



THE NEW YORK JAZZ RECORD



*BERTHA
HOPE
HOPE SPRINGS
ETERNAL*

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BERTHA HOPE

HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Bertha Hope (née Rosemond) is a pianist from a musical family with a remarkable story from a lifetime in music. In 1960 she married pioneering bebop pianist Elmo Hope and continues to present her late husband's music alongside her own while also championing women in jazz. She has received numerous accolades, including a Lifetime Achievement Award from Cobi Narita's Jazz Coalition in 2002, the Women in Jazz Award from the Mary Lou Williams Festival in 2005 and the Legends of Jazz Award from the National Jazz Museum in Harlem in 2018. Bassist/vocalist Mimi Jones has a documentary film in production about her life and music called *Seeking Hope*.

Hope is a native of Los Angeles. At three she surprised her family when she went to the piano and picked out the melody she had just heard on the radio, which happened to be the Brahms lullaby. It was soon evident she had perfect pitch. She and her two siblings, all of whom also sang, were encouraged to take piano lessons and they put on living room performances for their neighbors where they sold cookies and lemonade. She also studied clarinet and strings in school. Her father, Clinton Rosemond, had a career concertizing *bel canto* and German *lieder* and worked globally with Sidney Bechet, Josephine Baker, Mabel Mercer, Florence Mills, Paul Robeson and Eubie Blake. She used to practice with her father and when she was about 12 years old, he had a church concert and asked if she thought she was ready to perform with him. He gave her seven dollars, a lot of money, especially for a kid, and it was the first time she made the connection between music and money. With the growth of the movie studios, her father found acting work and Hope got a part in *Tonight We Sing* (20th Century Fox, 1953) about Sol Hurok.

It was later that she discovered jazz. She didn't see a lot of live music early on and records were a significant influence. In junior high school she befriended drummer Billy Higgins and, along with another friend, Danny Johnson, listened to records. Danny had the Blue Note record *The Amazing Bud Powell* featuring "Un Poco Loco", which made a major impact, and she resolved to pursue jazz. While still in high school she started performing with Johnny Otis in a band that featured Little Esther Phillips. She was studying theory and harmony at Los Angeles City College when she started carpooling with multi-instrumentalist Eric Dolphy, who lived around the corner. He was highly influential in his dedication to becoming a skilled musician. She also listened to rehearsals at his house and was there as the Clifford Brown-Max Roach Quintet was being formed, which led to lessons with its pianist Richie Powell for a few months. She then started playing solo piano in Beverly Hills. "I can't remember the name of that beautiful little room," Hope says. "After Hours" was the popular blues number she had to play for those audiences. She also worked with saxophonists Teddy Edwards and Vi Redd. The latter made a strong impression in part because at the time she was the only woman Hope had ever seen play a saxophone. Around this time Higgins was rehearsing with Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry and Charlie Haden. Hope would sit and

listen to them, and this also made an impression.

She met Elmo in 1957. His cabaret license had been taken away from him and he couldn't work anywhere that served alcohol in New York. He traveled out west on tour with Chet Baker. "He went on the road, I think, to be a little freer, move to a different location and give himself a different start." After finishing up with Baker, he became a first-call accompanist, especially for soloists traveling through town. "I think I met him at the Hillcrest Club when he was working with Sonny Rollins. By that time I had been listening to his records along with Bud and Thelonious. I think Elmo was more lyrical than Thelonious, who was much more angular than either one of them. Bud had that light, fast right hand and piercing left that let you know who it was right away. The three of them spent a lot of time together. It would be interesting to know what they thought of themselves as a trio and what their contributions were to the music. In conversations with people like Johnny Griffin, he told me that Elmo was the idea person, sort of like the ringleader of whatever they were going to be working on next."

Soon after they were married, she went on the road. The opportunity to work with saxophonist James Clay, whom she had heard with Coleman and at jam sessions, piqued her interest in a job backing up dancer Jeni LeGon. They traveled across Route 66 playing night clubs and Army bases. The tour ended abruptly in Florida when dates up to New York were canceled.

"Elmo actually wanted to come back to New York because by then [Riverside Records producer] Orrin Keepnews had offered him a recording date that might help to launch a different side of his career, still without the cabaret license, but at least get some recordings out and be able to work other places. He had had some offers in California, but that fell through and that was disheartening. So at that point he wanted to come back and I went from Florida to meet him." Putting work together in New York, she very briefly had a job with an all-female Cuban ensemble in Boston for which her cabaret card read "Tonita Alvarez". She also found work with Jimmy Castor and Jimmy Norman. "Jimmy Norman was one of the original Coasters, but he had other repertoire. He sang all the standards and he sang blues songs. We worked together quite a bit, a lot of private parties and things like that out in Jersey. When Sweetwater's opened up in New York, we opened that room. We were there a long time, like 14 months. That became a jazz band after a while."

Everything changed with Elmo's death in 1967. "Right after Elmo died, that was pretty much it for me in terms of music. I just decided I wasn't going to play anymore. So I gave away my piano, my in-laws were helping me with the kids and I decided just to find a day job. I really did stop thinking I was going to work in music anymore." She became a teacher, working for the Head Start program from 1971-82, during which time she went back to school and earned her B.A. in Early Childhood Education from Antioch College. She did have a jazz-fusion band called Inner Spirit she rehearsed with on Sundays out in New Jersey in which

she played electric keyboards with Doug Hawthorne (vibraphone), David Eubanks (bass) and Ivan Hampden (drums) but they never recorded. By the '80s, Hope wanted to play piano again. "I would really just be very happy to play an acoustic piano that really rang with whatever my body's strength can give it. The first group I joined when I decided I wanted to play again—and could make myself available for travel and rehearsals and all the things you need to be involved in in order to be an available working musician—was a women's band led by Kit McClure. She had great standard charts and a lot of people interested in her band. Teo Macero supervised recordings and I'm on at least two recordings that she put out."

She did most of her own recording in the '90s but much prefers live performance. "I did that one recording for Riverside with Elmo that became sort of an underground collector's item [*Hope-Full*, 1961]. Then I did [almost no] recording until the '90s. I'm just a nervous wreck in the studio. I think that's one of the reasons I haven't recorded more." She lived with her partner, bassist Walter Booker, for over 20 years before they married in 2004. Together they released four albums, the last one was *Nothin' But Love*, named after a song by saxophonist Frank Lowe, to which she added lyrics. Booker was a great part of the community, a mentor to many young musicians through his underground Boogie Woogie studio and Hope credits him for the inspiration to form the band Elmollenium.

This month, Hope has a solo performance at Brooklyn's Soapbox Gallery as part of the venue's Master Series (previous participants were Reggie Workman, Houston Person, Lenny White and Joanne Brackeen). "I have a possible tour in Holland in the fall, depending on where COVID is in Europe," Hope says. "That will involve some workshops in The Hague, some children's concerts and concerts at the Bimhuis and two other venues in Amsterdam. I'm working on taking some of Elmo's pieces and arranging them for string quartet. I am planning, with my [playwright and lyricist] daughter Monica, several projects to celebrate Elmo's centennial [June 2023]. I did a recording connected with the *Seeking Hope* documentary and I'm about to go back and clean some of that up and add to it. Music grows. You start to hear things acquainted with that first piece, but they're expanded now. So, I've got quite a few things I'm working through and working towards." ❖

Hope is at Bryant Park May 3rd-6th and Soapbox Gallery May 21st. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Elmo Hope-*Hope-Full* (Riverside, 1961)
- Bertha Hope-*In Search Of...Hope* (SteepleChase, 1990)
- Bertha Hope-*Elmo's Fire* (SteepleChase, 1991)
- Bertha Hope-*Between Two Kings* (Minor Music, 1992)
- Frank Lowe Quintet-*Soul Folks* (No More, 1998)
- Bertha Hope-*Nothin' But Love* (Reservoir, 1999)