

**Preview****NEOSonicFest — fourth concert features saxophonist Howie Smith and nine audio channels**

by Mike Telin



Though described as “an electrifying and versatile soloist” by the *New York Times*, it’s difficult to categorize virtuoso saxophonist and composer Howie Smith. As a performer, he has worked with musicians, organizations and composers as diverse as Lester Bowie, John Cage, The Cleveland Orchestra, Mark Dresser, Iron Toys, Mike Nock, Elvis Presley, Clark Terry, and the Tone Road Ramblers. As a composer, his catalogue includes works for big bands and combos, for string, wind and percussion ensembles, for electronics, and for mixed media.

On Wednesday, April 2nd beginning at 8:00 pm in Cleveland State University’s Drinko Hall, NEOSonicFest presents Howie Smith in a performance consisting of a single work, Smith’s own *The Speed of Time* for saxophone and nine-channel surround audio.

“It’s hard to believe the piece is twenty years old,” Smith pointed out during a conversation in his Cleveland State office where he served as Coordinator of Jazz Studies from 1979–2005 and Chair of the Art Department from 2003–2007. “If we were doing it now, with all the digital technology, it would be a lot easier. Back then we had to figure out how to do everything.”

Smith went on to explain that all of the pre-recorded mixture of saxophone, voices, percussion, synthesized keyboards, and electronics was done on two-inch tape with a twenty-four track machine. Then, the twenty-four tracks were mixed down to nine channels. “We also had to come up with a way to build a nine-channel stereo system.”

Smith said that he’s not just playing the saxophone but also playing the space. “I can move sound around, at times front versus back or side to side. Depending on how you have the [pre-recorded music] mixed, the sounds are actually moving around the space. So everything you hear during the concert is something that I either did before the concert started or is happening during the concert. And then there are some things that can be manipulated during the concert.”

When did Smith first develop his fascination with the movement of sound? “That goes back to high school. What’s a better description of moving sound than a marching band? I grew up in Reading, Pennsylvania where drum and bugle corps were a really big thing. When you watch a half-time show at football game, what it sounds like to people in the stands all depends which way instruments are facing. And if there’s a drum and bugle corps coming down the street, the sound changes as it gets to you and as it goes by. Of course Charles Ives was playing with this kind of thing a long time ago, but I think that’s where I really got into it.”

Smith said that how sound is heard in any room stems from the idea that no two people in a hall are hearing the same concert — both for acoustical and physiological reasons. “Everybody comes with a different set of expectations, and that affects how they respond to what they hear. The other thing has to do with where you are sitting. I once heard Frank Zappa say that music was in some ways like an air sculpture, and [performers] are re-arranging the molecules in the room. There are a lot of pieces I’ve done where I move around. It’s like the old Texas tenor players who would walk the bar. You get out and you play the audience. But to me it is about moving the sound around.”

*The Speed of Time* lasts between 60 and 75 minutes and Smith will play the room accompanied by sections of recorded sound, along with sections that are unaccompanied. But is Smith improvising his part throughout? “There is a certain amount of ritual involved. There are some things that I have to play as they are written and other things that will be improvised. And often I do need to do a very specific thing in terms of tempo, mood and structure.” The piece is also physically challenging. Smith jokes, “since I’m the only person playing, getting ready for it is like going into training.”

*Published on clevelandclassical.com March 31, 2014*