

## RECORDS

# Musical collective opposes jazz clubs' "cockroach capitalism"

**PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC**  
By the Revolutionary Ensemble  
Horizon (A&M) Records

While the Revolutionary Ensemble was setting up for a college gig in Springfield, Illinois, recently Leroy Jenkins (violinist) said he was bothered by music coming over the loudspeaker in the hall. He didn't want to hear himself play. The other two members of the Ensemble agreed. Drummer Jerome Cooper and bassist Sirone don't like to hear their own records before a performance.

This is not due to a false sense of humility, but rather to the need to free themselves of the past in order to play totally in the present. It is this "right there" quality of their music that is indeed revolutionary.

The Ensemble is about a revolution of consciousness, but not in the "greening of America" sense. They seek to free people's minds from the cliches of the commercial music turned out by the American recording industry. They are artists, poets, seekers, visionaries and revolutionaries, aware of their cultural roots, and at the same time in the vanguard of the "new black music."

Their music represents a threat (albeit indirect) to a corporate state that would prefer that its cit-

izens be lobotomized by "muzak" rather than challenged by music. They have placed themselves in opposition to what Imamu Amiri Baraka has called the "cockroach capitalism" of the jazz club scene. Most of their public performances in New York City (their home base) are in artists' lofts rather than in the typical jazz clubs, to avoid a situation where customers are hustled in and out between stunted sets, and the music exists only to sell alcohol and turn a quick profit for the club owner.

The Ensemble's previous recordings have been on small, artist-controlled labels like Revolutionary Ensemble Records, India Navigation Records, Survival Records and Jazz Composer's Orchestra of America Records, which have provided them with artistic freedom but very little bread. Promotion, distribution

and marketing is so monopolized by the major record companies that small, independent outfits are in a one-down position for offering technical and financial support to the artists who record for them.

The Ensemble recently signed with Horizon Records, (a division of A&M) for what they say were largely dollars-and-cents reasons. In this case, however, they have not had to compromise their music. Horizon has allowed them complete artistic freedom, and the result is an excellent new album entitled "People's Republic (A&M—SP708).

Though the Ensemble's music has sometimes been described as "free jazz," the group's Chicago beginnings have rooted their music in the blues. (Both Leroy and Jerome hail from the Windy City.) As a result their music can at any time be colored with a



slashing blues edge or a crying blues moan.

It is important to note that the players view themselves as a "musical collective." Although pressured in the past to change the name of the group to a more commercial one or to push one man as the leader, they have stuck to their guns. They are a unit; no one person leads.

No matter how freely they improvise, they are a tight band. Tight, not in the sense of keeping a constant discoflavored backbeat to their sound, but because of their ability to follow and bounce off each other's musical ideas spontaneously. Their style permits each member of the trio to

improvise separately or collectively at the same time.

Getting back to that recent Springfield concert: as Leroy Jenkins finished setting up his equipment, his record was taken off and replaced with another. Hearing the familiar strains of Charlie Parker's "Hot House," he perked up, smiled, and left the stage whistling the tune.

A while later he and the other two members of the Revolutionary Ensemble came on stage and blew our collective mind.

—Ron Sakolsky

Ron Sakolsky teaches "Jazz and Blues: Cultural Impact" at Sangamon State University in Springfield, Ill.



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# Rocky as Italian-American realism



Some aspects of the sleeper that have escaped the critics

During the last ten years an unprecedented number of Italian-Americans have risen to places of honor in Hollywood's film industry. Performers like Robert De Niro, Al Pacino, Talia Shire and Sylvester Stallone have been nominated for acting awards. Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese have been nominated for the directing award. Coppola won it in 1974 for his work in *Godfather II* and won the best screenplay award the same year.

And three times in five years the Oscar for the year's best picture has gone to a film by and about Italian-Americans—in 1972 and 1974 to *Godfathers I and II*, and this year to Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky*.

Unlike their predecessors of earlier film eras, these contemporary Italian-American artists have steered clear of the stereotypes of ethnic American and have instead created on film powerful images of an authentic collective experience. *Rocky* is an extension of the vision of the urban inferno in the *Godfathers*, *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*. It pierces the surfaces of working class life in an ethnic ghetto and exposes the spiritual poverty of a community in decline.

#### ►Not the usual "ghetto."

*Rocky's* Philadelphia neighborhood is not a ghetto in the way most middle-class people understand the term. Its row houses are too neat and prosperous; its employment statistics too high. It wears a face of neighborliness. But far as it is from the burnt-out horror of the South Bronx, it is even farther from the affluence of what Americans imagine as a typical, good-but-modest style of life.

Garbage rustles in the streets. Young toughs hang out on the corners. The periodic rumble of elevated trains breaks the quiet. The camera penetrates behind spring doors to disclose cramped living rooms in which people live lives that are a broken reflection of the American Dream, or behind factory gates to reveal the monotony and despair of industrial labor.

The mainstays of Italian-American communities of the past—church, family and rituals of food—are reduced to mere vestiges of what they once were. The church is present as statuary, rather than as spiritual force. And most significantly, there are no families in *Rocky*. There is no parental eye watching over the kids on the corner, no aproned mama tending the pot in the kitchen.

*Rocky* lives alone, eating out of cans, jars and packages. Pauly and his sister Adrian live together in a bondage of emotional debt. In place of a culture that gathered the generations to celebrate around the holiday table, we have Pauly throwing Thanksgiving turkey into the alley in a gesture of unmuted violence.

#### ►Violence under the surface.

Violence lies just under the repressive surface of all the lives in the film. It flares suddenly and vents itself on innocent objects or individuals unable to redress their grievances. Yet none of the characters is violent by nature. The lives they lead—Pauly, shivering in his icebox; Adrian, cleaning cat cages in a pet shop; Rocky shaking down forklift operators for a living and boxing on the side—breed unarticulated anger and frustration.

There is no enemy, no legitimate tar-

get on which to vent the anger. Unlike the blacks, for whom the gap between America's promise and its practice, is all too clear, the *Rockys* have only begun to sense that they have been assigned the low rungs of the ladder by those who control the power structure.

Stallone's portrayal of the character he conceived is reminiscent of Anthony Quinn's performance in the Italian film *La Strada*. Both are men whose physical prowess is extraordinary and whose powers of expression are stunted. Both are aliens within society, and their inability to translate feelings into speech reflects this. *Rocky's* painful inarticulateness is a measure of his incomplete assimilation into the American main stream. But he has also lost his ancestral tongue. He is a man without a language.

#### ►Realignment of the '60s.

*Rocky* counters the myth of working-class racism. It is the first film to suggest the complexity of the realignments wrought by the '60s. In the decrepit neighborhood gym where black and white together pound, punch and spar, a confraternity of brawn is united in the hope of the big chance that will magically transform nobodies into somebodies. *Rocky* defends Creed from the slurs of his tavern cronies; for him the black Creed is the Champ. Reviewers have chosen to ignore this aspect of the film as well as its pointed criticism of how the media continue to perpetuate traditional ethnic stereotypes.

*Rocky's* ethnicity is exploited and distorted as a saleable commodity. The hype used to promote the bout between *Rocky* and Creed plays on suggestions of physical and sexual prowess that have been identified with Italian-American men. The media—represented by a black woman reporter—focuses on the image of the "Italian Stallion" flailing a raw beef carcass, with close-ups of his bloodied fists. It is the old juxtaposition of blood and brawn that has served through decades of gangster films and police dramas.

But the *Rocky* the audience knows and sympathizes with is gentle and sexually innocent. Stallone's characterization allows us to perceive the distance between the man and the media-created image. A sense of privacy—the residue of a culture where public and private spheres were sharply demarcated—preserves him from the indignity of the consenting clown.

Creed, on the other hand, succumbs to the media's appetite for stereotypes even while he is exploiting the hype for his own ends. The Champ and a hard-nosed businessman with a keen eye for publicity, Creed chooses the marketable image of a Bicentennial "nigger"—a vaudeville Uncle Sam in blackface. Together, *Rocky* and Creed enact for America its favorite stereotypical scenario.

In the last sequence the two fighters symbolize the powerlessness of individuals caught in a struggle whose outcome is determined somewhere else. The spectacle of black and working-class white as living punching bags beating each other bloody under the silver-haired eminence of the white promoter is a potent image of urban America, where the least fortunate scramble for the debris others have left behind.

Lynn Garafola

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