



Dolphy and his Brief Life

Eric Allan Dolphy, born 20 June 1928 in Los Angeles, of West Indian descent, began his career in a rather unspectacular way, probably concentrating mainly on practising, before he moved to New York City in 1960. Following initially in the tracks of Charlie Parker on alto sax, Dolphy was not content to remain with this one instrument and so widened his scope to include perfect command of flute and bass clarinet—an instrument which up until then only Herbie Mann had undertaken to master before refocusing on the flute. After Dolphy's untimely death in Berlin on 29 June 1964, his bass clarinet passed into the hands of John Coltrane, who occasionally played it live in his later period.

Early on, Dolphy's aesthetics took shape within the quintet led by drummer Chico Hamilton, which featured cello and guitar in place of the piano. Surprisingly, though he emerged from the cool West Coast jazz tradition, before long he would go down in jazz history as one of its most expressive musicians. Very little can be said about Dolphy as a person except that he came across at this time as a rather introverted yet helpful sort of individual who favored an ascetic lifestyle. One sidelight from this early period was his casual friendship with John Coltrane which began in 1954. When he moved to New York City in 1960, however, preceded by his good reputation, his even-keel lifestyle changed abruptly. In quick succession, he was lined up to play with nearly the whole roster of important jazz musicians, from Coleman Hawkins to Bud Powell and from Coltrane and Hancock to Tony Williams. Now, for the first time, Dolphy's unmistakable, expressive style asserted itself on all three instruments.

Numerous other musicians have had only a minute amount of time to achieve their life's work: Mozart (1756-1791) had 35 years, Schubert (1779-1828) 31 years and Charlie Parker (1920-1955) a mere 35. Death has dealt trum-

peters even more tragic hands: Clifford Brown (1930-1956) lived to be only 26; Fats Navarro (1923-1950), 27; Lee Morgan (1938-1972), 34 and Booker Little (1938-1961)—Dolphy's favorite—lived only to the age of 23. With the exception of Booker Little, what distinguishes Dolphy from the others was his extremely short creative life span. Only a handful of his recorded works appeared in the decade from 1949 to 1959, whereas between 1960 and 1964—that is to say, in just four years—he took part in nearly three hundred! recordings, figuring as soloist in half of them and as winds support in the rest. Among other things, in 1960 he accompanied Sammy Davis Jr. in a band which soon would evolve into the Count Basie Orchestra. However, Dolphy only produced 14 records under his own name, not including the sporadic live tracks which appeared later, mostly in Europe.

Dolphy stepped up his creative output enormously in the last four years of his life almost as if he knew his days were numbered, much as the fir tree boosts its cone production the season before it dies. Apparently he needed to plunge into the dense woods of New York City in order for his best work to emerge from his own depths. The phenomenal Booker Little had just as little time to lay his indelible tracks—four years after starting his career at the age of 19 under the patronage of Max Roach. During the last year of his life, taken alone, he joined Dolphy in the studio eleven times...coincidence or the intuition of a partner in destiny?

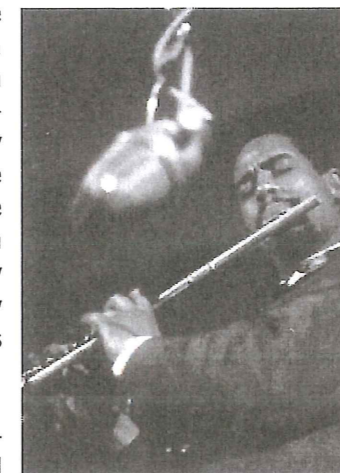
Dolphy and Free Jazz

As the '60s blew in, jazz was caught up too in the general spirit of uprising. Many musicians of the period wished to break out of the mainstream straight jackets—such as the 12-bar blues or the 32-bar song forms—to give themselves as much breadth as possible for personal expression and advancement. This jibed with the mind-set of the time. Miles Davis as well as John Coltrane, Ornette Colemann, Tony Williams, Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter...all were looking for new ways in and new ways out.

Non-European influences—and above all Indian music, with its ragas which so closely resembled modal music—played a major role in this search: "I've talked with Ravi Shankar and I see how we can incorporate their ideas," Dolphy once explained. "Indian music sounds to us like one minor chord; they call it a Raga or scale and they'll play on one for twenty minutes...it's a challenge to play a long time on just one or two chords." "

By and large, it is safe to assume that musical and not political considerations provoked these changes (at least not as far as Dolphy is concerned...How could he possibly have found the time to pay attention to politics when he was involved with the making of 300 records in four years?)

In all of this, it's important to remember that Free Jazz, at the outset, was played only by "straight" jazz musicians. Free Jazz developed seamlessly out of the formal. Only much later did a stratum form in which musicians played (or only could play). Free exclusively, in the U.S. as well as in Europe. And only then did the really estranged camps appear.



Dolphy was a much-prized, all-around musician: Opinions about Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor began to vary much earlier. Nevertheless in one notable exception, Miles Davis openly displayed contempt for all "experimentalists" of this type and categorically rejected all of their music.

Dolphy and Modern Jazz

Jazz did not develop in a cocoon as is often thought. Precisely American jazz musicians showed great interest in following the developing trends in European concert music and the avant-garde, attempting to elucidate them or to integrate some of their elements into their own music. Charlie Parker's greatest wish was to record with a symphony orchestra—whereas he missed his scheduled lessons in composition with Edgar Varese. Coltrane focused attention on Slonimsky's *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns* and analytical harmonic studies. Or, as he explained in *Downbeat* (Sept. 1960):

"In fact, due to the direct and free-flowing lines in his music, I found it easy to apply the harmonic ideas that I had. I could stack up chords—say, on a C7, I sometimes superimposed an Eb7, up to an F#7, down to an F. That way I could play three chords on one. But on the other hand, if I wanted to, I could play melodically. I found there were a certain number of chord progressions to play in a given time, and sometimes what I played didn't work out in eighth notes, 16th

notes, or triplets. I had to put the notes in uneven groups like fives and sevens in order to get them all in."

Miles Davis took up Gil Evans' scores for *Porgy and Bess* and *Sketches of Spain* and Ornette Coleman improvised in *Skies of America* around his own symphonic structures. Dolphy even went a step further. In a chamber music ensemble led by Third Stream pioneer Gunther Schuller, he played not only *Jazz Abstractions* (with Jim Hall), a number composed specially for him, but also Varese's *Density 21.5*, a piece for solo flute, and Stravinsky's *Ragtime*.

"Schoenberg was a name that came up frequently in conversations with Dolphy and he was also intrigued by African music—in particular "the singing of the pygmies." Furthermore, as George Avakian wrote: "He (Dolphy) read books, analysed records and scores; he had recently latched on to Erik Satie, whose pungent wit entranced him." "

Another name should be mentioned among the trail blazers in this area: John Lewis, pianist with the Modern Jazz Quartet, made tireless efforts to support Ornette Coleman, Eric Dolphy and a wide variety of cross-over experiments, as they would be called today.

Dolphy's Legacy.

So, as it turned out, in a mere four years Dolphy wound up playing with nearly all of the heavyweights among his musical peers, with the exception of Cecil Taylor:

"Before Eric went to Europe, he told me a dream he had," an acquaintance of Dolphy's explained. "He dreamed he was on a bandstand with Cecil...and he was waiting for his turn to play. He kept saying to himself, 'At last, I'm going to play with Cecil.' And before he could play, he fell down dead on the bandstand." "



Significant entries in his ample discography include his contributions to Oliver Nelson's *The Blues* and the *Abstract Truth* and George Russell's *Ezz-thetics*, to Freddie Hubbard's *The Body & the Soul*, O. Coleman's *Free Jazz*, Coltrane's *Ole*, *Impressions* and *Africa Brass* (for which he wrote the arrangements) and *Abbey Lincoln's Straight Ahead*, not to mention the twenty-plus



recordings with his favorite partner, Mingus, of whom more will be said later.

I think, however, that four of his own discs document his work more representatively. He cut three of these—Outward Bound, Far Cry and Out There—in 1960. The last of his four masterpieces, Out to Lunch, dates from 1964. While Outward Bound and Far Cry are still rooted to a certain extent in bop, Dolphy reconsidered his West Coast origins in Out There, replacing the piano with Ron Carter—somewhat indisposed—on cello. In Out to Lunch (with Bobby Hutcherson, Freddie Hubbard and Tony Williams), Dolphy goes the furthest and writes only fragments, which serve as a vehicle for wide-span improvisations. Yet, here, Dolphy and Hubbard never distance themselves entirely from the given harmonic-melodic context:

“I think of my playing as tonal,” Dolphy said. “I play notes that would not ordinarily be said to be in a given key, but I hear them as proper. I don’t think I ‘leave the changes’ as the expression goes; every note I play has some reference to the chords of the piece.”¹¹

Of the 22 compositions that Dolphy wrote, most are to be found on the four albums just mentioned.

Dolphy’s Influence

If Charlie Parker was the star who outshone all others, then next to him Coltrane, Coleman and Dolphy formed a bright three-star constellation:

“Coleman seems to arrive at a transcendence, Coltrane at a monolithic spiritual stance and Dolphy dances with the energy of the cosmos.”¹²

But modern saxophonists have since oriented themselves exclusively on Coltrane whereas Coleman’s music and “harmolodic” concepts have remained rather unattractive to the generations that followed. Why Dolphy never really became established as a viable stylistic model for later musicians is still unclear. It may be that his four-year creative boom was simply too brief for it to penetrate the collective subconscious of his jazz descendants. Or perhaps a new generation of musicians will use Dolphy’s vocabulary as a basis for a language yet to come.

Dolphy and Mingus

Of all of his contemporaries, Dolphy felt the most affinity for Mingus. Outside of his own bands, Dolphy could unfold best within the parameters of Mingus’ compositions. Twenty or so albums document this relationship which Mingus also respectfully nurtured. Especially noteworthy are the compositions Meditations on Integration, Hora Decubitus, What Love, Fables of Faubus, Epitaph 1, Stormy Weather, Orange Was the Color of her Dress and Better Git Hit in your Soul, in which Dolphy played featured parts. So Long Eric, performed twice with Mingus during his chaotic 1964 European tour, was not intended as a farewell but rather as a “come back soon” song. Here other recordings deserving mention include: Town Hall Concert 1964; Mingus, Mingus, Mingus, Mingus, Mingus; Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus; Reincarnation of a Love Bird; Mingus at Antibes; Mingus at Monterey; Meditations on Integration; Meditations & Mingus in Europe, Vols. 1 & 2.

“He had such a big sound,” Mingus once said about Dolphy. “As big as Charlie Parker’s, I mean, he didn’t need a microphone...I went through a time at a club we were playing in for a long while when I stopped taking solos. I was dragged because people weren’t listening. He (D.) kept after me to solo again. ‘Man,’ he’d say, ‘You’ve got to play. There are some people out there listening. Somebody cares.’ No, I don’t remember anything bad about this cat.”



The Dolphy Signature

How do you recognize a jazz musician? First of all by his sound (i.e. Ben Webster). Then by the melodics (Thelonious Monk), rhythmic phrasing (Miles Davis), dynamics/intensity (Dave Liebman) or, as in most cases, by a combination of all of the above. Furthermore, the choice of sidemen plays a considerable role (i.e. Coltrane with Elvin Jones and McCoy Tyner).

What you notice with Dolphy is that he prefers a rather calm and conventional background over which he lays solos which can hardly be outdone in terms of expressivity and virtuosity (except for in Out to Lunch, in which all parts carry equal weight). In this way, he manages to infuse the

more tranquil West Coast jazz (and Bebop) with the energy of the ‘60s—much as if expressionist painter Franz Marc were to paint his main figures on an impressionist background by Claude Monet. In contrast to most other jazz musicians (the comparison here being made with Coltrane’s record Ballads), Dolphy imbues his ballads with similar intensity and virtuosity, often even playing them in double-double-time.

At times Dolphy’s concept of parallelism seems almost autistic, but this is what makes for his unmistakable aesthetics. Moreover, Dolphy was the first woodwind player to achieve equal mastery of three instruments....Striking, his 10-minute, unaccompanied bass clarinet solo in God Bless the Child...

Dolphy and Other Contemporaries

Trumpeter Freddie Hubbard (who actually was Dolphy’s roommate for a short while) got his career off to an incredible start: In the space of just one year (1960), when he was only 22, he cut Free Jazz with Ornette Coleman, Ole with John Coltrane and Out to Lunch with Dolphy, producing downright milestones in modern jazz history before splitting off from this aesthetic trend and going his own way.

Compare this profuse and fulminating beginning with the paltry example of a Roy Hargrove and certain thoughts come to mind: Let’s imagine, for instance, that Leonard Feather and Dizzy Gillespie had joined forces with the same vehemence that a Stanley Crouch or Wynton Marsalis* would have had and that they had set up an immense number of “dos and don’ts” for jazz musicians. Then, perhaps, Hubbard might have dressed himself up like Louis Armstrong when playing, to make his music more authentic.

A propos authentic...when will we finally hear the old jazz played on the original instruments? You can hardly play music from the 1930s on a 1990 drum set! And if we continue along this line of thought: Shouldn’t whoever plays Mozart on period instruments also wear the costumes of the time? Because wigs might not reflect sound waves like short hair with gel...

*Reference here is not to the Wynton who plays brilliant Haydn concertos and who founded a remarkable quintet with his brother Branford in the 1980s but rather to the super-reactionary

jazz philosopher, jazz pedagogue and mentor from the new scene who thinks more or less in these terms: Thanks to the Lord, Thanks to Jesus Christ and thanks to Wynton Marsalis.



The VAO and Dolphy

After Erik Satie, Eric Dolphy is the second musician to whom we’re dedicating an entire program. Not because we’ve run out of ideas but simply because the path of jazz history is leading that way. Jazz also means continually dipping into the pool of musical precedents. After presenting so many thoughts on the subject of Dolphy, we’re not going to grovel now for legitimization. The task of realizing this project is hard enough. There certainly would have been easier things to tackle...

And: “C’est le ton qui fait la musique.”

mathias rüegg, August 95

Lieber Matthias,
Bravo(!) daß ihr Dolphy macht. Er ist
viel zu viel vergessen. Ich kann Euch lieber
nicht mit "Out There" helfen. Ich kann die
changes, hab' sie auch nicht in meinem Verlag.
(Wir haben keine Dolphy Werke.) Ich habe heute
Joe Lovano, Kenny Werner und mein Sohn Edwin
gefragt; die kennen die changes auch nicht.
Tut mir leid.

In passing, thanks to Gunther Schuller for lending (voluntarily!) his moral support.

¹¹ Eric Dolphy. A musical biography and discography
by Vladimir Simosko and Barry Teppermann