

MUSIC REVIEW | 'ANDREW HILL'

Compositions From the 1960s, With a Mystery of the Moment

By NATE CHINEN
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Mystery comes naturally to the pianist and composer Andrew Hill. In fact, it seems to come inevitably, like the lapping of waves on a shore. This is no accident: Mr. Hill's career, from the early 1960s on, is a study in aesthetic conviction. That his music is unmistakable is a testament not only to its distinctive opacity but also to his firmness of purpose.

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Those qualities have worked for and against him over the years, but on balance they have served his art extraordinarily well. It's one reason that "Passing Ships," an album recorded for Blue Note in 1969 but issued only three years ago, was hailed as an Atlantis-scale discovery rather than just another overlooked gem. And it helps demonstrate why Mr. Hill's interpretation of the album on Tuesday night at Merkin Hall — its first and only performance since the recording — was such a significant event.

"Passing Ships" features arrangements for an unusual nine-piece ensemble: five brass instruments, including tuba and French horn, in addition to a one-man battery of woodwinds and a rhythm section. Because the parts hew to an internal architecture, the balance of sound is crucial. In a conversation with Mr. Hill that prefaced the main portion of the concert, the producer Michael Cuscuna explained why the album went unreleased for so long: the stereo tape in the Blue Note vault was crudely mixed and "sounded like a train wreck."

The concert was no train wreck, despite a few small miscues. Leading a group of attentive players — including one invaluable alumnus of the original sessions, the tuba and bass clarinet specialist Howard Johnson — Mr. Hill offered an investigation of the album that was richly nuanced, if hardly definitive.

The opener was "Noon Tide," an overture complete with fanfare. There were flashes of improvisation by J. D. Parran on alto flute, Mark Taylor on French horn and Curtis Fowlkes on trombone, but the piece, all percolating rhythm and static harmony, was ultimately a showcase for the assertive trumpeter Keyon Harrold.

"Sideways," which came next, more clearly demonstrated Mr. Hill's affinities for lyrical angularity and complex chord voicing; as a sly act of disorientation, it succeeded beautifully.

"Plantation Bag" was even stronger, with its acoustic funk undercurrent and blues-rooted horn interjections. The musicians were deepening their rapport as they played, and growing more responsive to Mr. Hill, who conducted, so to speak, with the same inscrutable efficiency he brought to the piano.

Mr. Hill's pianism had been more properly featured in the concert's meditative first half, with the bassist John Hebert and the drummer Eric McPherson. Their interaction was wellspring-deep, seemingly in tune on a subconscious level. Rhythms ebbed, surged and overlapped, all by some secret logic. Mr. Hill's casually solemn abstractions were both gorgeous and gripping.

After the concert-closing flutter of "Passing Ships," the album's noirlike title track, Mr. Hill returned to the stage for a solo piano encore. What he played was a coda not unlike the final piece on "Time Lines," his exquisite current Blue Note release. In other words, it was impressionistic and serene. And it sounded unfinished, in the best possible sense.

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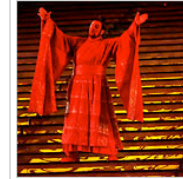


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