Oregon (music group)

Oregon is unusual.

In 2009, the musical ensemble named Oregon is approaching its fortieth year of concertizing, primarily in Europe.

When trying to account for the variety of musical elements the group deploys, it is more economical to list what it does not include (as many as fifty instruments have been used at one time or another). Reviewers have called Oregon's music "jazz and world infused new age sound," but that neglects their classicism and spectacular musicianship. The quartet has a loyal following in Oregon, where two of the founders were raised, but their celebrity resides in New York, Europe, South America, and Asia.

Of the four current members of Oregon, three have been with the group since its inception in 1970: Ralph Towner and Glen Moore—the Oregonians—and Paul McCandless. The fourth founder, Collin Walcott, died in a car accident in 1984. Walcott's death interrupted Oregon's trajectory, which recovered in 1995 with the arrival of drummer Mark Walker.

Towner and Moore, who were educated at the University of Oregon, joined the Paul Winter Consort in the 1967, where they encountered McCandless and Walcott. McCandless had studied classical oboe at Duquesne University, and Walcott had studied classical percussion and then enthnomusicology at UCLA. The group began performing as Oregon in 1970. The name was suggested by McCandless, a reflection of Towner's and Moore's enthusiasm for their place of origin.

The other most strongly identifying coloration in the Oregon sound is the yearning of McCandless's oboe and English horn. One of the classical influences in the Oregon sound is from northern India. Walcott, a student of both Ravi Shanker and Alla Rakha, played the sitar and tabla drum, instruments that gave the original group a strongly identifying Eastern coloration. Walker has retained more than an echo of this rhythmic tradition on a standard, supplemented drum kit. The other most strongly identifying coloration in the Oregon sound is the yearning of McCandless's oboe and English horn.

Towner, a pianist who has mastered classical, 12-string, and electric guitar, is a prodigious composer. His restrained use of synthesizer, a departure from the resolutely acoustical orientation of the band, adds an unexpectedly mysterious texture to Oregon's music. Every Oregon tour involves new music, and there is little repetition on the twenty-seven albums the group has recorded. "Icarus," Towner's best-known composition, accompanied an Apollo mission flight; it is also the theme of the "New Dimensions" radio broadcast and is featured on a recording that Oregon made with the Moscow Tchaikovsky Symphony Orchestra in 2000.

Musical comedy—evident in such compositions as "Buzz Box," "Impending Bloom," and "Pepe Linque"—keeps the group from becoming too mannered and rarified. Oregon, the sound, touched base with Oregon the state by contributing music to a 1977 documentary about the Portland Trailblazer's winning season.

Listening to one another is what Oregon is all about, and the group reinvents itself at least once during every performance. One member of the group introduces a motif, a riff, sometimes just a rhythmic figuration or sound, and off they go. Early in the group's career, according to Moore, Aaron Copland heard Oregon and declared that this manifestation of collective improvisation was on the level of what prominent avant-garde composers were writing.

Written by Jack Berry

Further Reading:

Oregon website. http://www.oregonband.com/.

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