Hearsay

The Chicago trio's improvisations combine slow evolution with sculptural and archaeological turntablism

By Bill Meyer

Hearsay: (from left) Bill Harris, Allen Moore, Ishmael Ali

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Hearsay's *Glossolalia* starts with the bump of a stylus striking matter several times in quick succession. It's a rare moment of rapidity, quickly reconsidered by turntablist Allen Moore. Next, he works the needle back and forth, giving the rest of the trio a chance to join in. Bill Harris builds a thumping, peg-legged groove a beat at a time, and then trips up his own cadence with random cowbell offbeats, while Ishmael Ali draws an elongated groan from his cello. It's the sound of music emerging, burdened by circumstance but liberated by the fact of existence.

Ali and Harris have a diverse shared history. They've played together for years in settings ranging from the funk band je'raf, in which Ali plays guitar, to an electronically charged chamber trio. They also run Amalgam, a label that has released efforts by local experimentalists such as Norman W Long and Emily Rach Beisel. Apart, Ali organises concerts and Harris is an in-demand recording engineer. They had been aware of Moore's work as a solo performer for several years, but it took Covid's clearing of their respective performing schedules and a grant Ali secured from New Music USA for them to plan the session that yielded *Glossolalia* and its predecessor, a self-titled CD which Amalgam released nearly two years ago.

In mid-January 2021, the three men first quarantined and then convened for two days of recording at Marmalade Studio, a spartan recording space which Harris and Ali had built out from scratch. "We would have to stop every 30 minutes and kick on the heat," says Ali, sitting in the front room of his house on Chicago's northwest side. The session was fraught with the kind of jitters that accompanied any gathering during that pre-vaccine window in time, compounded by uncertainty about how the music might turn out. Moore had little experience with free improvisation and had never played with a drummer before. "I was, like, nervous," he confesses. "Shit, I don't know how the hell I burned up two needles. So much had happened at that time. I can't remember if anybody had passed away yet but, if they hadn't, it was coming. I wanted to be there, but I was also like, I just want to be home."

The feeling was mutual, Harris recalls. "I was also nervous, like, I have no idea what to do with what Allen does."

Moore is not just any turntablist. He does play old soul platters, some of which originally belonged to his mother and other family members, often spinning them back and forth in slow motion. But he also plays homemade records cast by himself from organic matter that is similarly laden with memory and personal significance. Moore originally trained as a visual artist, and there's a direct line from his images to his sound art. "I got an MFA as a painter, and I started working with graphite. I wanted to create very deep and very intense things, black like flesh, feelings, things like that, dealing with weight, gravity. I eventually decided, instead of drawing records – that's what the drawings were – I'm gonna make a record and I'm gonna play it. I figured out how to take glue and make these really crazy graphite replicas of records. When you play them, they play backwards and they're really distorted. And then they always kind of settle, because this material's really wonky, so you get this nice loop."

Over time, Moore added other ingredients freighted with connections to lost family members – flowers from his late grandfather's garden, and red clay from his late aunt's front yard. "It's like I'm playing parts of my soul, my family's soul. The idea is just to make as many fucked up sounds as I can from the same record, because they never play the same. Really, they're just improv objects. I can't make them sound any particular way. But I just like knowing that I'm having pieces of all of that with me."

While it's impossible to know the personal history of the objects Moore plays, such knowledge isn't necessary to be both spooked and galvanised by his alternations between rough-edged noise bursts and fragmented, variably pitched, not quite familiar song fragments. The other members of Hearsay pick up and amplify aspects of Moore's sound production; Ali's cello and guitar emit arcing pitches and fragmented shards, while Harris implies grooves that seem to rush ahead of the action and circle back without ever locking into measurable time.

Since that initial recording session, Hearsay have stayed out of the studio and concentrated on live performance. In concert, Moore's ability to simultaneously slow the music's rate of change and disrupt obvious patterns has proved to be a rich generative resource. "That is something I have found fun about it, the slowness of it," reveals Harris. "It forces you to be in a zone that, as an improvisor, is very challenging. It's really easy or common, as an improvisor, to just get frenetic and crazy." ● *Hearsay's* Glossolalia *is released by Amalgam*

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