

sunny murray: interview

TAKEN BY SPENCER WESTON, TRANSCRIBED BY BOB RUSCH.

CADENCE: A little-known piece of information is that one of your first gigs in New York was with Red Allen, Willie the Lion Smith and people of that nature.

SUNNY MURRAY: Yeah, the reason I lost the gig was like, the reason a lot of people quit, was because of him and Willie always had a thing who was the leader of the band and drummers usually got bugged because with one cat you had to play one thing, with the other you had to play another. I didn't mind really but they let me go one night. I listened to Allen too long, naturally I tend to listen to Red Allen more because he liked the bass drum broken up or none at all; where Willie the Lion liked it steady. But he played it so well you were apt to forget you had no bass player. But he (the Lion) was much more an arrogant dixielander, almost like a business man dixie musician. He was always the watchdog for the cats, make sure the business went down all right. But Red could play, like an earlier Fats Navarro, that way of long toning.

CAD: Were you conscious of the freedom as it existed in dixie music and as it existed in the so-called free jazz.

SM: It was in my mind while I was playing with them, I had been playing dixie but I had never been allowed any solos in dixie. And solos I find on the trap set in dixie drumming, in order to follow the basic rhythm of dixie, mostly common time, your solos tend to float in their creativity very free, not regimental or rudimental, which would be Max and Art (Blakey). And then there's that steady boom boom boom overlying thing which to me is always the black Indian thing. So I was listening to Philly Joe Jones very strong then, matter of fact, I was a Philly Joe Jones devotee at the time, 'cause I went through Max, I went through Art. And so I was going through my Philly thing. So between the dixie and him (Cecil Taylor) and freedom it was so (laughter)...it was strong though 'cause I learnt my lesson sitting in with John (Coltrane). I played with Cecil for six years, never played loud 'cause Cecil didn't really play loud at first, and when I was sitting in with John, 1963, (Half Note), wow after hearing Elvin I had said to Albert (Ayler) I'm going to sit in this is the night. Now Cecil had said to me "somebody's playing your shit." I said "oh come on man, nobody ain't playin' my stuff." He said "go down to the Half Note." So I say "solid". Bash I walk down there and sit there paralyzed all night getting drunk listening to Elvin and John just tear up the vibration. Me and Cecil had a thing covered but they had another thing. I say "Damn that's a drag C.T. They blockin' on us, they don't intend to block but where they're going." I was going to curb Cecil's stuff into the main swing.

CAD: What do you think was different between Trane and Elvin and you and Cecil?

SM: Well, I feel Cecil was at a sort of music concept creativity from his studies that allowed him to really find...that time in the 60's John was coming of age, Miles was and they were really doing it. But Cecil needed a certain sway of the

public feeling. John had spent those years into that with Earl Bostic.

CAD: A closer connection with the people.

SM: Right. And I felt that particular hipness that drug me 'cause I felt that hip and I felt Cecil was hip but he was not as hip as me. And I had the wrong gig. I got very depressed, I went back home about two o'clock, tore up all my music. Cecil says "what's happening". I say "Well, I'm not going to play that way anymore."

See the trick of it was John Coltrane, while he was with Miles was listening to young Cecil Taylor and Herbie Nichols. John had technically figured out and played the feeling of Cecil's rhythm and C.T. knew that and I knew it. And that's one of the reasons we could play together different and nobody knew it. Play with that same intensity. It was a very special secret between me and John that we could play like that.

So, anyway, I said to myself the only thing that will cool me is to play with this man, and I came in one night, said "This is it Al (Ayler)." Elvin Jones play everything he could find, the table, the glasses. Albert say "You still want to play, Sunny?" I say "Yeah man." So I said "Mr. Coltrane can I play some?" Said "Yeah you can play some." I had never set on a Gretsch like that, you know a \$1500 Gretsch. I said, "Oh, goodness Elvin's drums is a dream." Elvin was real friendly for some reason his hostility didn't come out. I think what he was dealing with was John said "Yeah" without any problem.

CAD: New York seems to be so much of a proving ground for musicians from other areas. Is there much rivalry between the regions?

SM: It used to be, not now so much 'cause they all seem to be on top of it playing new music. But in the earlier days it was like Johnny Griffin, when he came to New York, look out Johnny goin' down to Birdland and blow down everybody who was playin'.

Most musicians in the last 20 years began so drastically different from where they are now that new music has embedded and found some reason to exist.

CAD: How do you feel about the guys that have gone over to the extremely commercial element of commercialism?

SM: I felt in jazz one of the most destructive forces is the lack of mass acceptance. The story of Herbie (Hancock) as opposed to the story of Billie Holiday, never touching the mass and this hurting her. The guys deserve success, I deserve success like Ornette said "We long overdue." The music must change and we must stay alive and change it 'cause we ain't did nothin' yet where we got to leave it.

CAD: Would you attempt to play that kind of music?

SM: I would attempt to play it with Herbie and I would attempt to inspire Herbie to be another Herbie. That's my role.

CAD: How do you feel about the recognition you have from the critics and in Europe and Japan, but the lack of economic support it gets you in terms of making records, gigs, and having a general level of acceptability as an artist.

SM: General level is a good way of putting it. I find, for some reason, being on the percussion side of the fence in America priorities are already sealed and signed for. We are not conscious as a mass of people what the drum set is or what it's really about. We don't feel its players are any more involved in life than a T.V. actor. So someone playing it is put in a strange position to survive from it. But we have a form

of music that can't survive without our drummers and we get into this pick and choose situation. My thing for making money in Philly it's because people in Philly have only been given food for thought by certain kinds of drummers. This city has not learned to put music on its high priority list, it's always kept in the bottom of the barrel like our private good time thing. They want it cheap.

The reason I try to put the trap set out there in a kind of perspective because so far every country has adopted it. Every country has learned you can express more of the black man in a trap set than you can in a conga or in a bongo. I mean that beautiful that was the original thing, that's being natural as much as our spirit allows. But (in America) the instrument has never been accepted, and that's why we don't make any money - they're afraid of a trap set. This may sound like a pass-off compared to the deep spiritualness of it, but it's that cold a game you play to survive on drums. You may know how well you play and you may know your music backwards and forward, but put on a social day to day vibe, you have to push that aside and deal with it like you're selling Cadillacs. Every now and then I break through and they realize good art cost money.

CAD: What would you consider being one of the strongest groups you've played with?

SM: The band I enjoyed most was for a minute in '69 and '70 (Paris) - Malachi Favors, Kenny Terroade, Byard (Lancaster) and Dave Burrell I liked that band very much. Made one recording, "Homage to Africa" (B.Y.G.).

CAD: Albert Ayler comes up as rather a mystery.

SM: I'm thinking about Albert a lot now. I believed in what Albert said about trying to play more people music. He felt the only way to do it in order to go home one more time was to go back out there one more time. Albert and me were going to do that together, after he got through with three albums but they wouldn't let him finish that trip. He was like a well for things to hear.

CAD: There's a controversy surrounding his death.

SM: Well, I'll tell you the controversy has been so cold that they just tried to wipe the whole thing of Albert's existence away and that hurts me the most of all.

CAD: You're from Oklahoma. Do you feel there is a connection between a region and one's music?

SM: Sometimes I feel drums are all a bunch of tom toms put together that you're walking softly on. We would not have been as directly in touch with jazz if we hadn't had such a beautiful American Indian mixture. I think the American dance, the American rhythm thing came out of being happy at one point during slavery with the Indians. I think we got back to finding out what it feels like to play an instrument again, being free with the Indians. My grandfather on my moms side was more or less a Senegalese kind of person to me. On my grandma's side the singing linking to dance strain was strong. Heritage is a very important thing, most of the real jazz came out from the west in a way. Sid Catlett was another cat from out there and this is the kind of consciousness that the drummers have to give recognition of. People like Eddie Blackwell, Billy Higgins and Connie Kay personify a western drummer too. The Indian and the army, that's why I was thinking of my grandfather 'cause he was in the Calvary and a hell of a lot of rhythm and music, technical stuff came down through the Cal-
page 16 - cadence - june 1979

vary. You know the Calvary manuals and the Calvary books - that was a source of information. The Indian does play a very significant role... in my family it does.

CAD: Let's talk about your style for a moment.

SM: Well, you know I try not to be stylized, my style is a changing style and I must keep that up until I'm too old to really stop that. I want to have a kind of home brewed, grown way, to express my way to people so they are able to feel some of me in them.

CAD: Is it still a challenge?

SM: (Whistles) now is the most frightening years because now I want to play completely different, after everything I've played with John, C.T., and Albert (laughter) I think I would have went to waste if I did anything (else besides being a musician) other than being a preacher.

CAD: Your "Apple Cores" record for some people it seemed a decidedly different Sunny Murray.

SM: That's a nice album for me because it was kind of like a kind of happy album. An album I can play on my lighter moments of life. This was the first time I had ever played with those cats so whatever came from the record is what we were feeling. I also wanted to set myself on a course and playing with those musicians is just an example how many fresh new musicians are around to play with.

CAD: You told me a story about a drum clinic with Max Roach and Art Blakey.

SM: Yeah. We were in a studio outside London with the Newport Jazz Festival tour. We were out there to tape a television performance and the drum clinic was myself, Art Blakey, Elvin and Max Roach. Anyway I was playing a single that night, go upstairs and get me a martini and this young director said I should not move. So Elvin and I were hanging out together and Elvin says "Well I'm going to have a taste" and I say "Well me too".

So the guy said something in very heated tones and I say "Well, you know what Miles Davis says friend, 'you got it'." So I split and go upstairs and get the martini and I came back and the guy is cutting off all the switches in the T.V. studio. The studio's going out piece by piece. So Art Blakey says "Man I made the guy very mad" and they took off on me. Art Blakey want to rumble so Art Blakey reach in his back pocket like he's going to attack me and Julian Priester and a few musicians hold him. So I take my sock cymbal and I say "let him go." I say it much more violent (laughter) and they never let him go. So I dug the English people had the cameras open and they're taping all of this niggerism. I take my cymbal and (throws it at the \$50,000 camera). Art was taken
page 18 - cadence - june 1979

back still going through the changes and Max is sitting there says "I'm not going to mess with you, man 'cause I'll cut your throat." So now the road man say "Oh Murray". I say "Will you stop putting all this madness on me, why you say 'Murray'". I say "Go upstairs and get on the phone and call George Wein, okay?" Everybody say "Wow, that's right I forgot about George." I say "That's who's hiring every damned body, never mind that little peepsqueak, go call George." As soon as I got on the phone I say "Hey George, I don't like this madness. I got \$800 in my pocket and a ticket round trip, I'm going home." "No, no don't come home." So I say "You better get this guy and cool him out." So the guy got on the phone (blah blah blah), so he came down (and turned on all the studio lights). I'm sitting in the corner drinking a beer, "Oh well Sunny, let's forget it." I say "No, no, no, I've been insulted, humiliated. I'm tired, I don't feel like playing, I'm giving you eight beats and I'm going upstairs and get me a taste for real." He says "No, no you can't give me eight beats you got to give me five minutes at least." I'm supposed to give them 14 minutes. They don't believe me and I play eight magnificent beats for 6000 people, and I jump up like a bull and (leave). The guy says I'm barred from B.B.C. and Max was very mad, he comes over and says who the hell do you think you are, now I got to play for 40 minutes. I say "Man, you don't have to play but one beat" (laughter), "you don't know who you are". And Elvin cracked up and I split for upstairs.

CAD: One last question regarding the spelling of your first name.
SM: James?
CAD: James?
SM: Oh, you mean Sunny, my Christian name is James, my nickname is Sunny. It's 'S-U'. I got the name when I was very young living in a kind of shanty town in Texarkana, Arkansas. I got the name 'cause I used to run around naked all the time and it was due to the fact that nobody really cared. My mother would come and put clothing on me but I didn't like clothing, it was so hot. I liked to sit nude in the sun so much my sister gave me the nickname Sunny. Sunny boy was the name you know, see it was a trick. She would open the window and I would climb out the window, my mother would lock us in and I could never get back in until my mother got home. I find people get hung up on the 'Son' in America, I never know why. In Europe it's just "Sun." Here it's always "Sonny", I imagine from our forefather slave days or something.

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