



DONALD DEAN

THE DEAN'S AMAZING GROOVE

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

COURTESY OF ARTIST

Drummer Donald Dean has not only worked throughout the development of modern jazz, but was present in the recording and broadcasting boom of the '60s. Born in musically historic Kansas City, MO, in 1937, he has worked with A-list performers from Ornette Coleman to Aretha Franklin. Well-known particularly among musicians, most listeners probably know him best for his part in *Swiss Movement* (Atlantic, 1969), the chart-topping album by pianist Les McCann and saxophonist Eddie Harris.

As a youngster in the public school music program, Dean mostly played French horn and trumpet. Later in college he would play the marimba and even oboe. But outside of school he studied drums with Dave Burdell. Says Dean, "I love Dave. He's the one that encouraged me to play drums. He said, 'man, you got to keep playing.' There were quite a few drummers who always challenged one another. And they were good drummers. So, it was really a competitive thing I went through." He would begin his professional career as a teenager when his family allowed him to go on the road at just 14 years old, touring with the Melody Lane Orchestra first and then with R&B singer and pianist Amos Milburn. "Well, I had to keep my grades up in order to do that," he remembers. "If they hadn't been right, I wouldn't have been able to go. So, I was a pretty good kid. I had good grades, and I really enjoyed playing. The musicians really took good care of me; they looked out for me. I was very lucky (and) it was a great experience." Dean finished high school, then joined the Navy as a pathway to college. But he never stopped working on music. "I was on a ship for a year and a half. I went to Hawaii, then came to the East Coast, north Virginia," he says. "In the Navy, I was in communications. I worked one day, a whole 24-hour shift, and then I was off for three days. If I got someone

to take my watch for one day, I would be off the whole week." With that schedule, he was able to freely travel up and down the Coast.

Finally, in 1959, Dean attended the University of Kansas, along with K.C. friends, saxophonist Nathan Davis, drummer Jimmy Lovelace and trumpeter Carmell Jones. Jones went to Los Angeles to join tenor saxophonist Harold Land, and it wasn't long before Jones called Dean to come out and record with them. He remembers securing a car through a newspaper ad; the owner wanted someone to deliver the car to California, paying for gas and expenses, so the transportation turned out to be "free." Dean's intention was to return to Kansas and resume his university studies, but after the recording with Jones and Land, *Business Meetin'* (Pacific Jazz, 1962), there were numerous more musical opportunities to be had. "When I first got here, I went to a session in Hollywood at the Grand Theatre. All the cats used to play there, everybody that came to town was there. So, first time I sat in to play, I got a job." That gig led to others. As Dean says, "...one thing after another." He realized then that music was "it" and remembers that "I started doing my thing, traveling right away, working with Dexter Gordon. I'm glad I was young. I was on the move (and) I worked with everybody!"

Dean led his own trio with pianist Jane Getz and was working with Kenny Dorham, Clifford Jordan, Andrew Hill, Eric Dolphy, Curtis Amy, Ray Charles, Richard "Groove" Holmes, Gerald Wilson, Horace Tapscott and many more. "Man, I was lucky," the drummer says, "I was never out of work." Working with pianist Marvin Jenkins at their ongoing engagement at the Playboy Club, pianist-vocalist Les McCann heard and invited Dean to a rehearsal that weekend where he asked the drummer to go on tour the next day. And so, with bassist Leroy Vinnegar, they debuted at D.C.'s The Cellar Door. It was at the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland on June 21, 1969, where they played (and fortunately recorded) the since-historic *Swiss Movement* live album. About the group's set, Dean says, "That was funny, too. It was supposed to have been Clark Terry. That didn't work out, so they got Benny (Bailey). And then Eddie (Harris) said he's not gonna play the electric horn." It was one thing after another, Dean recalls, so the musicians hit the bandstand with

no rehearsals and just started playing: "We did a lot of new songs, and the way we did the old songs wasn't anything like we did them...After that, everything happened. That was a big one!"

Dean remained as busy as ever. He recalls the last time he played in NYC, though, was back in the early '70s, when he lived for three years at the Franconia on 20 W. 72nd Street, right off Central Park West and directly across the street from The Dakota building (where John Lennon lived). He remembers then playing with McCann on numerous occasions in the city, including for a week at the Village Gate's Top of the Gate performance space (when Monk was at the Bottom of the Gate, before the pianist disappeared in the mid '70s for health reasons), as well as Carnegie Hall, the Apollo, Club Baron and several other places in Harlem.

Throughout the '70s, he worked with alto saxophonist Hank Crawford and guitarist Ray Crawford (no relation), organist Jimmy Smith and percussionist Willie Bobo. And while many musicians talk about clubs closing and the business drying up, Dean was working steadily into the '90s. In addition, an unearthed Tapscott album was released five years ago, *Why Don't You Listen* (Dark Tree), documenting Dean as a member of the pianist's Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra, recorded live at LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art) in 1998. Dean also toured Europe in different combos with pianist Rene Van Helsing and violinist Luluk Purwanto and held a steady engagement at the popular Maple Drive Restaurant in Beverly Hills with pianist Phil Wright and bassist Louis Spears. "I was there for a long time. If I would go to Europe, I would get [a sub], and I would come back and still have my job."

In 2009, Dean connected with guitarist Tomas Janzon and they've been working together steadily since, starting at Lucy Florence Cultural Center in Los Angeles' Leimert Park with organist Bobby Pierce. This month, Dean's grand welcoming back to NYC (after 50 years!) will be with the guitarist at Minton's Playhouse and National Jazz Museum in Harlem. Janzon, in praise of Dean (who turns 88 this June), says, "Donald has a special way of always being inventive, making up new ways of playing every time, while always holding down his amazing groove."

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 35)

LEST WE FORGET



ALBERT "TOOTIE" HEATH

SO MUCH SWING, SO MANY GOOD TIMES

BY JIM MOTAVALLI

ALAN NAHIGIAN

As with the Joneses (Thad, Elvin, Hank) there were three musical Heath brothers—bassist Percy, saxophonist Jimmy and drummer Albert (widely and affectionately known as "Tootie"), the latter who passed away from leukemia in Santa Fe, NM, last April. Tootie, the youngest Heath (he would have turned 90 this May) was also the last to pass away (Percy died in 2005 at age 91; Jimmy died in 2020 at age 93). And he was playing at a high level right into the 2010s, as the leader of a trio that included pianist Ethan Iverson and bassist Ben Street.

As Tootie grew up, the Heath home in Philadelphia was swarming with jazz musicians since Jimmy and Percy had established their careers early. Starting on trombone at age 12, he would soon switch to drums, playing in and around the City of Brotherly Love as a teen. As the house drummer at Philadelphia's Blue Note, he backed

visitors such as Thelonious Monk and Lester Young. But New York beckoned, and he made the move in 1957, the same year he recorded his first session, which was with John Coltrane (*Coltrane*, Prestige), the saxophonist's debut leader date. Several years later, in 1961, Tootie and bassist Ron Carter were members of pianist Bobby Timmons' trio, which recorded at the Village Vanguard (*In Person*, Riverside). "We went out and bought three suits, jackets and trousers, and we're wearing them on the album cover," Carter said. "Nobody played better [on drums], then or now."

For most of his career, Tootie was a percussionist for hire, and he worked constantly, appearing with such leaders as Wes Montgomery, Dexter Gordon, Sonny Rollins, Mal Waldron, J.J. Johnson and Johnny Griffin. That's Tootie on Nina Simone's *Little Girl Blue*, Herbie Hancock's *The Prisoner*, Yusef Lateef's *Gentle Giant*, Anthony Braxton's *In the Tradition* and at least half a dozen Dexter albums. Says Rollins, "It was a very tough day when I heard that Tootie had passed. A sad day for me, because I was always close to the Heath family and the Heath brothers. I knew his mother and father and was over to the family home in Philadelphia many times. I recorded with the brothers, hung out with them over the years. When Tootie played with our dear brother Yusef Lateef, it was an important gig to hold." Heath spent a

few years in Copenhagen, Denmark, where he worked regularly with Ben Webster and fellow expatriate Gordon at Jazzhus Montmartre, but in the late '60s he was back in New York and holding down the drum chair for Hancock and Lateef. Hancock graced Heath's first album as a leader, *Kawaida* (O'be, 1969), which unfortunately did not get wide distribution. His 1974 album release *Kwanza* (Muse) featured both of his brothers, paving the way for the popular Heath Brothers, formed in 1975 and lasting until 2010, five years after Percy's passing. Guitarist Tony Purrone, who played in that band, says Tootie "had that swing thing first, from the top down with the bottom up for coloration. Every beat meant something. Not rushed but urgent, with great sensitivity."

Drummer Roy McCurdy was Tootie's close friend. "I took his place in the Art Farmer-Benny Golson Jazztet," McCurdy says. "I'd see him around New York, recording with small groups in Manhattan. I moved out to Los Angeles with Cannonball Adderley, and Tootie moved out here, too. We both lived in Altadena, a few blocks from each other. Our families were close, and we'd practice together sometimes. He was a Philadelphia guy, had a lot of fire and swung like mad. His style was very dynamic and fiery. It got a little less dynamic as he got

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 35)

(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

down and says, "Boy, I tell you one thing before we get started. If you ain't got no sound, you ain't got shit."

TNYCJR: You would record and play with Hamiet Bluiett's baritone ensembles, including Bluiett Baritone Nation and Bluiett Baritone Saxophone Group. How did he influence you?

HARDING: Bluiett was my second teacher on baritone. Once I had that foundation, I was ready to go that next step. That was Bluiett. Playing and studying with him, it was more impromptu. It wasn't like, "This is your lesson." We would play, very casual, very natural. I'd always have my ears on, listening and absorbing.

TNYCJR: You would eventually join drummer-percussionist-vocalist Kahil El'Zabar's Ethnic Heritage Ensemble (EHE), following Bluiett.

HARDING: I first met Kahil in 1999 through trombone player Joe Bowie, Lester Bowie's brother, who has had an incredible underground funk band, Defunkt. This iteration was Adam Klipple (keyboards), Kim Clarke (bass), Gintas Janusonis (drums), Fareed Haque (guitar), Joe Bowie and myself. We had a great connection. I didn't start working with Kahil until 2016 because Bluiett was working with him, so they didn't need me. After Bluiett's passing (2018), Kahil asked me to be a part of EHE. It's been going on nine years: Kahil (drums, kalimba, cajón, vocals), Corey Wilkes (trumpet, percussion) and me (baritone, percussion). And recently last year, we added a fourth member, cellist Ishmael Ali. It's the expression of the African diaspora. Something as stripped down as that, being able to connect with the other players is paramount.

TNYCJR: What about your role as a member of the Sun Ra Arkestra?

HARDING: I just came back from seven days on the West Coast. The Sun Ra Arkestra is an institution. Once you are in, you're always in. I first heard about Sun Ra in '88 in Detroit from a great friend, drummer-percussionist-composer Francisco Mora Catlett. I graduated high school and I didn't know musically what I wanted to do. I remember hearing Francisco's band playing in Detroit and I really liked what he was doing. I introduced myself to him. I said, "I play baritone. I'd really like to check out a rehearsal." He said, "Absolutely" and gave me his address. I get to his house, and he says, "Go get set up." So, I go downstairs and I hear this noise coming from upstairs. I go up and there Francisco is, sitting in front of his altar, chanting. He tells me he is a Buddhist and he's chanting. I asked him to tell me more. My Buddhist practice since has been instrumental in every aspect of my life. And I started playing with his band.

Francisco had some of those rare LPs. No label. And he would play me these records. Hearing Sun Ra for the first time, it felt very familiar to me. It was like revisiting an old friend that I hadn't seen in years. Being a Buddhist, I believe in reincarnation. At some point in my past life, I know I must have been in Sun Ra's band. I come to find out, he was in the Arkestra and used to play with Ra back in the '70s. I just loved Francisco's understanding of world music, from Cuba, South America, and how he understood they were all coming from Africa. It was monumental to my understanding of music and religious development. Knowing him unlocked a world of other musicians I would meet along this journey I'm on who were also affiliated with Sun Ra. So, Sun Ra has been a huge part of my life.

TNYCJR: Did you get to meet Ra himself?

HARDING: Before I left for New York, I did meet him. He came to Ann Arbor and played at the Jazz and

Blues Festival. I went up there with Francisco and he introduced me. He had this energy about him. A few years later he died (1993) and I would move to New York. The night I was leaving for New York, Francisco gave me a list of people to connect with, including trumpet player Ahmed Abdullah. He said, "He's a good brother. We were in Sun Ra together. You should reach out to him." At the time I don't think Francisco realized Ahmed was a practicing Buddhist too. I called him and told him who I was. He lived less than a mile from where I was staying, so I walked over there and met him and his wife, Monique Ngozi Nri. We talked and played some music. It was embracing. From there, it was a whole array of all of these other wonderful musicians I began to meet and play with — trombonist Craig Harris, French horn player Vincent Chancey, Lester Bowie, Bluiett... It just grew out of this network of people I admired. I was able to go on the first European tour with the Arkestra after Sun Ra died. John Gilmore ran the band for a short period. Then John made his transition (1995). The band was in limbo and Marshall Allen began to take over. I went to Europe with them when they started working again. I drove down to Philly with Ahmed and stayed at the Arkestra house for two or three days, rehearsing and talking to Marshall and James Jacson. I slept in John Gilmore's room. And after Arkestra baritone player Danny Ray Thompson died (2020), they called me back.

Alex Harding Quartet is at Sistas' Place Jan. 25. He is also at Barbès Jan. 23 (in duo with Lucian Ban). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- NAM (Ahmed Abdullah, Alex Harding, Masa Kamaguchi, Jimmy Weinstein) — *Song of Time (Live at the Vision Festival)* (Clean Feed, 2001)
- Alex Harding, Dominic Duval, Jay Rosen — *Invocation for Pepper* (CIMP, 2002)
- Grass Roots (Sean Conly, Alex Harding, Darius Jones, Chad Taylor) — *Grass Roots* (AUM Fidelity, 2011)
- Alex Harding/Lucian Ban — *Dark Blue* (Sunnyside, 2018)
- Kahil El'Zabar's Ethnic Heritage Ensemble — *Open Me, A Higher Consciousness of Sound and Spirit* (Spiritmuse, 2023)
- Alex Harding/Lucian Ban *Blutopia* — *Blutopia* (Sunnyside, 2023)

(LABEL SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

of '60s soul, as the relaxed hipness of the title track makes plain. Andreas Toftemark's saxophone and Rolf Thofte's trumpet glide effortlessly over drums, bass, guitar and keys, even getting a bit of solo time as the energy increases. "If you like the album," Schmidt advises, "you should hear them live...what a party!"

Schmidt is quick to point out Toftemark's New York connections, an ingredient to capture that American spirit. "But you left out an important trio," Schmidt observes during our discourse. "Have you spent any time with Rasmus Sørensen's music?" April has released three Sørensen albums, one reissue and two new titles. "Speaking of New York, Sørensen studied at the Manhattan School of Music. Now he's back [in Copenhagen], and everyone wants to play with him." One listen to "Embrace the Circumstance", from the recently-released *At the Right Time*, confirms Schmidt's opinion. The changes are as dizzying as bassist Jon Henriksson and drummer Francesco Ciniglio's rhythmic counterpoint is accomplished. Indeed, Ciniglio's piquant rolls as the track progresses push and filigree, and it all demonstrates that for any April release you might choose, there are five others just as important. "You know, Sørensen worked 22 jobs last summer with that trio! I just find working with these young groups so exciting," enthuses Schmidt. "They have the energy to throw themselves into the music and into touring to support it."

Perhaps it's that kind of energy that best unites April's diverse catalogue, the energy generated by the tightly-knit community that is the Danish jazz scene, but contextualized by the musical universes they channel and embody. From duos to big bands, encompassing the mellow introspection of saxophonist Cecilie Strange to the probing multi-instrumental abstractions of Emil De Waal, April has something for every taste and shows no signs of slowing down this year. With all releases in digital, CD and vinyl formats, they'll satisfy casual listeners and collectors, like Schmidt himself. "I just don't want the music to get stale," he muses. And if the last four years are any indication, reinvention is in full swing!

For more info visit aprilrecords.com

(LEST WE FORGET CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

older, but he was still swinging his butt off." In his long sojourn in California, Tootie spent 30 years on the Stanford University Jazz Workshop faculty. His final years, after 2014, were spent in Santa Fe. Iverson remembers five years of great trio work with Tootie, starting while he was still living in California. "It meant a lot for people to hear this straight-ahead master in intimate, uncomplicated situations," he recalls. "It was not just the way he played, but the whole way of living he had from that era."

This month, pianist Emmet Cohen, who met Tootie in 2012 and featured him on *Masters Legacy Series, Volume 3* (recorded in 2017-18 and featuring another Philly legend in tenor saxophonist Benny Golson), is organizing a late-night "Tootie Fest" tribute at Dizzy's Club (the last set in Jazz at Lincoln Center's two-night Unity Jazz Festival this month). "Tootie was like a grandpa to me," Cohen says. "He went through life with humor and grace. I just enjoyed every moment I spent with him, learning about the history of jazz and all the great musicians from Philly. He left us so much music, so much swing and so many good times."

For more info visit arts.gov/honors/jazz/albert-tootie-heath. "Tootie Fest" featuring Emmet Cohen Trio is at Dizzy's Club Jan. 11 (part of Unity Jazz Festival). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- John Coltrane — *Coltrane* (Prestige, 1957)
- J.J. Johnson — *J.J. Inc.* (Columbia, 1960)
- Dexter Gordon — *The Montmartre Collection* (Black Lion, 1967)
- Albert Heath — *Kwanza (The First)* (Muse, 1973)
- The Heath Brothers — *As We Were Saying* (Concord, 1997)
- Emmet Cohen (featuring Benny Golson, Albert "Tootie" Heath) — *Masters Legacy Series, Volume 3* (s/r, 2017-18)

(ENCORE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

Dean is with Tomas Janzon at National Jazz Museum in Harlem Jan. 16 and Minton's Playhouse Jan. 17-18. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Carmell Jones — *Business Meetin'* (Pacific Jazz, 1962)
- Les McCann & Eddie Harris — *Swiss Movement* (Atlantic, 1969)
- Jimmy Smith — *Bluesmith* (Verve, 1972)
- Horace Tapscott Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra and the Great Voice of UGMAA — *Why Don't You Listen? (Live at LACMA)* (Dark Tree, 1998)
- Henry Franklin — *Music to the 5th Power* (Skipper Productions, 2006)
- Tomas Janzon — *130th & Lenox* (Changes Music, 2017-18)