



RICKY FORD

BY RUSS MUSTO

Back in the latter part of the '70s Ricky Ford established himself in the jazz world as the premier "mainstream" saxophonist of his generation; a lone young lion—practically a pride of one—blowing roaring tenor in the manner of Dexter Gordon and Sonny Rollins at a time when few young African-Americans were coming on to the jazz scene playing in the tradition. Ford, who was born in Boston on Mar. 4th, 1954, began his musical journey as a drummer, before moving on to tenor at 15. Playing capably with local organ trios around his hometown he was sighted by pianist Ran Blake, who urged him to enroll in the New England Conservatory, where he studied with master musician-educators Jaki Byard, George Russell, Joe Allard and Joe Maneri.

Upon his graduation in 1974 he was tapped to join the Duke Ellington Orchestra, then under the direction of Mercer Ellington, who had taken over following his father's death earlier that year. Ford recalls his year and a half in the group with understandable pride. "I love Duke Ellington so it was great to play in the band and to interact with the musicians," he says. "There were still a lot of people there from the original orchestra; [trumpeter] Cootie Williams was there and [saxophonists] Harry Carney and Harold Ashby. I was playing [saxophonist] Paul Gonsalves' chair. I had all of Paul Gonsalves' solos." The young Ford made his auspicious recording debut on the band's *Continuum* album.

Following his departure from the band he joined bassist Charles Mingus' quintet. He recalls, "[Saxophonist] George Adams had just left. [Pianist] Danny Minton was there. [Drummer] Dannie Richmond and [trumpeter] Jack Walrath. It was quite different [from Ellington] because it was a quintet...it was a lot

more intensive than playing in a big band. There were just two horns in the frontline, so there were more solos and things like that." Remembering those early years he says, "There's not that many great musicians that anyone can work with on that level in the 20th century and so I feel very lucky to have been able to have worked with Mingus and with Mercer Ellington. It's been a great honor."

After Mingus fell ill with Lou Gehrig's Disease Ford continued playing the bassist's music. "We did a couple of tours with Dannie Richmond and we called it the Last Mingus Band and then did a couple of records with Dannie Richmond. Plus I did a tour with the Mingus Dynasty," he says. "I started working with [vibraphonist] Lionel Hampton for about a year and a half around 1980," he continues. "And then right around that time I started working with [pianist] Abdullah Ibrahim when he started his band Ekaya. We were pretty much busy working locally at Sweet Basil. I started working there regularly with Ekaya and then with [bassist] Richard Davis. Sometimes I would work with [cornet player] Nat Adderley in the group with [pianist] Larry Willis, [bassist] Walter Booker and [drummer] Jimmy Cobb. So I was pretty active as a sideman and as a leader." Recordings with drummer Beaver Harris and soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy revealed an ability to play 'outside' the mainstream, which was increasingly apparent in the intensity of his solo improvising.

Soon he was leading his own groups, first at the Tin Palace and then Sweet Basil, as well as in Boston, where he was earning his Master's degree at Brandeis, studying composition with Guggenheim fellow/composer Martin Boykan. His 1977 debut recording, *Loxodonta Africana*, which featured sophisticated, swinging pieces for sextet and nonet, revealed the impact of his tenures with Ellington and Mingus on his writing, which became more idiosyncratically personal on a succession of ten albums for Muse and three others on Candid, quartet, quintet and sextet efforts that featured multigenerational casts.

In 1996, Ford relocated to France to join the family he had started in Paris a couple of years earlier. He quickly established himself, founding a big band that

played his ever-increasing songbook. He also played regularly with fellow American expatriates like pianists Kirk Lightsey and Bobby Few and drummers John Betsch and Steve McCraven. Then in 2000 he accepted a position to teach at Istanbul Bilgi University, splitting his time between Turkey and France for the next seven years. "There was a great scene there; there are a lot of musicians in Istanbul," he notes.

Upon returning to France fulltime, Ford retained something of the Turkish culture that led to another major artistic decision. He says, "Most of the musicians in Turkey, they don't just play music, they do other things involving art, so I decided to try it. I opened an art gallery in 2008. It's called Galerie 14 in a place called Toucy. We expose artists and photographers from all over the world. A lot of French artists; artists from Africa, artists from Turkey, artists from America; I do one exhibition a year of my paintings." He's also started a jazz festival in the town he likens to a French Woodstock. He says, "This year we have Steven Reinhardt, he's related to Django Reinhardt, and we're having Michelle Hendricks [daughter of Jon Hendricks]. We also have free concerts on some of the streets in Toucy and free concerts in the gallery."

Asked if he considers his decision to relocate from the U.S. to have been a positive one, Ford replies, "For the most part yeah. I mean I miss New York and I really miss the fan base there in America. I've also been working in Boston with the Makanda Project playing the music of Ken McIntyre. I think there's a larger reserve of musicians in America than in France, so this is why right now I try to come back a little bit more." ❖

For more information, visit ricky.ford.free.fr. Ford is at The 75 Club at Bogardus Mansion Aug. 3rd-4th. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Ricky Ford—*Loxodonta Africana* (New World, 1977)
- Mingus Dynasty—*Reincarnation* (Soul Note, 1982)
- Ricky Ford—*Shorter Ideas* (Muse, 1984)
- Abdullah Ibrahim—*No Fear, No Die* (Tiptoe-Enja, 1990)
- Ricky Ford—*American-African Blues* (Candid, 1991)
- Ricky Ford/Kirk Lightsey—*Reeds and Keys* (Jazz Friends, 2003)

LEST WE FORGET



JOE SHEPLEY

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

Joe Shepley was one of the most in-demand studio and live trumpet players from the '60s-00s. He did endless jingles and movies and worked with too many artists to name. He imbued the trumpet with childlike enthusiasm and steadfast positivity.

Shepley was born on Aug. 7th, 1930 in Yonkers. His uncle took him to see Louis Armstrong and Roy Eldridge as a teenager. He joined the American Federation of Musicians Local 402 in 1946 and was working club dates before serving in the Korean War from 1952-54, joining Local 802 upon his return. He attended Manhattan School before and after his service, studying with Joseph Alessi, Sr., Donald Byrd and Joe Wilder, earning his Bachelor's degree in 1956 and Master's in 1957. But it was Carmine Caruso, with whom he took less than a dozen lessons, who had the biggest influence: "All the success...all I have physically as a trumpet player, I owe to Carmine Caruso," Shepley said. 1957 also brought his first record release: *Unique*

Jazz From The Westchester Workshop (RKO Records).

Shepley taught privately and at Hastings High School while playing various club dates when his career started to take off in the mid '60s. He befriended Bernie Privin, who began giving him studio work. Bernie Glow and Ernie Royal also took him under their wing and soon Shepley was busy in the studios. He was proud of his lead assignment on B.B. King's "The Thrill Is Gone" and developed a close relationship with fellow trumpeter Burt Collins in the late '60s in King Richard's Fluegel Knights and the Duke Pearson Big Band. One of his great solos is his feature on "Time After Time", the final piece on *Introducing Duke Pearson's Big Band* (Blue Note, 1967-68). Shepley and Collins took the Pearson rhythm section of Bob Cranshaw and Mickey Roker and formed the Collins-Shepley Galaxy, releasing two LPs on MTA in the '70s, including a live album of Lennon & McCartney music featuring Herbie Hancock.

There was so much work in the studios up to the mid '80s that players 'buried' in the studios rarely performed live. As Shepley's son Joe, Jr. recalls: "He was on literally everything from KISS' *Destroyer*, Tony Orlando and Dawn, Barry Manilow, The Captain and Tennille, "Turn the Beat Around", James Brown, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Eddie Palmieri, Freddie Hubbard Big Band, Neil Sedaka, you name it; literally 18 hours a day playing and recording on everything in NY."

In the '70s Shepley became a student of yoga and meditation with Sri Chinmoy. Chinmoy named Shepley

"Satyavan", which means "one who speaks truth". This name was fitting. "Joe was one of the very few people I knew, or know, who was always himself, just who he was, true to himself," recalls French horn player Fred Griffen. "He never put on airs." Shepley orchestrated the music for Chinmoy's *Songs Of The Soul, Part I*, which was released in the mid '70s.

As the studio work began to dry up in the '80s, Shepley spent more time teaching, hanging out with Chet Baker, performing live and patenting a mouthpiece. Well known for his great leads, he was also a fine section player. Shepley could do it all. In 1996 he was honored at the 24th Annual Brass Conference for Scholarships in New York. The conference program includes an extensive interview with Bill Spilka. ❖

For more information, visit joeshepleytrumpet.com

Recommended Listening:

- Vinnie Riccitelli & The Westchester Workshop—*Unique Jazz from The Westchester Workshop* (RKO, 1956)
- Duke Pearson—*It Could Only Happen With You* (Blue Note, 1970)
- Collins-Shepley Galaxy—*Time, Space and The Blues* (MTA, 1971)
- Urbie Green—*Señor Blues* (CTI, 1977)
- Ron Carter—*Empire Jazz* (RSO, 1980)
- Manhattan Jazz Orchestra—*A Night in Tunisia* (Sweet Basil-Pioneer, 1993)