



# CALVIN HILL

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

Bassist Calvin Hill grew up in Bridgeport, CT in a family with a passion for music. He enjoyed listening to the greats on record at home and at concerts at the Apollo, including Pearl Bailey, Duke Ellington, Ray Charles and James Brown. By the end of high school, he started to think about becoming a professional musician. "It was a dream. I said, man, if I could... I know I'm not going to be good enough, but I'm going to keep trying." It wasn't long before he was accompanying the likes of Billy Eckstine, Mel Tormé, Mose Allison and John Lee Hooker before tenure with leaders such as McCoy Tyner, Pharoah Sanders, Max Roach, Michael Carvin and Joanne Brackeen, among others.

Hill started out on the trumpet in grammar school, but the band director switched him to trombone. He didn't like it, but wanted to play music so badly that he stuck with it until he was able to switch to saxophone. Having played for some years at this point, he was able to read pretty well and got an opportunity to join some local big band rehearsals. This led to his personal discovery of the bass. "I was playing in the section and noticing the bass player. I liked the rhythms and the sounds of the drums and I noticed that [the bass had] a beautiful sound and it was kind of like the drums with some melody." His high school band director was delighted to have him switch to bass and set him up with an instrument and a teacher. "It was kind of from that point on (laughs), school ended (laughs), academics ended. Music totally took over my life."

The local Boys' Club had trumpeter Steve Furtado visiting from New York. Hill was sure to be there and ended up learning about Berklee College of Music, where he matriculated in 1963. His father covered his tuition provided that he majored in music education so

that he had something to fall back on should he not make it as a professional, which was still a fantasy that seemed out of reach to the young Hill. However, his commitment was steadfast and he soon had plenty of work to cover his room and board.

"At that point I was a sponge for music. If it had to do with music, 24-7, music, music, music. I just wanted to play, that's all I did. I did as much playing as I possibly could. There were three major clubs in the Boston area. There was a club in Roxbury called Connolly's and I got to be in the house rhythm section. I played with everybody from John Lee Hooker to George Coleman on that gig. Guys would come up and they might hire one musician [but] we were the house band and whoever came in we would back them up. John Lee Hooker came in, 'oh, yeah, we're going to be playing the blues.' I thought, I know how to play the blues. But I realized, I didn't know how to play the blues (laughs). John Lee Hooker, I mean, that was a different kind of blues. That was freedom, man. It wasn't like 12 bars. It was 13 and a half bars or 11 and a quarter bars (laughs). It was however he felt. That was an experience, doing that gig. And then I was in the house band at a place called Paul's Mall. It was two clubs right next to each other. The Jazz Workshop and Paul's Mall in the same basement in different rooms. At Paul's Mall we had a trio and we would do dance music in between the shows and sometimes we would get to work with the acts coming through. That's where I got to work with people like the Kirby Stone Four and Matt Monro. And in the Workshop I got to work with Mose Allison. The third club was not in downtown Boston. That was in a suburb of Boston called Peabody, which was maybe 25 miles outside of Boston. Lennie's on the Turnpike. This guy Lennie Sogoloff at the Turnpike was kind of like a jazz buff. There were people that he brought into his club that he was really interested in. That's where I got to work with Billy Eckstine and Mel Tormé."

The Boston scene dried up for him after graduation. He was not doing very much when he got a call from drummer Chip White, who asked to him to come down to New York in 1969. They recorded for Capitol Records with a rock band called Cynara, played some big rock festivals and toured with various artists such as Laura

Nyro and played opposite Miles Davis, but he was soon back in Boston. "I left Cynara. I left that whole scene. It got to be too crazy, the music was too loud and nothing was really happening. I wasn't making any money and I couldn't make the jazz connection. I would hang out, but I hadn't really worked with anybody. I wasn't known as a jazz musician, so I moved back to Boston. One day I got a call from a friend who I met in Boston, a saxophone player named Byard Lancaster. [He] said, 'would you like to work with McCoy Tyner tonight?' So I went and I played one night at The Jazz Workshop [with] Byard Lancaster, Eric Gravatt and McCoy." Tyner invited Hill to join him on a six-week tour along with saxophonist Sonny Fortune and drummer Alphonse Mouzon. "I never played with McCoy except for that one time. I had met Sonny once. I had never even met Alphonse Mouzon. So, we kind of all met in the car. I had no idea what we were going to play or how we were going to play it. I learned the music on the bandstand. McCoy didn't tell me much." Soon after, Tyner called Hill for a couple of gigs and a recording in New York. They continued to play the same music they were playing, which Hill still only knew by ear. It turned out to be the material for the album *Sahara* (Milestone), which they recorded in January of 1972. "So we started playing and McCoy stopped and said, 'no, no, that's not what I want you to play, this is what I want you to play.' And that was the first time that he said anything (laughs) in all that time [about] what he wanted." Later in 1972, they recorded *Song for My Lady*.

By this time, Hill had established a reputation. He was living in New York and getting calls. He was working with George Coleman when Sanders asked him to play New Year's Eve at Ornette Coleman's place. It was his first time working with Sanders and, like that first gig with Tyner, he was invited to go on tour as soon as it was done. In 1973 they recorded tracks that would appear on *Village of the Pharoahs* (Impulse!) and *Elevation* (Impulse!).

"I would say the albums I did with McCoy and Pharoah were some of [my] best. And the albums I did with Max Roach, especially *Chattahoochee Red*. I thought that was an incredible album, the statement of that

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## LEST WE FORGET



# VICTOR SPROLES

BY SYLVIA LEVINE

Bassist Victor Sproles (Nov. 18th, 1927-May 13th, 2005), was by all accounts a really nice guy (Gloria Ware, Wilbur's widow, remembers him as "a very special person" and Sproles himself really looked up to Ware, listing him in several places as a personal favorite) and among the giants of his instrument—both musically and physically at 6'3". He had a really big pure sound with a 'point' on the notes, not a thump, according to at least one fellow jazz artist. Born in Chicago, Sproles was a member of the pantheon of musicians who went to DuSable High School and studied under Captain Walter Dyett. Fellow Windy City-ite drummer Leroy Williams recalls how much he looked up to the older Sproles. "We used to go hear him down at the Beehive, where he had the house gig for many years with Norman Simmons. He was definitely one of the greats."

While still in Chicago, Sproles joined the Sun Ra Arkestra and made several recordings. Not much else

is known about him in that period as so many of his bandmates have passed on. From his discography in the mid '50s, along with his tenure with Sun Ra, Sproles was also with the Red Rodney-Ira Sullivan group and recorded with Stan Getz/Chet Baker and Simmons. By 1960 he had recorded with Johnny Griffin (*The Big Soul Band*, Riverside) and played in Muhal Richard Abrams' Experimental Band. He was very close with blind pianist Chris Anderson, who was also from Chicago and only a year apart in age, and they remained friends for many years. He also married around then as his 2005 Chicago Sun-Times obituary lists his surviving wife of 52 years Jan, daughter Vicky and a grandson, Chase. He had returned to the Chicago area in 1998.

Sproles worked often with singers and toured and recorded with Billie Holiday, Joe Williams, Odetta and Carmen McRae. Although the chronology of his significant life events is somewhat muddled, he seems to have toured with, for example, McRae, from his home in Chicago and after his move to New York City sometime in the early '60s. Sun Ra also moved to New York in 1961 and there may have been a connection with the timing.

Once in New York he worked some with other Chicago associates, including Clifford Jordan, and became very busy according to Williams' recollections. Sproles worked with Williams, in fact, off and on throughout his time in New York until he disappeared from the scene in the mid '80s. He spent time at Barry

Harris' Jazz Cultural Theater around then, where his friend Anderson often was and Williams remembers that Harris asked him to do a live recording there for Uptown. "I thought Victor was supposed to be on that, but the time came and there was no Victor. So Rufus Reid luckily made the date. I don't think I ever saw Victor again after that. He just kind of disappeared."

Sproles became a Jazz Messenger in 1964, joining fellow Sun Ra alumnus John Gilmore, and toured and recorded with Art Blakey for about six months. After Gilmore left the band, alto saxophonist Gary Bartz joined the Messengers: "I joined in 1965," recalled Bartz. "John [Hicks] and Lee [Morgan] recommended me after I heard that John [Gilmore] was leaving. It was actually my dad, who owned a jazz club in Baltimore, who first told me he thought Gilmore was getting ready to leave. He'd heard it. Victor was the bassist. I remember that we drove right across the country to Seattle. Art and Lee flew out and the rest of us had to drive. Victor shared the driving duties with the roadie John Smith. He got paid extra for that. We did three days straight without stopping. My daughter's mother drove with us, the only lady friend on the trip. We did two weeks in Seattle, two weeks in San Francisco and two weeks in L.A. with that band. We also made a recording, *Soul Finger* (Limelight)." That LP was Bartz' recording debut.

Bartz remembers that when the going got tough

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album. Talk about high level, this is unbelievable. I had no idea he was going to do anything like this. Max had a way of putting you in a state. At the end of just about every night I played with him, I said, 'what am I going to do tomorrow [if I] can make it through tonight?' He put such demands on you and made you do things that you didn't think that you could possibly do."

While working with these artists in the '70s, Hill recalls, "the direction of the music and the artists was searching higher consciousness, higher existence, higher levels of culture. It was going way beyond entertainment. It was really a message in the music. [A concert] was a total experience. You weren't being entertained; the audience was part of the performance. That's probably one of the biggest things that I miss. Back then, it was more like everybody was on the same wavelength, striving for something more than just commercialism or making money. It was...a total commitment to spirituality, or a higher existence."

Reflecting on the significance of tradition, Hill says, "You're handed down a heritage from your family. You inherit characteristics, behaviors, appearance. I'm from the Hill family and that means that there's certain characteristics that would be different from the Smith family. In jazz there's a family, there's behaviors that are handed down, musically. I feel to be in the jazz family you have to have those jazz characteristics that have been handed down, that have been kept in the family, that have made it a family, that make it what it is. I think of the people I've been fortunate enough to play with, they're like my forefathers, like my family. They handed the tradition to me and I try to pass it on the same way I pass the Hill tradition on to my kids."

Hill has been living in Englewood, New Jersey for 30 years now. He retired from teaching several years ago but continues to focus on his playing today. Next summer he is looking forward to the 10-year anniversary of the "Jazz Under the Stars" series with the Englewood Public Library. "Last year things kind of loosened up in September and we did four concerts for the month of September. So, we actually have not missed a year in nine years. I think we started [with] four, maybe six concerts and it turned out to be the most popular program that they have and it expanded up to ten concerts. We start in June and [go] to the end of August. It is an educated crowd, they know what they're listening to. The people love the music." ❖

**Recommended Listening:**

- Pharoah Sanders–*Village of the Pharoahs* (Impulse, 1971-73)
- McCoy Tyner–*Song For My Lady* (Milestone, 1972)
- Max Roach–*Pictures In A Frame* (Soul Note, 1979)
- Hugh Lawson–*Colour* (Soul Note, 1983)
- Calvin Hill–*I Can't Give You Anything But Love* (Arichi Music, 1996)
- Michael Cochrane–*Minor Matrix* (SteepleChase, 2000)

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during that tour, Sproles would say, "Carmen, please take me back" to no one in particular, referring to Carmen McRae. After his time as a Messenger, Sproles recorded with fellow Blakey alumnus Lee Morgan, George Braith, Larry Willis and Harold Ousley and was part of Clark Terry's big band in the mid to late '70s. In 1981, Sproles reunited with his old Chicago friends for the Bee Hive album *Hyde Park After Dark*, made with

Jordan, Simmons, Von Freeman, Cy Touff and Wilbur Campbell. His last known recording was a 1990 trio date with Vernel Fournier released on the Swiss TCB label.

"He had a great sense of humor, but he was quiet, didn't hang out or anything like that, just a nice man," Bartz recalls. Like Williams, Bartz says that one day (long after the Messenger stint) Sproles just disappeared and no one ever heard from him again. Rumor was he was disillusioned with the business, that he went to Denver, but no one could confirm that. ❖

**Recommended Listening:**

- Sun Ra And His Arkestra–*Sound of Joy* (Delmark, 1956)
- Lee Morgan–*The Rumproller* (Bue Note, 1965)
- Andrew Hill–*Dance With Death* (Blue Note, 1968)
- Clark Terry–*Ain't Misbehavin'* (Pablo, 1979)
- Clifford Jordan, Von Freeman, Cy Touff, Norman Simmons, Victor Sproles, Wilbur Campbell–*Hyde Park After Dark* (Bee Hive, 1981)
- Vernel Fournier–Trio (TCB, 1990)

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but sits comfortably alongside *Thip* and Stewart's solo electric bass guitar album. "Everything may not be perfectly aligned in style, but there's a connective tissue that brings together these different approaches." ❖

For more information, visit [triptickstapes.bandcamp.com](http://triptickstapes.bandcamp.com). Artists performing this month include Gabby Fluke-Mogul and Luke Stewart at Roulette Nov. 17th with Bob Bellerue; Brandon Lopez at The Stone at The New School Nov. 5th and 12th and Clemente Soto Velez Cultural Center Nov. 13th; Joanna Mattrey at Center for Performance Research Nov. 4th; and Jason Nazary at Barbès Nov. 5th, 12th, 19th and 26th with Oscar Noriega. See Calendar.

Nicki Parrott  
If You Could Read My Mind

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