Global Ear: Chicago

As the city recovers from pandemic the Amalgam organisation has become a democratic hub for improvisation in its widest possible definition

By Levi Dayan

Outdoor performance in Chicago, 2020: (from left) Keefe Jackson, Bill Harris, Ishmael Ali

Ricardo Adame

Chicago based percussionist Bill Harris has a unique relationship with improvised music. Rather than learning of the scene by going to a conservatory, or from obsessively browsing internet forums, his interest in improvising developed through the natural progression of his own musicianship. Raised in a musical family in Pittsburgh, Harris moved to Chicago in 2011 and, by his own admission, came to improvised music late. "Before I moved to Chicago I had no idea what was going on here. I knew about Chicago blues and Wilco and punk and rock music, but I didn't know about the AACM, or Umbrella Music, or Catalytic Sound until after I got here."

Improvised music is heavily community driven, and as a newcomer to the city it took Harris some time to find his foothold. However around 2015 he began to meet musicians, including saxophonist Jake Wark and pianist Matt Piet, through a number of different series at drummer Mike Reed's Constellation venue, and the three of them formed the trio Four Letter Words. Around the same time, Harris started Amalgam, a record label that soon became a central force in Chicago's improvised music scene.

Most of Amalgam's early releases featured members of Four Letter Words, but the label soon expanded to include Chicago improvisors such as Gerrit Hatcher, Ben Zucker and cellist Ishmael Ali, whom Harris met at a workshop hosted by Tony Malaby at the venerable venue Elastic Arts in 2016.

Then, of course, the pandemic hit. In Chicago, where shows practically happen everywhere and all the time, the change was a mindfuck. "You start thinking about the music you're playing, and it just seems so unimportant," says Harris. "You're just like, I play improvised music. What am I doing? But very quickly all of the musicians I knew were like, 'Hey, we need to play and get together.'" These musicians – which included clarinettist and composer Angel Bat Dawid and multi-instrumentalist Molly Jones – began putting together impromptu performances in public parks around the city, and the people of Chicago, starved for live music, took notice. As an outgrowth of these performances, Amalgam started organising shows at Chicago's Comfort Station, a small island of art and music right in the centre of bustling Milwaukee Avenue.

It was also during the pandemic that Ali, along with bassist Eli Nemay, became more involved with Amalgam, and Harris's vision of a record label that could function as a community resource became more fully realised. "I had this idea for a record label which would be this democratically voted thing," recalls Ali. "The idea was to have us present albums to each other, and if enough people liked it, then you could collectively release it."

Having amassed a significant amount of music that he was eager to release, Ali pitched the idea to Harris. "We had some late night drunk conversations and I talked about how I wanted to do this new thing, and I actually had a name for it and everything. And he was like, 'Well, why don't we do this with Amalgam?' After a few conversations, we brought Eli into the mix."

As vaccines became more readily available and the world began to open up, Amalgam emerged as something completely different from what it had been before. In 2021, Ali received a grant from New Music USA through which he organised the Chi Away project, a collection of recordings featuring contributions from artists such as turntablist Allen Moore and sound artist Norman W Long, both of whom radically expanded Amalgam's palette of sounds. The performance series at Comfort Station gave way to a monthly run at Cafe Mustache, a bar just a few miles down the road on Milwaukee Avenue.

Amalgam also further democratised itself by bringing in guest curators. "We pick five or six people whose work we really like, and they basically have total autonomy to do whatever they want," reveals Harris. Curators for this year include the aforementioned Moore, whose Hearsay trio with Ali and Harris put out the most recent release on the Amalgam label (see *The Wire* 477), as well as noted vocal improvisor Carol Genetti, saxophonist Keefe Jackson and clarinettist Emily Rach Beisel, who recently released a solo record *Particle Of Organs*.

Beisel, whose use of effects pedals gives her clarinet improvisations a distinctive doom-laden sound, views her album as reflective of Amalgam and Chicago as a whole in its approach to genre distinctions. "This past year, Amalgam released two metal albums if you count mine, which you should. I don't know that you'd find that in a lot of other labels," says Beisel. "There's certainly a lot of really amazing labels that are really dedicated just to free improvisation, or free jazz, or metal. But it's really special to have one that's pretty open, and that does reflect Chicago a lot. With my album, it's hard to quantify what it is, but it definitely belongs on Amalgam."

Musicians associated with Amalgam's various activities clearly have an interest in pushing beyond ideas of what improvised or experimental music should consist of – for example Harris and Ali also perform together in the punk/funk/hiphop/free jazz band je'raf. In the process they reveal that Amalgam envisions improvised and experimental music as not just niche categorisations which guide the consumption of a hyper-specific form of content, but rather a musical lineage which contains liberatory potential for musicians working across all kinds of genres – potential that every participating musician seeks to unlock through their own approach. ●

amalgamusic.org

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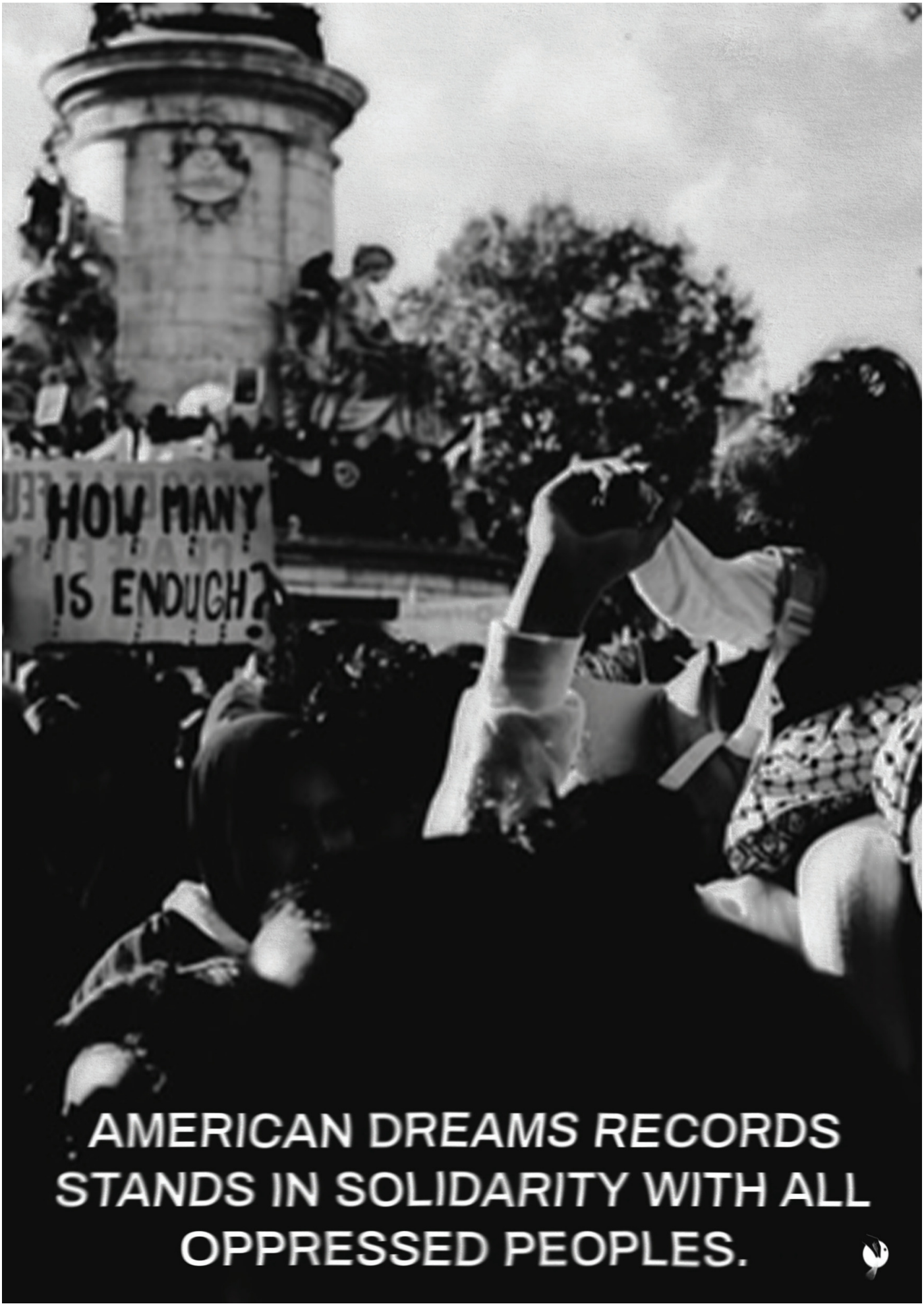

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