



## CKW TRIO

### *The Is*

#### Black Hat Records

Three young guys out to make a mark for themselves in improvised music, the CKW Trio (Alex Kelly, cello/bouzouki; Michael Cooke, reeds, flute, percussion; Andrew Wilshusen, percussion, trap kit) try on various suits of clothing here from the cultural closet (serialism, 'cell' structure, Eastern European folk forms, mathematical structures, ethnicism, etc.). To their credit, anything the band chooses to do fits pretty well, so once they decide on a direction they'll be difficult to stop.

A certain freshness comes from the instrumentation itself: Alex Kelly's cello is often plucked like your standard bass, giving CKW a surface 'sax trio' ambience. Those go all the way back to Sonny Rollins at the Vanguard, obviously, but the cello's higher voice tone capability (as opposed to the bass) lends the music more of a 'changeling' air. Sometimes it doesn't matter how 'out of the box' the bassist plays; if you hear a bass you make certain assumptions. It's a given. It's not the bass player's fault, it's the listener's. Like a few issues of *JAZZ NOW* ago when I reviewed Prestige Music's *THE BEST OF ERIC DOLPHY* and was stunned to hear George Duvivier, who I shamefacedly admit I categorized back there with Paul Chambers and his generation, taking even Dolphy for a ride... so don't you make my mistake. Kelly's cello is all over the place like Tony Williams's drums used to be on his first Blue Note recording *LIFE TIME*. During "Iram," a minor outrage loosely based on Middle Eastern themes, Kelly flips out and evenly spreads his hoodoo on every level of the piece. A certain mystical air here pervades, composer Wilshusen sticking to the basics and Cooke tootling a sketchy bassoon figure. More of an air of saffron can be whiffed in track 4, the name of which I can't give you because it's from an ancient Hindi manuscript found in India which nobody's been able to translate. Cooke leaps and spirals a flute bit to Wilshusen's agile tablas and Kelly's saz-like bouzouki. Good fun, a bit 'Incredible String Band' but they've only recently got back together and won't be touring the USA anyhow. Shame. Cooke is very accomplished, now and again recalling Ivo Perelman on his many saxophones, but Cooke's command of various world forms well outstrips Perelman's, that I can hear.

The first piece on *THE IS*, "Mondrian en Amerique," attempts to regiment itself in sound in as 'geometric' a fashion as Mondrian's boxy depictions of line and parallelogram do, but I wonder if a trio is the right size band to try something of this sort. One may need more voices to bring it off. The overlapping instruments, when they do, here, smack more to my ear of classic serialism as practiced by Varese. I hear idiomatic structure, but it is often a case of one motif or statement following another, often in response to whatever has just been played. So not exactly, but. Maybe with a larger band this track wouldn't sound so linear.

Elsewhere, you'll get a big laugh out of the circusy klezmer-based "R'izhii," the fractured blues that explodes and recombines somewhat different ("Alex In Wonderland"), and a circular-structured tune with an Anthony Braxtonesque name (you know the drill) that swings effortlessly.

In that last, Cooke slyly quotes "My One and Only Love" despite the quantum-undulating field of notes being played around him by Kelly and Wilshusen (whose more melodic attempts on the trap kit here also delight). No, I doubt that this indicates any belief that experimental music, as the Old Guard used to say before I stopped listening to them (no names will be mentioned), "would swing if it only were played right" -- to paraphrase my 13-year-old daughter: excuse me, could we define 'right'? -- I think it's a challenge that CKW wanted to try and not unlike bassist Dom Duval's similar attempts, hit it dead on.

Still more goodies abound here, like the wintry bassoon vehicle "4++11m6m7" or the more straight improv "Spirits," but it's like I said before. CKW clearly can go anywhere they like after this. Or they can go everywhere at once. Hard to book that trip on Amtrak, but it's doable. Try this; it's a humorous and accomplished journey into the not-too distant present. Music that, as the title says, simply 'is.'

by Kenneth Egbert

# ONE FINAL NOTE

www.onefinalnote.com

## **CKW Trio The Is (Black Hat)**

by Jay Collins  
11 January 2005

Instrumental diversity or programmatic variance can be a direction that makes or breaks a record. On occasion, ambition overshadows the musical outcome, so much so that the urge detracts from its overall success. On the other hand, a varied journey can keep the customer satisfied on many levels. The San Francisco-based CKW Trio is an ambitious bunch who mix a variety of influences, both musical and cultural, and choose an unusual instrumental mix to make music that is very much in their own image. Consisting of reedist Michael Cooke, cellist Alex Kelly, and drummer Andrew Wilshusen, the trio engages in a collective effort that navigates compositions from each of their respective pens.

One of the key elements of this record's success is the presence of insightful notes that bring the listener into the process by articulating influences or aims for each piece. While obviously not a novel idea for jazz or improvised music, these thoughts work particularly well and elucidate this well thought-out music. For instance, the record's opener, "Mondrian En Amérique", is inspired by Dutch painter Piet Mondrian and is an attempt to reflect his "use of pure line, space, and color juxtaposition". With this in mind, Cooke's scorching tenor tone cuts thick to match Kelly's frenetic cello and Wilshusen's bustling drums for the record's most engaging moments.

Following this lead, "Augmented" commences with chamberesque hues before shifting into a jaunty swing groove that pushes Cooke's soprano work. As a point of reference, the group thanks Ken Vandermark, and utilizing that inspiration, Kelly's "Alex In Wonderland" has a sense of groove that might remind some of Vandermark's Spaceways Inc. group. They are also a free-spirited bunch and "21st Century Blues" reflects this mentality, an interactive piece driven by Cooke's alto sax and the theory of circle music, a concept where "phrases can be played at any time and in any order".

Non-Western sources also play a significant role. For instance, "Iram", influenced by the buried city, features a bustling, lopsided groove that fosters Kelly's dashing lines and Cooke's robust bass clarinet. Further, "[Three Headed Yogi Seal]", a free improvisation, is centered on Kelly's bouzouki and Wilshusen's tablas, inciting Cooke's leaping flute sketches. Finally, "Da Yun He" reflects an Asian sensibility, with Kelly's wiry cello lines contrasting with Cooke's bass clarinet introspection. The trio also has a flair for carefree humor, best demonstrated by their musings on a Russian circus, "R'izhii", or the album's closer, the festive "Marchin' Home". Overall, a fitting conclusion to a wide-ranging disc that keeps the listener guessing as to what might be on the horizon.

URL: <http://www.onefinalnote.com/reviews/c/ckw-trio/the-is.asp>



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CD REVIEWS BY LOCAL WRITERS

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### From you, our faithful readers:

**CKW Trio, *The Is*.** 2004 BLACK HAT RECORDS. By Risa Dotson.

This San Francisco area band is made up of Michael Cooke, Alex Kelly and Andrew Wilshusen. The instrumental album was recorded earlier this year, and it has a truly unique sound. CKW Trio involves history, math, & science lessons — without lyrics — and would have made advanced theoretical physics tolerable in college!

As creative as the music is, it is surprising that the band's name (the musicians' initials) is so unoriginal. This album is not something to listen to while studying or reading. It feels good to zone in to every note and try to figure out what the music is telling you.

While listening, you might hear an exotic animal you've never seen or heard of before. You'll get the feeling it is endangered, and it has something really important to tell you. Then imagine feeling self-conscious, and getting the overwhelming feeling that you don't care what anyone thinks, causing you to run out to the street naked and dance in the fog. There is a great drum solo during "Alex in Wonderland." The album concludes with a relaxing mood, with flute playing and funky beats, and the band leaves you with an overall good feeling at the end.



October 2002 Volume 12, Number 6



## Michael Cooke

### *Statements*

#### **Black Hat Records, BH -1002**

Michael Cooke, flute; alto, tenor, and soprano saxophones; bass clarinet, bassoon and percussion.

The San Francisco Bay Area is home to a few virtuoso multi-instrumentalists like Michael Cooke, whose dedication and perseverance in the midst of tremendous competition rise substantially above more conventional offerings.

In twelve finely honed compositions, the absence of strongly defined diatonic chord sequences yields improvisations of tremendous space and depth. Cooke's rare ability to think "outside the box" reminds us that Jazz, in its best incarnation, is the sound of surprise. To be sure, Cooke's horizontal, tonal-center based approach reflects the influence of Eric Dolphy, Ornette Coleman, and other sonic innovators. However, these powerful forces have been internalized to the extent that Cooke sounds like no one else.

Highlights include "Head Bobbin," a wonderful, polyphonic piece whose bass clarinet countermelody provides a rock-solid pulse for the soprano saxophones, free invention. The close intervals on "Malevolence" yield a huge spectrum of contrasting effects; this is flute artistry of rare excellence. And the tremendously vocal tenor solo and contrasting tempi on "Neptune" communicate a powerful saga about the pursuit of creative art.

All in all, this is an excellent session.

*by James D. Armstrong, Jr.*

Editor, Music in Transition

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Besides a heady dose of solo reed improvisations, Michael Cooke proffers an interesting alternative to liner notes with his interactive computer disc *Statements* (Black Hat 1002). The CD Rom offers a wealth of opportunities for scrolling through the music, reflecting on a Q & A session and viewing various other tidbits of data the keep one's mouse clicking. Cooke plays alto, tenor, soprano, flute, bassoon, bass clarinet, and percussion on 12 openly spun tunes (*Jagged/ Viva Guatemala/ 35¢/ Cogitation/ Three Step Down/ Head Bobbin'/ Malevolence/ 38/ Amblin'/ Neptune/ Less/ Early Exit. 69:53. 5/01-11/01, San Mateo, CA*). His approach is not volatile or eruptive. He presents each solo as a logical sequence of phrases rolling up into an integrated whole the flows as would a semi-swift current in a stream. Cooke credits numerous Jazz luminaries as inspiration, such as Kirk and Hemphill, who provide the tonal pattern he follows on one dual-reed sequence. Other pieces show respect for Giuffre, Mingus, Alyer, Coltrane, Dolphy, Sanders, Zorn, Vandermark, and Berne. Throughout it all, Cooke is innovative stamping each selection with his own voice and personalized style that depicts the path but does not clone any of the related styles. His infusion of multiple layers of instrumentation and sonic variations keeps the music challenging while providing all the ingredients for a diversified and well-rounded expedition. This is a very intriguing example of the creative art process with a nod toward technology.

p. 26  
Frank Rubolino



**THE KUSF REVIEW FACTORY 06.12.02**  
assembled by Cactus & gabriella

**Michael Cooke: Statements (CD)**

Cooke (a multi-instrumentalist) challenges himself by playing every instrument you here in each of the ensembles--a variety of woodwinds (saxes, bass clarinet, flute, bassoon) and percussion all sequentially recorded--and challenges the listener with abstract improv and compositions worthy of his influences (Braxton, Coleman, Zorn, Coltrane, Hemphill, and Vandermark, to name a few). Sometimes peppy while at other times brooding, and more often than not navigating the murky shadowlands. (**Prem**)

**Noel Morrison - DJ for KUSF 90.3 FM, San Francisco, CA:**

Noel talking about the song "Early Exit" which he played for the **Jos Claerbout Coast to Coast Radio Memorial**,

"I'm not sure if you were able to tune in this morning, but I wanted to let you know I thought your song was amazing. Nothing has brought back that terrible morning more than hearing your song this morning. I think we had similar mornings that day, as I was also there to see Jos being loaded into the ambulance..."

**Larry Ochs - Saxophonist and composer with ROVA Quartet:**

I thought it was great man! I was really surprised; there were lots of surprising things in it, which is great!



**Monday, September 23, 2002**

## **Featured Artist: Michael Cooke**

**CD Title:** Statements

**Year:** 2001

**Record Label:** Black Hat Records

**Style:** Free Jazz / Avante Garde

**Review:** Statements is a collection of original pieces on a variety of saxes, winds and percussion by bay area multi-instrumentalist Michael Cooke. Some of them are solo performances in the strict sense, while most are multi-tracked conversations by Cooke with himself, a la Bill Evans. The thematic material for Cooke's compositions, according to his liner notes, are drawn from his own life experience, and the aforementioned notes also document the musical influences behind the approach taken on each track. But you don't always need a scorecard to tell who the players are; there's no mistaking the influence of Roland Kirk when Cooke attacks the flute, for example, and how can the sound of sleigh bells and the singing bowl fail to put you in the mind of later John Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders?

The twelve tracks on the CD proper (the CD is enhanced to provide various additional musical & visual information when played on a computer) paint a portrait of an ambitious young musician probing the depths of avant-garde jazz and displaying the treasures he has found. Some, like the album closing "Early Exit," are full to the brim with this ambition, mixing dozens of instruments into a Ayler-esque dirges that gives way to a harmonically complex, post bop theme that might have been written by Charles Mingus or a young Archie Shepp. Others, though, are more straightforward, such as "Viva Guatemala!" with it's pleasing, almost childlike bass clarinet line topped by a gritty flute solo. And don't think that Michael Cooke is some humorless academic--dig the "Close Encounters" quote in "Neptune," his tribute to Interstellar Space era Coltrane.

This independent release from 2001 might helpfully be compared to a major label counterpart from the same year, Chris Potter's Gratitude. Both CDs find young & talented artists openly assimilating and re-synthesizing the voices of great saxophonists past, though each would do well and take a page from the other and broaden the range of their influences--it wouldn't hurt Cooke to pay more attention to Lester Young and Ben Webster, just as Potter would surely profit from more exposure to, say, Anthony Braxton and Albert Ayler.

Michael Cooke definitely has a lot to say and the multifarious talents to make you listen. If this CD doesn't get your attention, you are probably deaf. Though it may be said that Cooke is still search for his own voice, Statements amply demonstrates that he is looking for it in the right places.

**Record Label Website:** <http://www.blackhatrecords.com>

**Artist's Website:** <http://members.aol.com/cookeq/>

**Reviewed by:** Ted Kane





Vol 06 - Issue 9 - September 2002

## **Michael Cooke**

### **Statements**

(Black Hat - 2002)

by Ray Redmond

This is a very interesting CD. I didn't take it seriously at first because the packaging, although very professional, is obviously self-produced. Once you put the CD into a computer, the whole picture changes. The CD launches a well thought out interface that lets you wander through interviews, poetry and artwork for the alternate covers (there are 3), review links, artist and instrument info... there's a lot of stuff here.

But what about the MUSIC you ask? Michael Cooke plays alto, tenor, soprano, flute, bassoon, bass clarinet, and percussion on all 12 of these solo expeditions. 'Viva Guatemala' struck me the most, with it's breathy flute overlaying bassoon. 'Head Bobbin' is appropriately titled, horns layered in a semi-rhythmic configuration. Each track is an individual creation. Taken as a whole it is a real album... a collection of pieces that relate, but are not the same. Although some tracks are a little sparse, as solos tend to be, this is some pretty creative stuff and deserves a listen.





## **Michael Cooke**

### ***Searching***

#### **Black Hat Records**

Michael Cooke, tenor, alto, soprano sax., flute, bass clarinet; Mel Nelson, piano; Alec Little, acoustic bass; Sameer Gupta, drums; Paul Fisher, congas and percussion; Roland Robles, tabla and percussion; Cliff Winnig, tampura; Greg Rosenberg, percussion

And search they do. This is an achieved coupling of rhythm and exploration in which the percussionists are given a great deal of work in laying the ground for the flights taken by multi-instrumentalist Michael Cooke. This is Jazz for the serious listener. Jazz for the reflective soul, and that goes for the up-tempo pieces, too. What is constantly a revelation is the sheer number of really great, and generally little known musicians who are capable of such a high- quality performance. We sometimes hear the established names of Jazz producing music less accomplished than what we have here. A real pity, we feel. Sameer Gupta's "The Source" has an inner beauty, a special quality, that permeates the air around you. This CD is for people who listen to a lot of Jazz, for people who listen daily and often hours at a time. Recommended for people who are already working their CD players with their first cup of coffee.

*Lawrence Brazier*



## Cooke Quartet **Searching**

(Black Hat Records - 2000)  
by John Barrett

Give this some time; it starts slow but the power grows every minute. Michael Cooke has a strong abrasive tenor, like late-Fifties Coltrane; on "Malcontent" he squeals, metallic rage as Mel Nelson jabs Cecil Taylor chords. Nice idea, but something's missing; I can't really say what, but keep listening. They find it - in abundance.

Percussion is everywhere; as many as four men on drums of the world. Tabla reigns on the mystic "Goddess"; Cooke takes the alto on a sinuous dance. When he leaves, Nelson shines: echoing block chords, rhythmic slams, and a moment of pure Tyner. He tried this on "Malcontent", but here it succeeds. Mel's lush on his ballad "Nikita", where Michael plies the old slow vibrato. (Always gorgeous when one does it right - he does.)

There's a deep Latin groove on "Searching" (Cooke's soprano is vibrant, if a bit quiet) and the Trane whistle excels on a furious "Footprints". "Coalescing" features the bass of Alec Lytle; he walks tall as Cooke surrounds him in flute. (Some overblowing here, and a lot of sweetness.) "The Source" is a ballad with guts: tough tone from Lytle (plus a good solo), Cooke swaying slow, and congas for a naked-city feel. This is nice, but wait for the encore: with a bass clarinet flutter Dolphy used on "God Bless the Child", Michael sails strong with "Reflection", just him and the bass. It's a marvelous display, shows Cooke has a full bag of tricks, and hints he hasn't used them all. Very impressive; if you find this album, your search will be rewarded.



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Monday, January 3, 2000

# Jazz at a Glance

- *Featured Artist: Cooke Quartet*
- *CD Title: Searching*
- *Year: 1999*
- *Record Label: Black Hat Records*
- *Genre: Contemporary Jazz*
- *Musicians: Michael Cooke on tenor, alto, and soprano saxophone. Mel Nelson on piano. Alec Lytle on acoustic bass. Sameer Gupta on drums. Paul Fisher on congas and percussion on 2,4,5,6,8. Roland Robles on tabla and percussion on 2,4. Cliff Winnig on tamera on 2. Greg Rosenberg on percussion on 4.*
- *Review: For listeners of contemporary jazz, they are in for a nice treat when they put on "Searching," a compact treat of original music which includes songs such as "Malcontent," "Goddess" (written by Sameer Gupta), "Nikita," "Searching," "Footprints," "Coalescing," "Lonely Woman," "The Source," and "Reflection" (written by Michael Cooke). The total playing time for the CD is 57:50.*

*Mel Nelson reveals his wonderful playing techniques as a jazz pianist in different ways on each selection he performs. Nelson is a fine pianist, and if you have not heard him play piano before, this CD is an excellent introduction to his style.*

*Michael Cooke has a fresh and original saxophone voice, and he is equally at ease blending in or on solo, his pleasure with harmonic lines is openly shared with the listener in a mellow jazz idiom, allowing the listener to savor the notes being played. In fact, this Cooke Quartet is outstanding in numerous ways.*

*"Searching" is fresh, innovative contemporary jazz from the Cooke Quartet. It is something to be played often and savored. Excellent music. If you have a friend that would like an introduction to contemporary jazz, suggest this CD to him or her, or better yet, purchase it and give it as a gift! High energy, emotional, lively, and enjoyable is what this CD "Searching" is all about!*

- *Rating: **Five Stars***
- *Record Label Website: <http://www.blackhatrecords.com>*
- *Artist's Website: <http://members.aol.com/cookeq/>*
- *Reviewed by: [Lee Prosser](#)*



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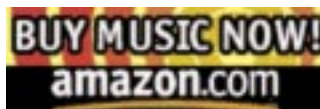
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# BLACK HAT RECORDS presents:

## The Cooke Quartet's debut CD "SEARCHING"



This eclectic debut album has songs influenced by Latin, Indian, Asian and Classical music. A gutsy and risk taking performance, "Searching" is a musical adventure for the Jazz enthusiast. At their performance at the San Jose Jazz Festival, members of the audience stated that "CQ is a true jazz discovery." The CD is available for purchase online at The Jazz Loft, CDNOW, Amazon, CD Universe, CDWorld and many more.



### Review from Amazon

From Boston, Mass. , September 15, 1999

Innovative and emotional jazz! Searching is a great album. It is not glossy or slick. It is jazz played with emotion from the soul. It made me feel as though I was sitting in a jazz club in the by-gone days, listening to musicians tell their stories of love, sorrow and joy through music. This group reaches the inner soul of us all!

**Christian Carlson from Atlanta, GA , October 6, 1999**

Excellent Old-School Jazz The Cooke Quartet is a new band out of the Bay Area that pays tribute to the Old School Jazz sounds of Coltrane, Miles, Monk, etc. The combination of standards and originals give hope to the current Jazz scene. If you are looking for some "new" music to put beside your "Live at Birdland" CD, this is it.

**Venus Rea' - KSAK 90.1FM Walnut, CA:**

I really loved that CD (Searching) you sent and so did my Co-host.



**Yanick Theriault-RadioJ 93.5 FM New Brunswick, Canada:**

... played it with good reviews. Had a call and many comments (all of which positive). My copilote says the same thing: good grooves, man!

**Kristen Heslet-WBMT 88.3 FM Boxford, Mass.:**

I just wanted to let you know that I've had a lot of requests for the CD and lots of positive feedback. I personally love listening to Michael's' CD...they have an awesome sound!



**Nick Dedina - Listen.com Reviewer:**

The Cooke Quartet make Hard Bop that, like Horace Silver and early Herbie Hancock, dares to be delightful. Latin and Swing touches make their mid-'60s Blue Note sound extra groovadelic-- this is one tight outfit.

**Rev. Dr. Rodrick Miller:**

I have been listening to "Searching", and I'm enjoying it very much. He (Michael Cooke) is very talented, that's for sure. Michael is able to set various moods in these songs. And the energy comes through.

**Clive Savage:**

WOW! It's incredible. I do hear nods to Coltrane a lot, but will surely hear more stylistic references with each listening. I listened to it all the way into London this morning on the train too - so it's now a permanent feature in my walkman.(It's worth noting that when I went to put the CD into the stereo, I took out The Birth of the Cool to make way for it. So, Miles makes way for Michael..)

### Reviews from Riffage.com

**pez**

I like this style and era of jazz. This group does what it does very well... keep it up!

**jtownes**

I love the percussion. It's adds so much to the vibe. Good groove, nice flavor.

**jubalation**

tastfull use latin rythme. love sax work. soulfull and polished.



To book CQ for your club or festival call: 650.572.COOK If you're wired, you can reach CQ on the Internet at cookeq@aol.com. And for more information on the group check out their Web site at <http://members.aol.com/cookeq/>

<http://cq.iuma.com/>

<http://www.blackhatrecords.com/>

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