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# DICK GRIFFIN

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

*Dick Griffin is a composer, educator and trombonist who has performed with some of the biggest names in jazz and soul, as well as appearing with several symphony orchestras. Known for his time with Rahsaan Roland Kirk and Sun Ra, he also worked with Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, Charles Mingus, Dizzy Gillespie, Tito Puente, Art Blakey, McCoy Tyner, Marvin Gaye, Michael Jackson and Isaac Hayes, among many others. Griffin has developed a personalized technique he calls "circularphonics", in which he combines circular breathing with multiphonics. Later in his career, Griffin became an accomplished painter. He is currently working on a series about race focused on the color red.*

**The New York City Jazz Record:** Have you practiced today?

**Dick Griffin:** Yes. I woke up early and practiced with this new mute. I've got this gig coming up in Pittsburgh with James Carter, performing the music of Rahsaan Roland Kirk. That's exciting and that's what I've been kind of working on. He sent me some charts, which was interesting. I pretty much know all the tunes he sent and one of the parts is kind of transcribed off what I played. You know, Rahsaan never told me anything to play, he just played and trusted me to fit in the right places and stay out when I didn't fit in. He might have some suggestions, but he never said, "Play this".

**TNYCJR:** You didn't have any charts either?

**DG:** I wrote the charts. He's blind, right? So I wrote all his charts, the changes for the rhythm section. I wrote all the charts for all of his record dates on Atlantic, even the ones I didn't play on.

**TNYCJR:** You were kind of like the musical director?

**DG:** In a sense. When I was playing with Rahsaan, he would depend on me to recommend musicians. I'd say, "This guy here just came in from Memphis" and that was [pianist] Sonelius Smith, "see what you think". Sonelius had just come in to New York and I knew how I felt so I would always look out for guys coming from the south. [Trumpeter] Charles McGhee was a classmate of mine, so I got him on the gig. You know, different people I would recommend and they would get the gig.

**TNYCJR:** What kind of music programs did you have in school in your hometown of Jackson, Mississippi?

**DG:** I had a great musical experience in school. I started piano lessons with Ms. Betty Merino when I was 11 years old. I studied with her for one year and she passed away and I kept playing piano even though I never got another teacher. I would just learn stuff by listening and back in those days it was all rhythm changes. [sings] All those doo-wop songs [sings]—just listen to them!—They all had rhythm changes with the same kind of bridge. It was amazing how many songs

that were written, hits and everything, but they had the same rhythm changes. That's why they called it, "Rhythm and Blues". [sings] "Goodnight, sweetheart it's time to go..." [sings] "Tears on my pillow..."

The junior high and high school were combined and I had two great teachers: Mr. Waits was the vocal teacher and Mr. Holly was my band director and trombone teacher and they were really supportive and helpful. I went to school in the seventh grade and Freddie Waits had these drum sticks and he was beating on the books and said, "I'm in the band, man!" I said, "I'm going to be in the band too!" So I ran to the band room, "Mr. Holly," I said, "I want to be in the band, I want to play trumpet." He said, "Son, I have all the trumpet players I need, but if you want to play trombone, you can take it home today." I said, "Give it to me." He sat me down and gave me my first lesson. I'm pretty sure it was that same day I went home, I was so proud, I was in the band, I had me an instrument. There were not a lot of apartments, it was what we called shotgun houses. I would practice and everybody would just encourage me, nobody was knocking on the walls. That was it. I got in the band in seventh grade and didn't look back.

**TNYCJR:** Is that when you met Freddie Waits or did you grow up together?

**DG:** I met Freddie Waits in the first grade. We were in the same class up through the seventh grade.

**TNYCJR:** Were you not even thinking about the band until you saw Freddie with those sticks?

**DG:** Well, I was into music and I loved playing the piano. [sings] "Heart and Soul", everybody played "Heart and Soul". That was one of the ways you could get the girls to come over and chat and everything. I had a pretty good ear, so I banged out a lot of those things that were on the radio. At that time, music was taking over; it was the thing that I was kind of noticed for. In high school, I sang in the choir and played in the band. And then I had a doo-wop group called The Sputniks and we were so good we won the talent shows for six months straight. The grand prize was to open for Sam Cooke and we did, in 1957. We opened for the Sam Cooke Revue in College Park Auditorium in Jackson, Mississippi and Sam Cooke liked the group so much he offered us a gig to become part of the Sam Cooke Revue. We were so excited. I went home and told my mother and she said, "Nope. You're gonna stay in school and finish." And that's what I did. But, with that group, I started to make money with music in high school. I was sure I was going to make my living with music.

**TNYCJR:** Skipping ahead to your time at Indiana University, were you there with David Baker or were you before his time?

**DG:** I was there a year before David came, but Randy Brecker, Jimmy Green and... another tenor player, the four of us used to drive up and study with David Baker privately in '65. He was there by my second year, because I spent two years to get my Master's. The first year it was Jerry Coker. Dominic Spera had the second band, I was in his band. I wasn't in the first band because my reading wasn't up to par. I was good, but I was not on that level. My Bachelor's training was to be a band director, so I could teach all of the instruments in the orchestra. My degree was in Education, with an emphasis on music. It worked out very well for me, because when I came to New York, I was playing with

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(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

Rahsaan Roland Kirk and we played at a school out in Brooklyn and [trumpeter] Donald Byrd was teaching there. He said, "Man, get your teaching license and come teach with me" and that's what I did. We taught together at a junior high school out in Brooklyn for a year. That's where I met Gerrie, [his son] Jakubu's mother, and I got married in '68.

**TNYCJR:** How and when did your relationships with Sun Ra and Rahsaan Roland Kirk develop?

**DG:** When I went to Chicago in '59, I started playing with Sun Ra every summer. I met Rahsaan in Chicago, around '61 or '62. He was playing at this club, McKie Fitzhugh's Lounge on 63rd and Cottage Grove. It was the spot. It was almost like the Blue Note or Birdland or something. One of the spots, anyway. They also had the Sutherland Ballroom. They had all kinds of great jazz musicians there. At McKie's, they had Monday night jam sessions. Oh, boy...I saw Johnny Griffin, Dexter Gordon, Johnny Boyd, Gene Ammons. There were so many great players around Chicago at that time. John Gilmore was there, Pat Patrick and Marshall Allen. Eddie Harris was there; he would play piano some gigs and play saxophone other gigs. Another great piano player, who then played drums, was Jack DeJohnette. I was playing piano and we both played piano gigs with tenor saxophonist Tom Archer. I met Rahsaan when he was playing at McKie's. When I went back to Mississippi, because I was still in college, I was corresponding with his wife at the time, Edith, you know, Rahsaan being blind. He was always sending me lead sheets. So, when I went to New York in '64, I actually played with him, a little gig at Saint Peter's Lutheran Church. That was my first time. But I had played with Sun Ra earlier, in 1959. Sun Ra left Chicago and went to Montréal, I think. But, by the time he'd gotten back, after I moved to New York in '67, it was an ongoing thing that he was playing at Slugs' on Monday nights and I was working with him.

**TNYCJR:** What a time! I figured you went to school, then spent some time in Chicago where you met Sun Ra, then moved on to New York, but it sounds like a lot of these things were happening at the same time.

**DG:** Yeah. Here's what happened. 1959 was the first summer I spent in Chicago and up until '63, I spent every summer there. I got my degree from Jackson State University in '63 and I didn't go to summer school. Most people went to summer school or grad school. In '64, instead of going to grad school, I went to New York to spend my time with Freddie Waits, who was already playing there since '62. So, '64 was my first trip to New York. That's when I saw Coltrane for the second time. I saw him in Chicago at McKie's around '61 or '62, after he had recorded *My Favorite Things*. He only played soprano on this gig and I got a chance to meet him. He was such a personable and nice guy, the only thing he did was he always played with his horn, so he would talk to you out of the side of his mouth. In '64 I drove to New York in my '63 Volkswagen bug and spent the whole summer living with Freddie Waits. New York was different. He lived on 96th Street and West End Avenue. I went to Indiana in '64 and stayed the summer of '65, but I was still in touch with New York. I would go in and out of New York and either play with Sun Ra at Slugs' on Monday nights or Pharoah Sanders or Frank Foster's Big Band or I used to play with Marzette Watts and other people in the East Village.

**TNYCJR:** Were you playing circularphonics then?

**DG:** Yup. I was even doing that back in Chicago with Sun Ra. So Rahsaan knew that I did it and he featured me on *Rahsaan Rahsaan*. I did another record later with

Frank Foster where he featured me on *The Loud Minority* and then David Baker wrote me up in his trombone book. I was doing multiphonics when I was doing Monday nights with Pharoah Sanders, who was playing with Coltrane and he had told John and Alice about my multiphonics and they wanted me to sit in. Now the only thing was, I thought I was going to graduate in June, but something happened and I had to take an English proficiency, so I had to go to summer school to finish my degree instead of coming to New York in June. John Coltrane passed away July 17th, 1967 and I never got a chance to sit in with him.

**TNYCJR:** You met Stanley Cowell after you moved to New York?

**DG:** Yes. It might have been...1970 or '71? The first Strata-East big band record, I was on that. I met him because he lived in the same building as Freddie Waits and Stanley and I had similar backgrounds—we both came to New York with our Master's degrees. Stanley was doing more playing, I don't think he was teaching then. I was playing as much as I could, but I didn't go on the road because I was teaching and I was a family man. I would go out with Count Basie here and there because Al Grey would ask me to sub for a couple of weeks. So I got a chance to play with the original Count Basie band, with Freddie Green and Sonny Payne and that rhythm section. Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis was the tenor player. I came to New York and I was a fairly good reader, so I substituted on Broadway shows. I did *The Wiz* for the whole five years it ran on Broadway. I did a lot of recordings; you could do five dates a day.

**TNYCJR:** So, the *Music, Inc.* record led to you making your record *The Eighth Wonder* (Strata-East, 1974)?

**DG:** Yes, and that's an interesting story, because at that time there was a record label called Buddha Records. Rahsaan took me to Buddha Records and that was Joe Fields' label, then they changed it to Muse. I went with Strata-East, number one. The deal was pretty good, because you produce your record, but Strata-East gave you 85% of the profits on your sales and they only took 15% for distribution. Now that's a pretty good deal. When I went to Buddha, I sat down with Joe Fields and he laid out, "well, I want you to do one standard and do this and da da da". And with Strata-East, I did all originals. That's one thing they emphasized too, because we don't deal with your publishing, you get your 100% publishing, all of your music. So that's what happened, I went with Strata-East.

**TNYCJR:** And you had Freddie playing drums.

**DG:** Yes. My premiere date was Freddie Waits, Cecil McBee, Rahn Burton, Warren Smith, Leopoldo Fleming and Sam Rivers. It's still out on the market, on my label Ruby Records. It came out on Strata-East, then Sugar Hill Records released it. From there, Konnex Records in Germany put together a compilation of three LPs and made two CDs out of it. Then it came to me.

**TNYCJR:** This article is going to be printed in January and you'll have a gig coming up at Sistas' Place.

**DG:** Yes. I have this gig at Sistas' Place, with George Gray on drums and Greg Lewis on organ. We're going to be doing some music of Rahsaan's. On this gig I will do a little speaking about my relationship with Rahsaan, because that's the kind of the nature of the gig, and I'll be doing some of my original stuff. It's really a vast amount of material, the period he went through when he was actually protesting. He was on the fringe of being a so-called avant garde player because every set he would go out and free things up and he was very good at going waaay out and reeling himself back in. ❖

For more information, visit [dickgriffin1.com](http://dickgriffin1.com). Griffin is at Sistas' Place Jan. 26th. See Calendar.

**Recommended Listening:**

- Rahsaan Roland Kirk & The Vibration Society – *Rahsaan Rahsaan* (Atlantic, 1969-70)
- Dick Griffin Septet – *The Eighth Wonder* (Strata-East-Ruby, 1974)
- Abdullah Ibrahim – *Ekaya* (Ekapa-Blackhawk, 1983)
- Dick Griffin – *A Dream for Rahsaan* (Ruby, 1985)
- Dick Griffin – *All Blues* (Amosaya-Ruby, 1999)
- Dick Griffin – *Time Will Tell* (Ruby, 2010)

(LABEL CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

its own idiom, an inspired free jazz trio with an intensity and a pitch range all its own. While *Live* documents a tour through European club culture, the CD *Island Virus* plays most conspicuously with Doom Metal conventions: a black and white cover drawing of an octopus with a human skull and short tracks driven by sludgy riffs and titles like "Black Bird of Death Spewing Death Puke".

If you're looking for an island of serenity, clarity and form in the contemporary maelstrom, Tubapede has that too, its release between *Live* and *Island Virus: Handel, Scarlatti and Bach 1685*, a series of baroque sonatas (and a Bach concerto) adapted for tuba, with Bryan Reeder playing harpsichord and piano. Peck's evident virtuosity is most apparent in the lightness of his upper register, suggesting a particularly warm euphonium, and the subtlety of his inflections, in keeping with a release that includes his essay on "Representation of Affect in Baroque Era Chamber Music".

Tubapede's activity is definitely the work of a busy individual and a close circle and shows in the release schedule: one release in 2013, two in 2014, six in 2016 and three in 2018: Peck considers it an inevitable consequence of creative work: "The broad aesthetic of the label is experimental/DIY, although the present-day definitions of those terms have obviously become quite elastic. You could argue this expansion/contraction is an inherent quality of art that is truly 'avant', to constantly avoid becoming passé; this quality is also inevitably reflected in most artist-run organizations, Tubapede most definitely included. Most people are skeptical of an artist-run business for the same reason they should be skeptical of a string quartet made up of IRS employees. So, as a label, Tubapede is all fits and starts, but hopefully that creative energy is reflected in the quality of each release."

2018 has been an interesting year. While Dicker's LP continues the original vision in its purest form, trumpeter Joe Moffett's solo project, *More of It and Closer*, complete with nature photography, is a cassette. A year-end release seems downright mainstream, at least in these circles: *Eight Improvisations* (2014) is a two-CD set of Anthony Braxton, Taylor Ho Bynum and pianist Bob Bresnan playing music that's cerebral, intimate and lyrical. As for the immediate future? "For 2019, my main focus is on getting some neglected personal projects back into gear," say Peck. "I have a relatively new band called Sogfarth [with Ava Mendoza, Matt Nelson and Tommy Campbell] that will play some shows and record. I also have a duo called Blood of the Stars with Erica Dicker that has been dormant; we will also play some shows and record as well. The Gate has also been somewhat inactive and we have a recording session that has been sitting around collecting dust. It might not suck, so watch out for that one. Otherwise, I might look into more solitary forms of expression like cartooning or filming. Running bands is tough." ❖

For more information, visit [tubapederecords.bandcamp.com](http://tubapederecords.bandcamp.com). Artists performing this month include Joe Moffett at St. Lydia's Jan. 17th and Dan Peck at Brooklyn Conservatory of Music Jan. 13th and St. Lydia's Jan. 17th. See Calendar.