

Tubby Hayes

On Cloud Nine

The Cessna Skyhawk stood alone on the airfield, its engine idling in anticipation of take-off and then flight. In the pilot's seat was tenor saxophonist Edward 'Tubby' Hayes. Next to him was bassist George Duvivier, and in the back were pianist Horace Parlan and drummer Dave Bailey. They'd been booked to play the Antibes jazz festival, and Tubby, who'd recently gained his pilot licence, had decided to fly his band to the gig himself. Suddenly a voice from the control tower crackled over the intercom: "Guys, you're okay to go, but it's cloudy up there, so visibility is reduced. Be careful."

Tubby stayed calm despite the warning. After all, as a jazz musician, flights to the heavens – cloudy or otherwise – were what he did best. He and his group were also accustomed to the sensation of taking off: that special moment when the syncopated pulse they generated seemed to defy Earth's gravitational pull, allowing the music to float weightlessly, like a cloud drifting over some beautiful vista.

An elemental and unpredictable quality was at the heart of Tubby's playing. Take, for instance, his solo on Gershwin's 'Soon.' Once Duvivier and Bailey's propulsive rhythm has sent the music spiralling skyward, Tubby enters, breaking through the cloud cover with a glistening cascade of notes as light and untrammelled as the watery vapour of which clouds are formed. The ideas stream from his sax so fluidly that you, the listener, feel like you're right there alongside him on this exhilarating, high-altitude journey. His soloing could be mercurial too, altering shape and course as subtly as clusters of clouds. And if the mood took him, he'd unleash Coltraneesque sheets of sound with all the fury of a hailstorm.

Dark clouds loomed on the horizon towards the end of Tubby's short life and even shorter career. It was a period when fast living and a gargantuan appetite for hard liquor and even harder drugs had all but destroyed his creative muse. He did everything to excess, and for that he inevitably paid the price. During his prime, he'd been of portly build – hence the nickname – but the ravages inflicted on his body by substance abuse and failing health left him as a slight and rather forlorn figure – a wispy Cirrus, destined to wander the skies in solitude.

Ultimately, Tubby's personal cloud remained gloomy, without a much-needed silver lining to redeem it. However, his musical legacy lives on. So while Sinatra, somewhere in the beyond, still swings on a star, Tubby still sits, Zeus-like, atop a cloud, surveying the jazz kingdom of which he was sovereign, and where for the angels he continues to spin diaphanous lines of improvisational genius.