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## A High-Octane Chamber Group's Continuing Insurrection

By STEVE SMITH

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AROUND five years ago the string quartet Ethel announced its arrival on the New York new-music scene with the explosive impact of a lobbed grenade. Calling themselves a band rather than a chamber ensemble, the players — Todd Reynolds and Mary Rowell, violinists; Ralph Farris, violist; and Dorothy Lawson, cellist — flouted convention at every turn. They played exclusively with amplification, used choreography and theatrical lighting in their concerts and improvised segues between compositions like a D.J. fashioning a seamless flow of dance music.

Those efforts marked this fast-rising group as a natural successor to the fashionably eclectic Kronos Quartet. But growing pains ensued. Mr. Reynolds left in 2005, turning his attention to composing and a growing solo career. His replacement, Cornelius Dufallo, had previously been a member of the Flux Quartet, another highly regarded New York ensemble.

At first glance Mr. Dufallo seemed an odd choice. Flux was (and continues to be) associated with rigorous works by the likes of Iannis Xenakis, Giacinto Scelsi and Morton Feldman. But Mr. Dufallo — whose résumé includes work with the jazz innovators Ornette Coleman and Oliver Lake as well as rock acts like Lenny Kravitz and Queensryche — took to his new role with ease and assurance. Two recordings issued by Ethel last year prove that its chemistry remains intact, its sights commendably broad.

“Light,” Ethel’s second disc on the Bang on a Can label, Cantaloupe Music, offers a dozen short selections, many of which have featured in the group’s recent concert programs. “Nepomuk’s Dances,” by the Brazilian pianist and composer Marcelo Zarvos, is scattered around the disc: one movement at the beginning, the other two near the end. “Arrival,” the first part, opens the disc with bustling rhythms, over which a violinist plays lines of aching sweetness. The second movement, “Sickness and Death,” is a mournful dirge reminiscent of Arvo Pärt’s music; the third, “Memory,” returns to the ebullient mode of the introduction.

In “Ethel Dreams of Temporal Disturbances,” by the vocalist and performance artist Pamela Z, the group’s soporific lines are repeatedly interrupted by electronic rhythms, advertising slogans and the odd snatch of Broadway belting. “After Dust,” by Mary Ellen Childs, is a rich, dreamlike tango. A movement from Don Byron’s String Quartet No. 2, “Four Thoughts on Marvin Gaye,” evokes that singer’s smooth voice as well as the lascivious bump and grind of his dancing.

Each of Ethel’s members is also featured as composer or arranger. Ms. Rowell’s “Sambula” is filled with swooning melodies and driving Brazilian rhythms; “Also Sprach Einstein” overlays the same piece with the whistles, rude outbursts and verbal asides of an African gray parrot. Ms. Rowell also provides a luminous transcription of “Requiem,” by the jazz pianist Lennie Tristano.



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The string quartet ETHEL features, from left, Ralph Farris on viola, Mary Rowell and Todd Reynolds on violins and Dorothy Lawson on cello.

Mr. Dufallo’s songful “Lighthouse” has the breezy sway of bossa nova, and Ms. Lawson’s “Chai” is filled with gritty, grainy blues sounds. Mr. Farris is represented by “Pelimanni’s Revenge,” an arrangement of a rustic folk dance originally performed by JPP, a Finnish group. All three works are attractive, as the players combine formally honed acumen with a convincing sympathy for popular modes of expression.

“AllSteel,” another recent Ethel disc, issued on John Zorn’s Tzadik label, is devoted exclusively to works by John King, an electric guitarist and the former curator of music programming at the Kitchen.

The most substantial piece is the one that lends the disc its title. Mr. King sketched four movements of “AllSteel” on Sept. 10, 2001, then added another four in response to the tumultuous events of the next day. The movements composed before the tragedy are energetic, jazzy and occasionally abrasive in their high spirits; those that followed move from numbed anguish to quiet resilience and hope.

“Round Sunrise” is in two movements, a relaxed blues and a bustling conclusion based on a persistent riff. Both sections require extensive improvisation. The Ethel players respond with serpentine lines and greasy slurs. Similar qualities characterize “Lightning Slide,” which Mr. King composed for Kronos. Insistently chugging rhythms in the opening and closing movements suggest the momentum of a runaway locomotive. Happily, Ethel keeps eight firm hands on the wheel.