

HORACE SILVER: The Undaunted Artist



Horace Silver

On a windy February evening, while descending to the bottom level entrance to a New York Club called Fat Tuesdays the familiar opening chords to the classic jazz tune "Song For My Father" were distinctly recognizable. A white fellow, who was also walking down the stairs, excitedly proclaimed "Gee, Horace Silver is playing that song by Steely Dan!"

Of course, every jazz aficionado is well aware that, in fact, it was the jazz/rock/fusion group Steely Dan who "borrowed" the opening piano chords of "Ricky Don't Lose That Number" from Horace Silver.

The fact that this case of mistaken identity occurred gives credence to the present lack of understanding regarding the origins of jazz and the accomplishments of such consistent artists like Horace Silver.

Playing piano since the age of 12, Horace Silver has enjoyed a career with a rare longevity and a diversity of experience.

Silver's first big opportunity came while playing at Hartford, Connecticut's Sundown Club. He and his trio played for tuesday night's jam session in which guest artists (including Lucky Thompson) would come on stage and play with the house band. One night, jazz saxophonist Stan Getz came up as the celebrity guest soloist. He liked Silver's trio and after the set Getz asked for their phone number and promised to get in touch with them. Two weeks later, Horace Silver was phoned by Stan Getz and he asked the trio to join him in Philadelphia. As a result, Silver played with Getz for a year.

After leaving Stan Getz, Horace

decided to settle in New York City. He worked weekend gigs at a New Jersey bar playing for dancing and floor shows. The sax player, Bowman Caine, worked with Art Blakey's band. He informed Silver that Blakey's piano player was leaving and encouraged Horace to audition. They liked him and he was hired.

Silver's first encounter with Blakey only lasted a short while. The group was forced to disband due to a shortage of work.

The next meeting between the pair, (who were destined to create some of the most influential music on the jazz scene) came about when Art put together a group to record "The Night at Birdland." Clifford Brown, Lou Donaldson and Curly Russell were also on this date. This group played only two weeks at Birdland mainly to record and then played Philadelphia for one week.

"That was a very short lived group," Horace relates, "because there was very little work in those days (early '50's)."

The Jazz Messengers were finally formed after Silver had recorded a couple of 10 inch piano albums for Blue Note Records. The company asked him to record a third album but he wanted to use horns this time. Blue Note told Horace that he could choose whomever he wanted so he picked Art Blakey, Doug Watkins, Kenny Durman and Hank Moten. They did two recordings and liked playing together so well that they decided to stay together as a cooperative team. This is how the original Jazz Messengers started.

When Silver was asked why so many talented musicians during the 1950's had such a difficult time obtaining and sustaining work he reflects, "Prejudice entered into the situation in those days. A lot of White bands were working more so than Black bands. The well established Black names were working like Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Count Basie. But men like Art Blakey, Max Roach, Sonny Rollins and even Miles Davis weren't getting a hell of a lot work."

"Many of these great musicians," Horace continues, "were only offered a Monday night (which was an off night) at the Birdland to play. Very seldom would they get a week's engagement."

During this time, many jazz greats had limited exposure not only from a lack of club dates but recording opportunities as well. With the emergence of Blue Note and Prestige Records a real effort was made to sign and record these artists. Consequently, musicians such as Silver and

Blakey had an opportunity to grow.

In Silver's growth, he incorporates a wide range of musical styles that include blues, folk, latin and operatic. Always experimenting, Silver has done complicated horn arrangements in the "Silver and Brass" series, to stimulating vocals employed in his "United States of Mind" record series.

At present, his contract with Blue Note has expired and he now has his own recording company, Silveto Productions.

The incentive to start Silveto resulted from the fact that Blue Note, which once boasted an impressive roster of jazz greats, was not resigning anyone after their contracts expired. Many of these legends went to other labels. Silver, however, felt that he would create his own label and grow with it. He believes that with his own label he can create the kind of music that is in his head with no interference.

"I have been trying to pursue a direction with my music for the past 10-12 years that is sort of a metaphysical approach," Silver states. "I have always been interested in the uplifting, healing and therapeutic power of music," he continues. "I have always wanted to investigate it, learn it and use it to help people."

When asked how he feels his music encompasses a self-help, holistic, metaphysical concept Horace replied, "The music is holistic in the nature of the song titles, lyrics and music. They are all designed to uplift a person's spirit. It's self-help because the music can only help you if you involve yourself in it. The music is metaphysical because meta means before the physical and the music is the physical part while the lyrics, title and concept is spiritual and mental."

Horace Silver's latest example of this concept can be heard on the album "Guides to Growing Up." The recording includes recitations by Bill Cosby, vocalizations by Feather and Eddie Harris on sax.

The concept for the album came to Silver as a result of him being a divorced parent with a young son.

"Often when I have my son on weekends," Horace explains, "I am so busy taking him around and having a good time that when I take him home I would say, 'Damn, I should have sat him down and talked about the things he should and shouldn't do.' So, I decided to create this album not just for him, but for all kids."

His records can be ordered by writing: Silveto Productions, P.O. Box 7000-306, Rancho Carlos Verde, California 90274. The album sells for \$8.98 plus \$2.00 postage and handling. ■