

# Alan Braufman Valley of Search

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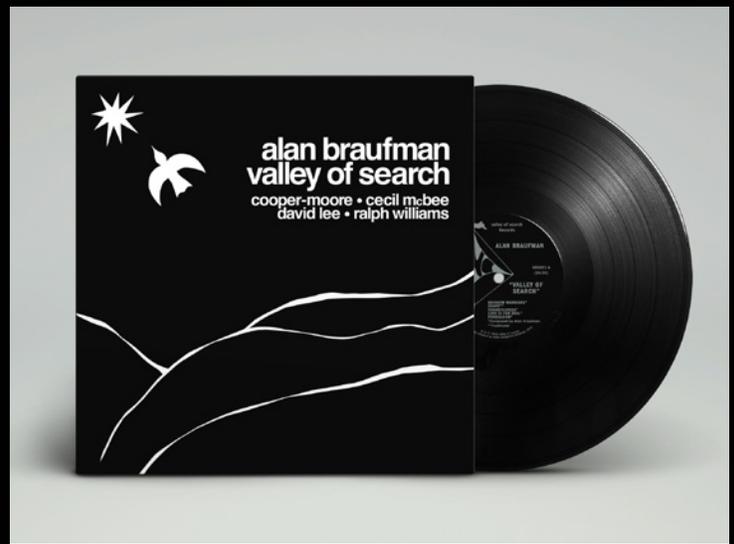
Reissue on Valley of Search label  
Originally released in 1975 on India Navigation

Alan Braufman • alto, flute, pipe horn  
Cooper-Moore • piano, dulcimer, recitation  
Cecil McBee • bass  
David Lee • drums  
Ralph Williams • percussion

[www.valleyofsearch.com](http://www.valleyofsearch.com)

What we know of Downtown New York comes from the countercultural and creative flowering that emerged in lower Manhattan in the 1960s, attributable to cheap live-work spaces called lofts. These were often abandoned and disused small manufacturing spaces and they became a nexus for artistic practice and life. From a jazz perspective, lofts were alternatives to the club scene, and they gained notoriety in the 1970s. Places like Studio We, Studio Rivbea, The Ladies' Fort, Ali's Alley, and Environ became central in the development of the new music. But even the underground had an underground, and the happenings at 501 Canal Street on the West Side were a point of activity in which a small but dedicated number of people took part.

In 1973 a cadre of free improvising musicians relocated from Boston to lower Manhattan: pianist Gene Ashton (now known as Cooper-Moore), bassist Chris Amberger, and saxophonists David S. Ware and Alan Braufman. All had studied at Berklee College of Music, though they stood apart from most collegiate musicians. Ashton secured the building at 501 and the rent for the each of the four usable floors was \$140 a month. The first floor became a performance space, while Ware and Braufman took the front and back of the second floor, respectively. Ashton was on the third floor with his young family, and Amberger was on the fourth. Later, drummer Tom Bruno and his partner, vocalist Ellen Christi would take Amberger's spot. Along with bassist David Saphra and drummer Ralph Williams, the Braufman-Ashton unit became the house band, rehearsing regularly and performing in the storefront.



Braufman was born in 1951 in Brooklyn and raised on Long Island, moving to Boston to attend Berklee in 1968. In his own words, he “started playing clarinet at eight; my mom was deeply into the music, so she would play Mingus, Eric Dolphy and Coltrane. It grabbed me – there was something exciting about it that I didn’t hear in other music, so no matter what I was going to be a musician. When I was thirteen I got my first saxophone. I had a teacher who could teach me how to play but not how to improvise (which is what I wanted to do) so I had to figure it out. I didn’t know changes, but I could pick out the patterns that were happening in free music and I could figure out what to do. I would teach myself patterns and scales, figure out some harmonics – I was self-taught until I got to Berklee.”

Braufman’s sound — “Alan had a huge sound on alto and voice that was his, and that was rare in a town where you had lots of young players coming up” (Cooper-Moore) — was immediately appealing and rooted in such forebears as Jackie McLean. In Boston,

he made other connections, including drummer David Lee Jr.'s wife-to-be who ran the coat check at the Jazz Workshop. The saxophonist parlayed that into working lights at the venue and, more importantly, a friendship with Lee that resulted in the percussionist's place on this album. Braufman also sat in at the Jazz Workshop, which is how he met future mentor and collaborator Cecil McBee, whose partner Lucia, an artist, was also living in Boston — in this case, on the bandstand when the bassist was coming through town with Pharoah Sanders. Braufman later played on McBee's debut Strata-East LP Mutima, recorded in New York in May of 1974 and a precursor to the bassist's role in Valley of Search.

As Cooper-Moore tells it, "when we moved to 501 Canal Street... that's when I got to really play with Alan. When we started putting on concerts, we used the same musicians but [depending on the day it] would be either his band or my band. It was around that time Cecil Taylor did a concert at Carnegie Hall with his orchestra, and Gary Giddins, who was writing for the Voice, wrote very badly about David S. Ware. Tom Bruno was living at Canal Street then, along with Ellen Christi. Philip Polumbo, a bass player and painter, was living on the top floor, and they were all working at the Village Voice. Tom said, you know, 'we gonna get back at this guy Gary Giddins,' so they mimeographed these posters, little sheets about how Gary was an idiot and he couldn't hear, he really didn't know the music and he should come down to Canal Street sometime and hear what's going on there. So one week when it was Alan's band, Giddins showed up and reviewed us, and we got good press. He thought that the space was loud but the headline read 'Taking Chances at 501 Canal' and then people started coming." The article, in the June 13, 1974 issue of the Voice, discusses the music as it relates to figures like Taylor and Don Cherry, and notes the programs' "kaleidoscopic densities" and that Ashton and Braufman's linkage is what pushes the music forward.

Valley of Search is a document of the music at 501 Canal, but it's also a document of relationships — people who lived or worked together and were humanly close. Braufman met Bob Cummins, the founder of India Navigation Company, at a party at McBee's apartment in Harlem. The label had just been conceived, and

Braufman would be its second artist. McBee, Lee, and Williams were obvious foils for their place in the saxophonist's work and life, the latter providing a bevy of instruments that he would later apply to work with trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith. In late 1974, Cummins set up microphones in the building's storefront, documenting two short sets by the band with no alternate takes or additional cuts.

Invoking with a dulcimer and bowed bass drone undergirded by flits of percussion, Ashton chants the Bahá'í prayer "God sufficeth all things above all things, and nothing in the heavens or in the earth but God sufficeth, verily he is in himself the knower, the sustainer, the omnipotent. God sufficeth all things above all things..." granting the music's higher search a stirring, declaratory shout amid mountain strings. Soon, liquid alto keen, harried screams, and rhapsodic piano chunks edge a dense fracas toward the sharp, sinewy groove and foamy crests of the following movement. One would imagine that the music on this recording reflects the overall feel at 501; the compositions are among those that were in their book at the time, fleshed out with a powerful array of percussion, whistles, and cries, McBee's bass steadily thrumming and in counterpoint to burred, throaty alto and briskly twined piano.

When Bruno and Christi moved from the fourth floor down to the first, that was the end of performances as they had been at 501 Canal; Ashton relocated to his home state of Virginia soon after, before returning to New York in 1985 as Cooper-Moore. Braufman would go on to work with drummer William Hooker and his own more commercially-leaning groups (as Alan Michael) before relocating to Salt Lake City, where he resides today. Valley of Search has enjoyed a cult status among followers of this music, and it captures a unique and very alive historical slice of New York's creative improvised underground.

**Clifford Allen**

**Brooklyn | March 2018**

## Taking chances at 501 Canal

Everytime I write about the New Music my first inclination is to begin the review with several thousand words of preamble, including justification of the music and the musicians. At this date that shouldn't be necessary and maybe it isn't. Yet the cliches and ignorance with which the music is dismissed and/or belittled are no less inane today than a decade ago.

When criticism had some meaning, one of its uses was to define the aesthetics of an art form, making it possible to differentiate between good and bad. Today music has been compartmentalized into sub-genres. Not, it is my conviction, according to musical characteristics but by social and economic ones. We have classical critics (even *The Voice* isolates them from us po' Riffers), jazz critics, rock critics, folk critics, and pop critics. Breaking it down further, we have modernist classical critics and classicists, swing critics and bop critics. Is there one honest-to-God Music critic—a general practitioner so to speak—operating in the United States? That is, a critic who makes it his business to go and hear what is happening in music and put it into perspective with purely musical considerations, leaving cultural ones to the sociologists?

Predictably, this specialization is most debilitating to the New Music. Classical critics ignore it because it is jazz. Jazz critics ignore it because it isn't jazz. Rock critics are apparently satisfied with whatever the media force-feeds them, so we will leave them out of this. Meanwhile a generation of musicians, with no fanfare or help from anyone, has evolved a new concept for music—with correspondingly new techniques—that fulfills all the requirements, emotional and formal, of all prior music. It is related to jazz the way jazz is related to ragtime. One is a (but not the) precursor of the other. It is, so far as my own listening experience allows me to judge, genuinely new.

My preamble above would delineate its pedigree, catalog its tools, and search out its values. But that would be a long article, maybe a book, and I'm not certain I'm presently capable of doing it anyway. The only thing I am certain of about the New Music is that it IS music, with great life and ringing human resonance. And it is being played, created, refined at various, mostly dingy, locations in the Village area of this city. Yes, you have to pay some small dues (but no money other than a contribution) to hear it.

One such place is 501 Canal Street. The building is owned and occupied by musicians who have formed groups including Apogee, the Bruno Surrealistic Ensemble, and THE ALAN BRAUFMAN QUARTET. The bands perform on a rotating schedule Friday and Saturday evenings at 9 p. m.

The Braufman band had five pieces the night I heard them: Braufman, reeds; Gene Ashton, piano; David Saphra, bass, trumpet, guitar; Philip Polumbo, bass; and Ralph Williams, drums. The pervasive force of Cecil Taylor and Don Cherry is apparent not only in a general stylistic sense but in the players' mastery of their instruments. Contrary to those who compare New Music to a kindergarten melee, this is a difficult, exhausting way to play.

The music unfolds itself with kaleidoscopic densities, Braufman's choice of flute, alto, or baritone commanding the colors. There are no secondary instruments; everyone contributes to the ensemble textures and rhythms. Ashton is an impressive pianist, providing rumbling tableaus and scattershot trills in counterpoint to Braufman's work and soloing himself with assured touch and contagious energy. He controls the keyboard, and his instincts are sharp and on the mark. Braufman plays with ecstatic energy and conviction, but also with a soft breeziness, giving full sonority to his in-

struments. His sound does not waver nor is his pitch unsteady. He works closely with Ashton's fulsome patterns. The music is open enough to accommodate a variety of percussive and other contributions but closed enough to insist on their relevance to the larger conception. A set lasts about an hour, wisely, and though the room isn't terribly comfortable, the sound balance works fine.

There are other New Music scenes—most advertise in *The Voice*, such as Studio Rivbea (24 Bond Street) and Artist's House (131 Prince Street.) If I had written in *The Voice* 30-odd years ago (had there been a *Voice*, or me) of young musicians, like Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, playing a new music at Minton's in Harlem, few readers would have preferred trekking up there to hearing established people on 52nd Street. No, I am not comparing Braufman and colleagues to Parker. Whether or not the music played at 501 Canal survives as well doesn't concern me at all. The fact is, these are the musicians who are taking the chances today and their gifts and commitment ought to be attended.

—Gary Giddins

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