening - filled with starts, stops, abstract solo outbursts and silence and aggressive group improvisation: this is not the Longines Symphonette. The second disc leans even more heavily toward Miles Davis' electric period with...a plethora of electric guitarists...added to the fray. Davis is clearly the biggest influence on Smith's sound (although he also cites Booker Little and Louis Armstrong). ...this disc is funkier than the first, while also engaging in electronic soundscapes - reminiscent of Davis' *Tribute to Jack Johnson* and *Pangaea*. Interesting music and a great introduction to Smith..."

- Brad Walseth, *JazzChicago.net*, 12/2009, www.jazzchicago.net

"A thrilling double album by the adventurous trumpeter, Wadada Leo Smith, *Spiritual Dimensions* spotlights two remarkable bands that both deliver with an intensity and skill that'll give any open-minded jazz fan goosebumps. ... The first disc features the Golden Quintet... A more traditional ensemble, the Quintet plays with a style that compliments Smith's use of space and abstraction. With a nod to Miles Davis's simmering early to mid-1970s electric period, the second disc is a full-on powerhouse that boasts Smith's Organic group... A master improviser and composer...at 67 years of age, Wadada Leo Smith has proven that he's only getting stronger with age.

- Douglas Newman, *JAMSBIO magazine*, October 6th, 2009, magazine.jamsbio.com

...the first CD...is very much in the same vein as "Tabligh", a high quality and quite creative mix of composed improvisations, and a fantastic illustration of what five virtuosi can accomplish together. Smith's compositions are abstract, expansive, soaring, angular, sophisticated. The quintet is brains and emotions, and spirit.

...the second CD...is more inspired by the electric Miles, and although the hypnotic rhythms, the electric bass and the electric guitars are omnipresent, so is the spirituality of Smith's trumpet playing. ... Despite this heavy line-up, the music keeps the clarity and discipline we've come to expect from Wadada Leo Smith. ... Smith's compositions are expansive, linear, soaring, rhythmic, funky. The Ensemble is body and emotions, and spirit. ...five-star rating! ...listen to it, and your heart leaps, your body shakes and your mind ... is out in the stratospheres"

- Stef, *Free Jazz*, October 7, 2009

"... Wadada Leo Smith has been...rarely more accessible than on the massive "Spiritual Dimensions,"...which unfolds over nearly two hours. The first disc...offers Smith's trademark beautifully pensive trumpet with plenty of space and wisdom, punctuated by cutting-edge pianist Vijay Iyer and bassist John Lindberg. It's lovely, open-ended and typical of what Smith has been offering for decades.

It's the second disc...that makes "Dimensions" a contender for best avant-jazz release of the year; a deep excursion into slow, twisted funk that is unlike anything else in recent memory. ...the music is...multilayered, dense and holds up to repeated listening... If you're interested in the continued evolution of these brilliant artists, you should hear both the Threadgill and Smith sets."

- Bret Saunders, *Denver Post*, October 18, 2009, www.denverpost.com

"Smith presents two different bands on this two-CD set... The first group...is a fine complement to the drama of Smith's trumpet lines. The contrast is particularly marked between Smith and Iyer. Almost every note the trumpeter plays is drenched in significance, a brassy blast of sound or muffled introspection. Carrying on the line of Miles Davis, Smith is a minimalist orator who must make sure every syllable is charged. ... This is an intense set, with AkLaff and Moye embellishing the skein of rhythmic particles that highlights Smith's testament. Lindberg is a fine soloist as well as a supporting player, and he shines ...

...the Organic's performance...on the second CD... includes... A dense undergrowth of chattering, processed guitars and funk rhythms appears almost immediately... Smith and company find a kind of heightened musical street vernacular compounded of bending guitars, trebly drones, Lee's dissonant cello bowing, and Smith's own wary, incisive, bleats and smears. ...
... Smith's electric project, funk functioning as community rather than commerce. ... seems to take the trumpeter to another level of interaction, with a band that's both more intense and more inventive. It's not to be missed. "

- *Stuart Broomer*, *Point of Departure*, Issue 25 - October 2009, <http://www.pointofdeparture.org>

"... Smith is noted for his adventurous and unfettered free jazz approach. His Golden Quartet...outings are some of his most accessible. That said, the live sound of *Spiritual Dimensions* has a freer, more abstract feeling... The turbulence factor gets ratcheted up with the addition of the extra drummer, making the music sound darker, more foreboding.

...the Golden Quintet...makes music that seems set apart from the concept of time--drifting, scattered rhythms, unexpected, dreamscape interventions from Iyer and Smith, whose trumpet playing ranges from brassy and straight-ahead to echoing, to harsh and anguished. The searching quality of the sound ends abruptly with the last Golden Quintet tune...a deep, dense funk boils up, sounding like a rawer, meaner Miles Davis on *On the Corner* ...with Iyer synthesizing wah-wah guitar sounds from his keyboard, while Smith's trumpet also goes guitar-ish, with a sharp, stinging metallic sound on this fifteen minute-plus tour de force. ...

With the ambitious *Spiritual Dimensions*, Wadada Leo Smith has created a strangely entrancing music, and one of his finest recordings."

- Dan McClenaghan, *All About Jazz*, November 30, 2009, www.allaboutjazz.com

"...my 2009 best-of list...the most enthralling jazz is being created by artists well beyond the age of 60. ...it does tell us that we have a lot to learn from our creative-minded elders.

1. Wadada Leo Smith, "Spiritual Dimensions" (Cuneiform): Some of the densest avant- funk ever recorded is on the second disc, accentuated by Smith's trumpet, which gets as harsh as Miles Davis at his most apocalyptic. The first disc is more in the vein of (by now) "conventional" outside jazz — but it's similarly inspired. There was no better display of where the music has been and where it can go. ..."

- Bret Saunders, *Denver Post*, December 27, 2009, www.denverpost.com

"Trumpet legend Wadada Leo Smith offers an array of persuasive contrasts... On disc-one, the Golden Quintet generates a sliding-scale view of song-forms and improvisational jaunts. With acoustic pianist Vijay Iyer's, clustering chords and intermittent synth treatments, the musicians delve into broad soundscapes and climatically-oriented motifs. Smith's resonating and often, yearning lines spearhead a free-form and thoroughly expressionistic gala, subdivided by highs, lows and power-packed movements.

On "Umar at the Dome of the Rock, parts 1 & 2," bassist John Lindberg follows drummers, Don Moye and Pheeroan AkLaff's swirling intro via an extended and rhythmically intense divide-and-conquer mission. With "South Central L.A. Kulture," the ensemble lays out a free-jazz, soul induced groove, appropriately emphasized by Iyer's corpulent synth bass notes. Consequently, the artists impart a surrealistic portraiture of the heart of Los Angeles.

Disc-two captures Organic live... Spiced with ethereal effects and mid-tempo backbeats, Smith rides atop Lindberg...and Skuli Sverrisson's ... punchy bass parts along with the guitarists' angular fills or edgy treatments. They dish out four extended avant, jazz-fusion works, hinting at a new-age approach to Miles Davis' early 1970's funk-drenched jazz-fusion galas. Here, Smith's piercing and sometimes, raspy phrasings spark loping patterns and the group's rebel-rousing breakouts, hued with spacey meltdowns into a cosmic void. Various sounds dart across your listening space, as the musicians use depth, tonal color and the element of surprise at various intervals. It's a double-barreled extravaganza that offers a multi-tiered and polytonal insight into Smith's musicality, all enhanced by the instrumentalists' emotively-charged assault."

- Glenn Astarita, *Ejazznews*, February 03, 2010, www.ejazznews.com

"This double-disc catches two live recordings by two very different bands led by the avant-garde trumpeter. For all the lack of traditional harmony in these performances...this is accessible music, music that feels natural and communicative. The first disc...lets Vijay Iyer play beautiful, expansive acoustic piano solos that always have structure. The second disc presents a multi-guitar funk orchestra that is subtle and precise despite its size.

All of this music can be seen as part of Smith's ongoing interest in refracting the sound and legacy of Miles Davis. Though Davis had little interest in the avant-garde, Smith has appropriated Davis's plaintive sound and interest in the role of silence in jazz, but he has done so in contexts that free his playing from most traditional harmony. ...

The performance by Smith's acoustic "Golden Quintet" is wide-open but lyrical. Iyer and Smith get plenty of solo space, but there is also room for bassist...and drummers...to jam in thumping free dialogue. What impresses is...clearly articulated avant-whirlings of trumpet and piano...also the straight-up funk of "South Central L.A. Kulture". Surprises.

The funk band...deals in pastels too. Its "Organic" whispers out of the gates, with the many guitars...never getting in each other's way. The groove takes its time kicking in, with AkLaff again at the center, but the Davis-like funk gives way in episodes to a rock guitar feeling, then a meditative bass solo, then a free-time trumpet excursion with ballad feeling, and then a slinky new funk feeling. There is nothing obvious about this material. And though its debt to Davis is plain, Smith makes clear throughout these two discs that his interest is in pushing farther down some of the dead-ends left by the genius rather than merely creating more tributes to him.

Wadada Leo Smith has never seemed more essential and easy to listen to... He's on a roll, or perhaps my ears are finally catching up to him."

- Will Layman, *PopMatters*, January 12, 2010, www.popmatters.com

“... The music from both groups teems with immediacy and vigor, Smith's bold trumpet at its centre. I appreciate that Smith deals with musical fundamentals -- the Organic Resonance band lays down some mighty, earthy grooves -- up on which he and his musicians venture into the unknown. Most of the collection's tracks are long -- in particular with the Organic Resonance disc -- but the jamming always feels as if it's moving forward. ...Smith's coterie of string-players...co-operate marvelously to create churning, evolving soundscapes. Jazz, whether it's avant-garde, modern mainstream or veterans digging deep into tradition, most impresses and moves me when it hits me emotionally and cerebrally, leaves me feeling that the musicians are giving their all, committed to creating something bold, thrilling and personal. By these measures, Smith's music is a giant win.”

-Peter Hum, *Ottawa Citizen / JazzBlog.ca / Ottawa Jazz*, February 4 2010

“... On...Spiritual Dimensions, he's surrounded by strings: His band Organic has two basses, a cello and a gaggle of electric guitarists, including Wilco's Nels Cline. The band can re-create Miles Davis' '70s funk with eerie fidelity, but it also puts its own spin on the idiom. "Organic" features powerhouse drummer and longtime Smith ally Pheeroan akLaff, who also appears on the other half of Smith's Spiritual Dimensions, in his Golden Quintet... This band can evoke Davis, too, but the reggae beat is its own twist.

...Smith's trumpet functions as the calm eye of the storm. His sound is raw but lyrical, full of big gestures but intimate somehow. He's not the most technical player, but he's very expressive. In all that, Smith recalls the late Don Cherry. That trumpeter had a very different sound, but was also a musical nomad at home in all sorts of situations. When it comes to making music with the right ideals, Wadada Leo Smith couldn't be in better company.”

- Kevin Whitehead, *NPR: Fresh Air*, www.npr.org

“...Wadada Leo Smith...must be one of the best trumpeters alive. Although emanating from a '60s free jazz Chicago tradition light years removed from Armstrong's '20s Dixieland, Smith's palette of breathy, tonal colorations owe a debt to the pioneering trumpeter. The first disc situates Smith in the traditional, acoustic context of his Golden Quintet, which he leads through improvisations from the rumblings of “Al-Shadhili's Litany of the Sea” to the mournful “South Central L.A. Kulture.” The second disc puts Smith in the context of his larger, electrified Organic group, and launches with an eerie take on the latter song. ...Smith's acoustic and electric sides... shows himself to be one of the most flexible, expressive trumpeters alive today. “ - Dan Grunebaum, *Metropolis*, Mar 25, 2010, metropolis.co.jp

“The word magic keeps coming to mind. If we knew exactly where the magic came from, it wouldn't be magic. But it has something to do with the way the toms of Pheeroan AkLaff and Art Ensemblist Don Moye rub against each other, creating not so much a beat as an incantation. And it has something to do with the sparkly piano powder that Vijay Iyer tosses out of his bag. It's in Wadada Leo Smith's concentrated trumpet tone, and in the dark recesses of John Lindberg's bass. Together. The cover photo of a patchwork quilt, with diverse elements coming together in appealing symmetry, sends the right message.

Talkin' about the first disc of "Spiritual Dimensions," featuring Smith's Golden Quintet... The Golden designation is an extra-special one, denoting the value of a truly sympathetic group; the deep AACM roots of Smith and Moye provide a source from which the younger members can extend family branches, making this...recording one of the few that resonates on the same wavelength as '60s productions by Bill Dixon, Albert Ayler or Cecil Taylor.

The album awakens and stretches, then sends up gale warnings, engages in animal festivities, conjures up spirits that appear and disappear. The drums establish a physical heart massage; the musicians pair off or solo with natural confidence, inspiration and skill, showing off the rapport they've developed over the years. Over the first four tracks, this brilliant abstract mood dominates. Then Smith shifts gears for the final...epic, "South Central L.A. Kulture" -- and ohmygod. Lindberg adopts a stalking wah bass riff to seize the center as the drums jostle him like a street crowd; Iyer switches to dweebly synthesizer before adopting grandiose Cuban acoustic flourishes; Smith finishes with electrified grit. And you have just FELT the song's title.

"Kulture" puts Smith's individualized slant on early-'70s Miles Davis. For a more literal "Live/Evil"-style Miles tribute, proceed...Disc 2 for an entirely different take on "Kulture" by Smith's Organic ensemble. ... The concluding track sandwiches the scary glass towers of "Spiritual Fire" between the two beautiful exhalations of "Joy" to leave you a satisfied customer.

Throughout his fearless career, Wadada Leo Smith has shot arrows in many different directions. This time, he's crowding the bullseye.”

- Greg Burk, *Metal Jazz*, January 21, 2010, www.metaljazz.com

“...On the first disc, the percussion input is doubled, making what formerly was a Golden quartet a quintet; while on disc two, with the Organic ensemble, the string section includes not only bass, electric bass and cello, but also features at least three and sometimes four electric guitarists. ... To get an idea of the different strategies, compare the quintet's version of “South Central L.A. Kulture” with the one done by the nonet. The former...features a core groove section involving cascading echoes and repetitive modulations from the synthesizer plus backbeat drumming. But this doesn't stop Iyer from chording distinctively or exposing with high-frequency key fanning and forte glissandi. Meantime Smith's flutter tonguing is expressed in flanges and distended breaths. Altering the tonal centre by the final variant, the trumpeter sums up the theme a capella with electrified reverb.

...the nonet version of the tune seems to serendipitously pick up where the first version ended. Right from the top, unaccompanied echoing grace notes and braying reverb from the trumpeter are heard, quickly followed by the almost opaque coloration of four electric guitars. Slurring engorged and distorted tone rows skywards, the multiplied flanges mean that this “South Central...” moves in allegro and agitato fashion in contrast to the andante pace of the quintet version. With the two basses and drummer leaning into the pulsating beat, Smith's rubato changes are answered by a contrapuntal guitar licks. Later, cross flanging and distorted phaser fills from three guitarists gear into overdrive on “Organic”. The resulting tessitura is angular and cross-wired when the thumb-popped electric bass licks are audible, but is also sliced contrapuntally with cellist Lee's sharp cuts.

...“Angela Davis”...Sluicing and slithering electric bass patterns, heavy drum ruffs plus antipodal guitar-hero licks...solidify and expand the deep-funk groove until the resulting rasgueado reaches the six-string equivalent of reed multiphonics. Meanwhile the cellist's pedal point riffs skitter and saw through the interface. As Lee's spiccato lines ascend and descend they're matched with concentrated trumpet flutter-tonguing that only stands aside for further guitar lick distortion. Smith's soaring tremolo first parallels the guitarists' variations, then, following a pause created by AkLaff's cymbal resonance, constructs a coda of chromatic lines seconded by moderato-pitched cello stops.

Lacking the string section, on the Golden Quintet disc, it's Iyer and Lindberg who join Smith to create the proper response to the dual drummers' double-timed backbeat, ruffs and flams. With the trumpeter often linear and graceful in his parts during "Umar at the Dome of the Rock, Parts 1 & 2", for instance, the pianist's high-frequency dynamics and the bassist's guitar-like flanging prevent the backing for these tunes from degenerating into no more than percussion discussions. Using the power generated by slapping the wood on his instrument's belly and waist, plus snaps on his bass neck, Lindberg creates enough space for Smith's bugle-like chromatic notes to elongate tones without splintering and define the parameters of the selection.

"Al-Shadhili's Litany of the Sea: Sunrise" is more of the same, with the moderato composition sustained by Smith's sluicing grace notes – which seem to vibrate internally as well as splutter externally – plus presto runs and emphasized arpeggios from Iyer's keys. Buzzing acro slides and parsed piano chords enliven the performance's mid section, which concludes in stop-time.

Offering two contexts in which to appreciate Smith's compositional smarts and different bands' fulfillment of his ideas, *Spiritual Dimensions* may be the definitive recorded set for capturing the trumpeter's unique musical visions. ...

-- Ken Waxman, J A Z Z W O R D R E V I E W S, May 27, 2010, www.jazzword.com

You can still apply the word legendary to a few jazz musicians today, and one of them is trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith. One of that group of musicians who came together in Chicago under the catchall Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), he played with Anthony Braxton, and later made a couple of albums for the ECM label.

Still, a lot of his recorded music is difficult to come by, so a new double album by the man is extremely welcome. There are two different bands here: on CD1 is Smith's Golden Quintet, with Vijay Iyer on piano and synth, John Lindberg on bass, and Pheeroan AkLaff and Don Moye on drums; CD2 features a bigger band called Organic and comprising four guitars (Michael Gregory, Brandon Ross, Nels Cline and Lamar Smith) Okkyung Lee on cello, Skuli Sverrisson on electric bass, with Lindberg on acoustic bass and AkLaff again on drums.

The Golden Quintet roams wide and free, managing to be pretty busy players yet still leave a nice amount of space in the music. Smith creates energy with swift outbursts, then lays back, while Iyer and Lindberg lay down spikey beds of complex harmony. The drummers roll and tumble together in a constant swirl. Three tracks near the quarter-hour mark with two briefer interludes. This is a live performance from the 2008 Vision Festival in New York, and it's great to hear the strong ties between the '60s avant-garde and the '00s scene, of which Iyer is one of the leading lights, made manifest.

Organic sets Smith's powerful, declamatory trumpet sailing upon an ocean of electric guitar sustain and distortion, cello and bass guitar. Given the electricity involved, it's extraordinary how natural the sound is – an electric space storm perhaps... Once the drums enter, the beats get funkier and it's a bit like a new progression of electric Miles (Smith was at one time in a Davis influenced band called Yo Miles!).

There is a strong link between the two bands, and in fact the final piece from the Golden Quintet and the opener of the Organic disc are versions of the same piece: South Central L.A. Kulture.

A great double disc release with both strong links and strong contrasts – one free and acoustic, the other funky and electric, both with a political force and a spiritual depth. And you just wouldn't want to be without either.

In case you have difficulties finding this in the shops, here's a tip. I saw one just last Friday in Polar Bear, the finest independent record shop in the Midlands. It's in York Road, Kings Heath, Birmingham...

And news just in is that Wadada Leo Smith will be playing in London on 2 and 3 May – the first concert in a trio with Louis Moholo and Steve Noble on drums, the second with Pat Thomas on piano and electronics, John Coxons on guitar, and Alex Ward and Paul Lytton on drums. Both are part of the Freedom Of The City Festival at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square. ...

- Peter Bacon, *TheJazzBreakfast*, February 8, 2010

Makes me happy to have ears. Improv Jazz that takes improvisation and twists it anew into something not only heard, but into a figure at times, a shape or form. This music keeps me guessing and wanting to be a part of a this in a live setting. Of course Wadada Leo Smith takes the trumpet to all levels of new and beyond, and i mean deep in the portions of my mind where my ears must have dug a secret tunnel, this trumpet sound found a place to gather...allowing me extra time to digest and think it through. The Golden Quintet was recorded live at Vision XIII in June of 2008 and features Vijay Iyer on piano/synthesizer, John Lindberg on bass and Pheeroan AkLaff on drums. The Organic portions was recorded live in New Haven at Firehouse 12 in April of 2009. Featuring Michael Gregory on electric guitar, Brandon Ross on electric guitar, Nels Cline on 6/12 string electric guitar, Okkyung Lee on cello, Skuli Sverrisson on electric bass, John Lindberg on acoustic bass and Pheeroan AkLaff on drums.

- Mister G, **Green Arrow Radio, October 27th, 2009**, www.greenarrowradio.com

Both CDs of this double issue capture the full range of Smith's spiky trills, sharp blasses and hauntingly muted trumpet melodies. The first CD features his long-running acoustic Golden Quintet with Vijay Iyer outstanding on high-energy piano. The second surrounds Smith with a wash of electric guitars, two basses and a lone funky drummer.

Smith soars over each band's unfolding textures, many-layered rhythms and rumbling urgency, confident in the ensemble support he initiates and

guides. "South Central L.A. Culture", a common theme for both bands, simply drips with nocturnal menace.
- Mike Hobart, *Financial Times*, September 4 2010, www.ft.com

Wadada Leo Smith illustrates by example how art and funk can coexist. It's a marvellous thing to hear the groove being so beautifully dropped into trance vibe and in the same release being able to hear complex improvisations sparkle with colour and life. On this double CD, each disc features a radically different ensemble, yet both are very much steeped in Smith's iconic vision of contemporary black music. From Miles Davis -style stoner throb to referencing the Art Ensemble of Chicago's sweeping African narratives, Smith and ensembles take the music and spray-bomb the air like multi-armed graffiti ninjas.
- Nilan Perera, *Exclaim!*, December 2010, www.exclaim.ca

"... The sound of Leo Smith's trumpet, acoustic or played through a wah-wah pedal, is always bright and direct, whether engaging in piercing mournful cries, darting melodic interplay, or punchy, jabbing blasts and flourishes. Smith is an exceptionally strong player – by which I don't mean that he's aggressively macho. Rather, his strength comes from his ability to impart authority, leadership, organisation, even when he seems to be staying in the background; it comes from his ability to choose the right note, the right phrase at the right time. As he puts it, "in music it's an aesthetic where the notion of sincerity takes place. For example, it would be inappropriate to play a note or a phrase or a rhythm that you didn't feel."¹ Consequently, his presence is felt when he chooses *not* to play almost as much as when he does: interjecting with a brief phrase that somehow seems to clarify and bring together what the rest of the band has been playing in his absence, opening up a direction which may then be switched as he comes in again, a few minutes later, with a totally new idea. There's a lot riding on the use of space, on the use of pauses, re-starts, back-tracks, proclamations, declamations, declarations, statements, articulations: for though this is music, and not the language of spoken conversation, speech is always at the back of whatever Smith plays, as it is with Ornette Coleman or with any blues player worth their salt. The emotional openness, the tempering of strength with vulnerability, might seem removed from the language of public speech – at least, to a generation grown cynical at the blandishments of corrupt politicians and establishment figures. Despite this, one would do well to remember that the music is performed in public (by which I don't just mean the audience; for both they and the other musicians in the band are at once participants and witnesses to what any one musician is doing). What we hear on 'Spiritual Dimensions' melds interior and exterior, form and feeling, collective ritual and individual consideration into a whole that might very well be described as 'organic'.

Smith's trumpet is very much the lead voice on these nine lengthy pieces, spread over two discs, but the bands are quite different. The Golden Quartet, here expanded to a Quintet through the addition of an extra drummer, has been one of Smith's major projects of recent years, and though the personnel changes from one release to the next (Anthony Davis, Malachi Favors, Jack deJohnette and Ronald Shannon Jackson are all previous members of the group), a definite continuity is maintained. In general, one might say that the emphasis is on free improvisation (I'm aware that Smith would claim that *all* his music is 'free', that such labels as 'free jazz' or 'free improvisation' are a constricting imposition on open creativity, and he's probably right – nonetheless, I hope that using such a journalistic short-cut allows for a clear description of what can be heard in the music). 'Al-Shadhili's Litany of the Sea: Sunrise' opens with a barely-audible synthesizer wash before John Lindberg's twanging bass figures (at once providing a sense of certain ground and sure placing, and leaving room for a world of potentialities) and Vijay Iyer's sonorous piano lay the ground for Smith, taking his time, building up statements with an under-stated force and clarity to them. It's tempting to draw parallels between the music and its dedicatee, the founder of the Tariqa Shadhili, a North African/Egyptian Sufi order: mysticism might approximate the mysterious logic of improvised musical interaction, and something of its boundless openness, its capacity for multiple combinations, directions, and fields of activity, is also suggested by the following description of Shadhili: "He gave me forty sciences. He was an ocean without a shore."

'Pacifica': chiming, bell-like, solemn; a pause and a rapid turnaround, a quick twist and a swish of the tail, a leap into steely moto perpetuo stylings; sense of the static bursting with potentialities of movement. For some reason, the track fades out as it changes direction, tempo quickening from the reverie into which things had settled. 'Umar at the Dome of the Rock' is where one really hears what each individual musician in the band can do, through a series of ample solos. Particularly impressive is John Lindberg on acoustic bass, seemingly heading in a Jimmy Garrison direction with his strumming, almost flamenco-flavoured figures, before transforming these into much more percussive, throbbing, thwacking things, building a totally absorbing rhythmic intensity. 'Sirat': composed phrases melding with spiralling improvisations, Vijay Iyer's dark-hued sprinklings of notes, always following the logic of each phrase, led on by the cumulative energy and flow of what he plays, Smith, by contrast, placing his quick flurries around held tones.

'South Central L.A. Kulture' is performed in two versions, at the close of the first disc and the start of the second. In both, it emerges from Smith's piercing, mournful solo – slow phrases interspersed with repeating trilled clarions, like a more brittle, less vulnerable Miles Davis. That said, Davis, whose 70s music Smith paid tribute to in the band Yo Miles!, is an influence not so much in the trumpet phrasing or even tone (despite the use of wah-wah pedal), as in the contextual backdrop – most obviously on the performances by Organic, a guitar-heavy electric group whose music tends to sound like jazz fusion. On the Golden Quintet disc, the rhythmic backdrop is less locked-in, less relentlessly groove-focussed. This may in fact be due to the presence of two drummers, upping the rhythmic complexity, though often, they mesh so well that they almost become one, sticking to particular areas of their own kit in order to complement each other, rather than getting in each-others' way, or drowning out the other musicians with the force of combined bombast. That said, 'L.A. Kulture' soon moves into a very groovy bass-line, sometimes reminiscent of funk, sometimes with a Latin vibe which possesses the same sort of capacity to inspire passionate, lengthy solos as Mingus' 'Ysabel's Table Dance' from 'Tijuana Moods'. The 'Organic' version emphasises the groove element even more, in a manner very reminiscent of Yo Miles!, with added bass guitar, AkLaff, the single drummer, laying down a more straightforwardly metronomic rock-beat, and guitars swirling and twanging around the groove. For all these reasons, and despite the larger size of the band, it's fairly one-directional, and thus holds less interest for me than the more open interplay of the Quintet (for instance, Lindberg's electronically-manipulated acoustic bass is more texturally interesting and unusual than the fat fusion bass on disc 2). The roving harmonic approach of Vijay Iyer's piano is also missed – ducking in and out and round about, it forces itself into the crannies around Smith's trumpet, rather than imposing its own commands. With Organic, by contrast, the focus is less on detail, more on a general forward-driving pulse and a particular set of sounds. This may sound unduly negative, and it's not meant to be: once you accept that the groove is the way things are going, and that your attention may occasionally wander, it becomes easy to like this music, particularly when, as on 'Angela Davis', Okkyung Lee's cello is threading its way in and out of the foreground, or when, as at the start of 'Organic', things turn all spacey, with reams of sci-fi echo. Smith is one of the most important musicians around today, and 'Spiritual Dimensions' is ample evidence of his commitment, his drive, his charge. (DG)
1 Kevin Le Gendre, "Spirits Rejoice", *Jazzwise*, December 2008 / January 2009, Issue 126

Trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith recently revealed that he feels, at present, 'more driven than ever ... in a flow that could not be better', and the AACM pioneer has certainly seldom sounded more vibrant than he does on these two live outings.

The first, on which he fronts his Golden Quintet (completed by keyboardist Vijay Iyer, bassist John Linberg and two drummers, Pheeroan AkLaff and Don Moye), was recorded at New York's Vision Festival XIII in June 2008, and features free-ish interpretations of music composed by Smith, focused on his spearing yet almost conversationally intimate playing, but also allowing Iyer free rein to make his garrulous but controlled contributions, and a robust – occasionally downright tumultuous – rhythm section to drive the music irresistibly forward.

The second album is a record of a New Haven concert in 2009 performed by Smith's Organic band, which sees him spearhead a four-guitar line-up (Nels Cline, Michael Gregory, Brandon Ross and Lamar Smith) completed by cellist Okkyung Lee and electric bassist Skuli Sverrisson, plus Linberg and AkLaff.

This is a much more groove-based affair, electronic rather than acoustic, and (although less overtly than his 1998 outright tribute album *Yo Miles* with Henry Kaiser) explores the territory opened up by electric Miles music of the 1970s. Its relatively straightforward, almost jamming feel makes it a great place to enter Smith's soundworld for those unfamiliar with him who might be daunted by the sheer size and disparate nature of his discography; this is viscerally exciting, seething music that will please the more adventurous rock listener as well as hardcore Smith fans.

The two albums also, usefully, each contain a version of 'South Central L.A. Culture', enabling the trumpeter/composer, in his own words, to 'experiment ... to see what kind of interplay, what kind of musical intellect that these ensembles can grab onto'. A compelling and wholly enjoyable two-disc set from a man clearly at a creative peak.

-Vortex, July 2010, www.vortexjazz.co.uk

Founded in 1965 in Chicago, the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) was designed to give forward thinking performers and composers not only a forum but support group within which they could develop, nurture and present their ideas. From its inceptions, members have created some of the most adventurous and advanced music in the past century and continue to do so in the 21st century.

Far be it from me to give you a technical analysis of the music produced by these giants of innovation— including pioneers like the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Anthony Braxton, Leroy Jenkins, Muhal Richard Abrams and many others—but the music produced by members, though incredibly individualistic all seemed to share several defining characteristics: For one, it often defied “conventional” ideas of rhythm, intermixing set patterns with long obligato and free passages and frightening, dense polyrhythmic burst of fury; though played on “conventional” (there’s that word again) instruments, performers and composers often developed new playing techniques to coax additional sounds out of their instruments, and an unmistakable sense of freedom could be found in many of the compositions and performances. But, most of all, the music produced by the AACM is imbued with deep sense of emotion, cultural relevance and spirituality. Listening to most AACM recordings is essentially a meditation.

Because of the instruments and the backgrounds of most of the members, the music usually is thought of as jazz. So, unfortunately, when it is categorized as such, many first time listeners come away shocked and confused. Truth is, this is something different. Yes, it has the improvisational aesthetic of jazz at its core as well as the Afrikan/African American cultural and spiritual vibe. But, this truly is new music with a new purpose— providing consciousness lifting as opposed to just giving some temporary emotional panacea to listeners. This ain't party music!

While that description of the music might sound daunting, don't take it that way. If you're ever in need of some time to sit back and contemplate self in a productive manner, the new music is designed to help you do just that. And, if you're looking for a starting point to give it a try, check out the appropriately titled “Spiritual Dimensions,” a recently released two-disc set by visionary trumpeter and AACM early member Wadada Leo Smith on Cuneiform Records.

For the uninitiated, “Spiritual Dimensions” serves as a wonderful, modern introduction to what the AACM and its members have wrought. For those in the know, it serves as another triumph for Smith, who consistently has produced powerful, passionate and high quality music through the years. Some 40 years after the birth of the AACM Smith is still creating music endowed with intellectual and spiritual fire as he proves here.

The collection presents to sets of live performances. CD 1 features Smith's Golden Quintet— Vijay Iyer on piano and synthesizer, John Lindberg on bass and Peeroan AkLaff and Don Moye (of Art Ensemble of Chicago fame) both playing drums and Smith on trumpet—from a 2008 at concert at Vision XIII in New York. CD 2 features the much larger Wadada Leo Smith's Organic live at Firehouse 12 in New Haven, Conn., from April 17, 2009. Joining Smith, AkLaff and Lindberg are Michale Gregory, Brandon Ross, Nels Cline and Lamar Smith in various configurations on guitar, Okkyung Lee on cello and Skull Sverrisson on electric bass.

CD 1 opens with “Al-Shadhili's Litany of the Sea: Sunrise,” a beautiful, spacious composition that unfolds slowly but majestically, like a sunrise. Smith's plaintiff trumpet drives the composition with Iyer providing strong call and response support while Linberg, AkLaff and Moye provide growing hints of color throughout the 12- minute, 57-second piece. The piece turns from a sleepy eyed opening to sometimes furtive soul searching before coming to a strong, yet peaceful ending.

Next is “Pacifica,” featuring some upfront work underneath by Iyler, as well as piano with trumpet providing the response. Again, the remainder of the ensemble provides the appropriate color accents with burst of percussion and arco bass in places.

Another long form composition, “Umar at the Dome of the Rocks, parts 1 & 2,” comes on strong from the beginning with drums providing power and piano adding a sparkle. Then comes a Smith, solo with a haunting muted trumpet solo later accompanied by piano. His work in this section rivals any of the beautiful work that the late great Miles Davis did with a mute. (By the way, check out Smith and Henry Kaiser's 1998 “Yo Miles” tribute to Davis' electric funk period also on Cuneiform.) Clocking in at 14:52, the piece travels through a number of harmonic and melodic themes, before heading for a fiery drum lead conclusion.

The next piece, "Crossing Sirat," comes out the box smoking with the ensemble playing with plenty of kinetic energy but, at the same time, with plenty of space for solo turns by the piano and trumpet. Some might find the sound somewhat chaotic in its freeness, but for some of us, it reads like a determined struggle through a storm toward a stated destination.

CD 1 closes with "South Central L.A. Kulture," a 15-minute-plus piece that starts with what sounds like a wah-wah or other effects laden trumpet (although some of it also appears to be some creative blowing technique by Smith to create some interesting undertones) with a hint of synthesizer in the background. It eventually evolves into a wicked funk groove with sometimes wailing, sometimes climbing, sometimes circling solo ideas on trumpet. The track closes with a funky groove, albeit it slower and sparser than the earlier one. Check out the effected bass track. There's a beautiful darkness to be found in this closing track.

CD 2 has quite a bit different flavor, thanks largely to the bigger, guitar-laden group. Interestingly, the opening track perhaps addresses one of the unfair and uninformed criticisms detractors of the new music have had over the years—that "free jazz" was just noise and people were faking it. Lest you get that impression, check out the opening but different read on "South Central L.A. Kulture," that closed on the first disc. The structure, despite the opportunity for a lot of free improvisation is essentially the same as the other version, although the funk part enters with the slower groove. The presence of electric guitars and bass adds to the funk and groove, but again, the composition has the same emotional direction and impact here as it does on the Golden Quintet version.

Understandably, this CD contains a lot of funk, but don't get the idea that this is typical run of the mill funk. If you think George Clinton created some space music, you ain't heard nothing yet. Again, this is new music and as what folks used to call jazz, even the funk takes on new depth here as it does on the opening track and the following composition "Angela Davis" (which has a truly "militant walk-it-like-you-talk-it" groove. But, even in this larger configuration, Smith doesn't abandon the elements that have advanced music into the new century.

On "Organic," Smith and company pull out all stops, particularly in the opening minutes of the piece that includes electronic effects, courtesy of synthesizer, electronically altered trumpet, guitar and bass and pieces of what sound like musique concrete, much in the vein of something one would hear from legendary 20th century composer Karlheinz Stockhausen. The piece eventually evolves into another wicked funk 4/4, 4/4, 4/4, 4/4, 4/4, 6/4 groove with even the cello playing an interesting response melodic role before moving to a brilliant electric bass solo and then moving back to the funk.

The CD closes with "Joy: Spiritual Fire: Joy," which takes a ride seemingly literally through fields of soft joy to fire regions before a peaceful soft finish thanks to some lovely playing by Smith.

Whether you're a fan of something different or just feeling bold to try something new, "Spiritual Dimensions" by Wadada Leo Smith is bound to take you places you've never been—and places you'll thoroughly enjoy.

- Strings , Frost Illustrated, January 6, 2010, www.frostillustrated.com

Interview:

“Wadada Leo Smith... Yes. In fact there are three recorded versions of that piece... I decided it would be a good time to show the difference between the two different bands playing the same piece. It's about South Central LA – a suppressed area, mostly where black people live, with lots of helicopters and levels of crime. But the piece is not about that, it's about the positive aspect of those neighbourhoods, where rhythm can define a better future.

You are known for developing your own composing language Ankhramation. Can you give an example of how this works on the disc?

The Quintet piece 'Pacifica' is an Ankhramation piece. ...everything is based around the level in which light penetrates into the ocean and each instrument symbolically represents those different levels. Around 25-30 per cent of the light is reflected off the water, so it's only 70 per cent that penetrates. The key to performing it is understanding how well you can reference colour and shapes. ...the ocean and the sky – light comes from sunlight in the sky... It's a shifting type of reality that is fascinating to think about.

What got you interested in jazz in the first place?

BB King, Howlin' Wolf – all these people came through my town [Leland, Mississippi] ... But my introduction to jazz came through TV. In the '50s Louis Armstrong appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show*... I ordered four LPs – Miles Davis, Billie Holliday, Duke Ellington, Count Basie. That's how that started.”

- Neil McKim, BBC Music Magazine, www.bbcmusicmagazine.com