



SMILEY WINTERS

Smiley Etc.

ARHOLLE

9033

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SMILEY ETC.

If Williams "Smiley" Winters had been based in New York instead of Oakland, he no doubt would have been widely recognized as a major jazz drum stylist. Except for a brief tour with Dinah Washington, however, the drummer spent 49 of his 68 years playing exclusively in the San Francisco/Oakland Bay Area. He did all manner of gigs, from backing strippers and accompanying cocktail lounge pianists to shuffling the blues in juke joints, but jazz was the primary arena for his art, particularly jam sessions. He participated in them almost as if they were religious rituals, sometimes for pay, more often simply for the fulfillment spontaneous creation affords the soul.

"That's the battlefield," Winters said of jam sessions in a 1990 interview. "It makes you a soldier, spelled 's-o-u-l-j-e-r.' I've been in the trenches a long time."

Born in St. Louis on September 11, 1926, Winters was a self-taught drummer, which perhaps accounted for his

unorthodox practice of playing a right-handed set left-handed and right-footed. Although he didn't take up drums until he was 12, music became an all-consuming passion. In high school art classes, he used his paintbrushes so often to tap out rhythms on his desk top that the teacher took them away and gave him crayons.

"I used to be quite an artist," he said. "I'd do the posters for school, but I still couldn't get away from that music. That music just hooked me up. It gave me a habit."

Around 1941, at a ballroom in St. Louis, Winters heard Charlie Parker with Jay McShann's big band. "From then on, when I heard Bird, it was all over," the drummer recalled. "I didn't know what he was doing, but that was it."

After a stint in the Navy, during which he organized swing and military bands and a drum-and-bugle corps at Port Chicago, California, Winters settled in Berkeley in 1945 and married his childhood sweetheart, the former Doris

Marie Tipton. Though Winters never had any other job than playing drums, they managed to raise 10 children. He and Doris remained together until his death on December 13, 1994.

During the '50s, Winters was a mainstay at Bop City, the legendary San Francisco after-hours club, where he would jam till the wee hours with such players as Ben Webster, Sonny Stitt, Leo Wright, John Handy, Frank Haynes, and Art Farmer after they had gotten off their regular paying gigs. "You don't know how good you can play till you get into fast company," he commented.

In the '60s, he was part of an informal group of Oakland musicians, including saxophonist Pharoah Sanders and pianist Ed Kelly, that regularly crossed the Bay Bridge to sit in at San Francisco sessions. They became known as "the Oakland Raiders." "We used to raid," Winters explained. "We'd run over and take over."

A master of coordinated independence – the art of maintaining a steady swing beat on the ride or hi-hat cymbal while accenting freely on the snare, toms, and bass drums – Winters approached rhythm with a propulsiveness and crisp attack reminiscent of such fellow drummers as

Frank Butler (his old Bop City session mate) and Philly Joe Jones. Winters was a consummate accompanist who had the uncanny ability, as if through telepathy, to anticipate what an improvising soloist was about to play and then not only make his patterns fit theirs but to spark them to greater flights of imagination.

"You have to listen more than you play," he explained. "You have to keep your ears wide open and your eyes and whatever else you can open. You have to feel what the fellas are trying to do. The main thing is the feeling. It's like a Maypole that you dance around and the beat is in the middle."

If Winters was well attuned to the structures of bop, he also adapted brilliantly to the avant-garde "free jazz" of the '60s where musicians threw many of the old conventions out the window. His work in that genre is the main focus of 1969's Smiley Etc., one of only two double-disc LP albums ever issued by Arhoolie Records.

Known around the world for his recordings of blues, zydeco, Cajun, conjunto, and other types of roots music, Arhoolie owner Chris Strachwitz also was a follower of the '60s avant garde, having

been introduced to the music by a woman friend from Germany. "She took me to see Coltrane," the producer remembers. "The night we saw him at the Jazz Workshop over in San Francisco he had two drummers – Elvin Jones and Rashied Ali. I was absolutely knocked out by that. I thought if this had been 1923, it probably would have been the King Oliver band."

Winters, who Strachwitz calls "one of the really syncopating African American drummers – a roots man," performed with one or more other drummers on most of Smiley Etc. and frequently with two bassists. And present on the explosive title track was multi-instrumentalist and vocalist Rafael Garrett, a veteran of Coltrane's marathon jams.

It was very interesting 'cause you'd get into different textures," recalls bassist Harley White, who played on three of the album's seven selections. "You didn't have a piano. One bass player is playing with a bow and the other bass player is picking.

And then you've got the two drummers, and you've got all this polyrhythmic stuff going. In order to make it work, they had to give and take. It was really nice to hear that the drummers could make it work, 'cause that was around the same time that Elvin and Rashied were playing with Trane. That was the direction that we were trying to go in."

Smiley Etc. is one of only a handful of non-traditional jazz albums ever cut by Chris Strachwitz. "Recording jazz has always been a problem, because you really can't capture the whole dynamics of a live performance," he explains. "But I think this is the closest thing. If you turn it up loud, boy, you can rock out with it."

Lee Hildebrand, 1998

Produced by Smiley Winters & Chris Strachwitz
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BERT WILSON

BARBARA DONALD

1. Two Trains (Bert Wilson)
2. Love Is Enlightenment (Bert Wilson)
3. Smiley Etc. (W. Winters)
4. Frank's Blues (F. Jackson)
5. Some Blue Shoes (Bert Wilson)
6. Just Steppin' (M. O'Barra)
7. Smiley's Mini Drum Suite (W. Winters)

SMILEY WINTERS: drums on all tracks.

BARBARA DONALD: trumpet on 1, 2, 3 & 5.

BERT WILSON: tenor on 1 & 5; soprano sax on 2;
tenor and bass clarinet on 3.

CHRIS AMBERGER: bass on 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, & 7.

HARLEY WHITE: bass on 1 & 5; claves on 6.

JAMES ZITRO: drums on 1 & 2; congo drums on 3;
bongo drums on 6.

MIKE O'BARRA: congos on 1; bongo drums on 3;
piano on 6.

JERRY SEALAND: bass on 2.

RAFAEL GARRETT: thumb piano, flute, voice, bass,
horns, etc. on 3.

MICHAEL WHITE: violin on 3

PAUL SMITH: drums on 3

EDDIE MARSHALL: drums on 3

FRANK JACKSON: piano on 4 & 5

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Produced by Smiley Winters & Chris Strachwitz
#7 – recorded by Chris Strachwitz at the Newman
Center in Berkeley, CA. on February 7, 1969 on
portable equipment. All other tracks recorded at
Sierra Sound Studio in Berkeley, CA. on March 19,
1969–Bob DeSousa engineer.



CHRIS AMBERGER

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