



CALVIN KEYS

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

Guitarist Calvin Keys hit his stride as a teenager in the late '50s and has enjoyed a career filled with decades of performance. He has worked with Ray Charles, Ahmad Jamal, Earl "Fatha" Hines, Sonny Fortune, Pharoah Sanders, Blue Mitchell, Bobby Hutcherson and just about all of the great organ players, including Jack McDuff, Richard "Groove" Holmes, Jimmy McGriff and Jimmy Smith. In the early '70s he recorded with Gene Russell and Doug Carn for the Black Jazz label while leading his own, now classic, sessions *Shaw-Neeg* and *Proceed with Caution*. Both titles have been reissued perennially; the former received a new treatment in January 2021 (by Real Gone Music) and the latter will be reissued later this year.

Keys was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1943 and started playing the guitar around the age of 13 or 14, though he wasn't really supposed to be playing it. "My uncle Ivory introduced me to the guitar. He told me and two of my cousins if he ever caught us with the guitar he was gonna put his foot... [laughs] But I didn't care, because I was fascinated by it. I used to sneak down in the basement after school, hook it up and figure out how to play it, because I'd seen him do it."

Uncle Ivory finally caught him one day, but instead of punishment, he asked the youngster to play what he learned. He played what he'd seen his uncle play as well as some things he'd picked up from the radio and told his uncle that he was saving his money from his weekend job at the carwash to buy himself a guitar. His uncle was touched and told him he could have his guitar. Every day after school, Keys would go home and play that guitar until well after dark. Finally, the police knocked on his door and said the neighbors were complaining. They just asked him to turn it down.

He'd stay up and pick up all he could from the radio.

"There weren't that many stations working late at night, but we could get Stan the Record Man [Lewis] out of Tennessee. He would have all the new blues tunes and I used to listen to him every Saturday night: Bobby 'Blue' Bland, Muddy Waters and all the cats during that time." He also sought out any guitarists he could find in the area. There was Papa Luther Guitar Woodruff and The Night Riders and Clon Von Fitz in Council Bluffs, Iowa who showed him some things. His neighbor Richard Gardner played and his wife was the sister of Wayne Bennett who played with Bland.

"Wayne used to come to Omaha when he wasn't out there on the road with Bobby. We sat at the barbershop and I'd pick up a few more chords. There were four or five different guitar players in Omaha during that time and if you didn't know none of them blues tunes you wasn't in the game: Freddie King's 'Hideaway' or Bill Doggett's 'Honky Tonk', 'Gatemouth' Brown... he had that popular guitar blues, Jimmy Reed and all of them cats. Any guitar player comes through town and we heard about it, we'd go down there and worry him to death trying to figure out and learn stuff. So, that's where it started, socializing with them different guys."

By the age of 16 or 17 he started playing with Doctor Spider and his Rock'n'roll Webs at local clubs like The First and Last Chance, The Off Beat and up the road in Sioux City, Iowa at trumpeter Clarence Kenner's Poor Boys Club 54. At the same time, he started working with another group called Andre and the Ramrods, playing the blues and covering tunes they heard on the radio. They were working for a couple years when Little Walkin' Willie came through town and heard the young Keys. He needed a guitar player to cover about a month of work and invited Keys on the road, but his mother said no, since he was still in school. He had enough credits to graduate, so he said, "Mom, you know, you always told me to be up front with you ... Well, I'm gonna go [with] Little Walkin' Willie if I have to sneak out while you're asleep." She said, "Well, I don't want you to be a musician, young man, but if you're going to be one, try to be the best."

They went on the road to the Riviera Ballroom in

St. Louis, Gleason's in Cleveland and DWI Dave's Walnut Inn, in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. Keys had the time of his life and couldn't believe it when the month was suddenly over and he was on the train back to Omaha. He'd got a taste of life on the road in crowded clubs and would never be the same. So as soon as he got home, he moved down to Kansas City where his father lived and where there was more live music. He got a trio gig at the Nightingale and then started working with saxophonist Preston Love. Love's ensemble was a nine-piece dance band and while traveling the region, Keys started learning to perform standards.

Next, Keys got a call to join Frank Edwards' organ trio along with drummer James Gadson. "So, we started playing that circuit: O.G.'s Lounge in Kansas City, Allen's Showcase Lounge in Omaha and then to Leroy Smith's The Voters Club, the oldest club in Denver. We'd leave there and go to Booker T. Washington Hotel over on Ellis Street between Fillmore and Webster in San Francisco. Charles Sullivan owned the Fillmore Auditorium and a bunch of other clubs and businesses around here; he was a very prominent, successful Black man. Then over here to Oakland to Don Barksdale's joint. He had two clubs, The Showcase and The Sportsman, and we'd work in either one of those lounges and go back to West Oakland to Esther's Orbit Room. Now we worked eight weeks in each club and I was getting 150 dollars a week. So we was out here in the Bay Area for two, three months, man. So that was the gig. That was the chitlin' circuit that we knew. Frank was an outstanding organ player, man. So, Jimmy McGriff, Jimmy Smith, all of them knew him, 'cause he could play."

In 1967 and 1968, Keys was back at O.G.'s in Kansas City with his own trio, during which time Pat Metheny's father used to take him to see Keys play. But California was calling to him and he was ready to move on from the organ. "I moved to L.A. in March of 1969. I had saved up my money, I had a nice little bank roll... bought me a brand new guitar, a new wardrobe and a brand new 1969 Deuce and a Quarter Buick 225, so when I hit L.A. I was rollin' [laughs]. Then I played all

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 25)

LEST WE FORGET



AARON BELL

BY GEORGE KANZLER

By 1960, when he was 39, Aaron Bell had been playing bass professionally since 1946, after serving four years in a U.S. Navy band during World War II. He played with Billie Holiday, Lester Young, Stan Kenton, Cab Calloway, Carmen McRae and Dick Haymes. Along the way he acquired an M.A. in Social Work from NYU and was raising a family with four children in Mt. Vernon, NY. But that year became the most important of his musical life: he became an Ellingtonian.

"Dad had great respect for Duke Ellington as an artist and as a man," remembers Robin Bell-Stevens, Bell's only daughter and Director of JazzMobile.

"I learned more in the school of Ellington than I ever did in school," The bassist told this writer in an interview for the [New Jersey] *Star Ledger* in 1989. "When you played with Ellington's band you learned to apply the knowledge as you gained it."

Bell was in the Ellington Orchestra for two years and worked on and off on projects with Ellington and

his collaborator Billy Strayhorn for another four years, returning to play with the band on the Duke's tribute album to Strayhorn, who died in 1967, *...And His Mother Called Him Bill* (RCA, 1967). It was a fertile period for Ellington and Bell appears on seven albums from the band during 1960-63. He is also the bassist on two of Ellington's more celebrated small-band dates of the period, *Duke Ellington Meets Coleman Hawkins* and *Duke Ellington & John Coltrane*, both recorded in 1962 for Impulse.

Besides being the bassist in the band, Bell also had the opportunity to write out parts for Ellington and Strayhorn scores. "It was really educational," he said, recalling an incident when he went to Ellington to point out what he thought was a mistake. "In school they tell you not to cross your parts and being a kid I thought I knew more than I did, so I went to Ellington and said, 'I think you made a mistake here, sir.' He said, 'That's alright, just copy it as it is.' And when you heard the orchestra play it, you knew he was right. But Ellington never wrote a book about his technique, so people are still trying to figure it all out. Whatever it was, he arrived at it through experience, through writing for his band.

"He studied in school, not music, art, but I think he picked up a lot of traditional composing ideas from Strayhorn. But I could always tell the two apart. Strayhorn was smooth, almost classical, but Duke had that rough cut to it, he did very original things.

"Strayhorn was also a genius. I think most of his songs are comparable to art songs of the Romantic Period, like the songs written by Schubert, Brahms and Hugo Wolf. They are beautiful, but so are Strayhorn's. If you take them and analyze them you find the same elements in 19th Century art songs as you do in Strayhorn's 'Lush Life'. That's why Ellington didn't like the word 'jazz'; it put things apart in categories and Strayhorn was like Ellington, who described his music as 'beyond category'."

"Duke was pretty close to my dad, personally," says Bell-Stevens, "and when my grandfather died Duke told my dad that as long as he, Duke, was alive he'd always have a dad." She also remembers that Bell's closest musician friends were trumpeters Clark Terry and Joe Newman and saxophonist Frank Wess and that their families socialized together.

From 1970-90 Bell was head of the jazz program at Essex County College in Newark, NJ. He brought in visiting artists to give concerts and sometimes teach semesters and inaugurated a Performing Jazz Institute in 1989 (it disappeared when he retired in 1990).

In 1976 he finished his doctorate at Columbia Teacher's College, his dissertation a "Bicentennial Symphony" for string orchestra and jazz horns and reeds, which, according to Bell-Stevens, "traces the history of black Americans from Africa and slavery, musically, through the Great Migration to the present,

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 25)

(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

DO: This is what I was just talking about. What I want to project with the band is what he did to me in an instant. I felt like every human emotion was embodied in every note that he played. He gave me chills down my spine. He made me cry. He made me joyous. He made me think about other people. He seems to hit all the common nerves of humanity and it just knocked me over, that there could be one person who could do that. "Swing That Music" in particular. As a 15-year-old full of pep and vigor, I was excited by the speed and the unbridled joy of the music. And so that's what kind of caught my attention. That was the first one. I started getting more and more interested in reading about him and learning about him, learning about how he lived his life and how he was treated and how he treated other people, how he dealt with adversity and it all matched up with his playing.

TNYCJR: Was your attraction to the tuba as dramatic as your discovery of Armstrong?

DO: The passage of time has revealed an answer, but it took a while for me actually to realize what it was about the tuba because for years, when I was asked that question, I would give a flippant sort of silly answer. Like how can you not want to play the tuba? A few years ago, I was hanging out with a friend of mine who showed me a clip of a 1965 ballet of *Romeo and Juliet* with Margot Fonteyn. There was a musical section called "March of the Capulets", which has the most incredible, beautiful, heavy, deep tuba part. I'd actually seen that production when I was 10. Shortly after, I was passing the band room in school as we were running out for recess. I saw the tuba there. It was actually a sousaphone, the kind that wraps around. It was gold and beautiful. And, as I remember it, there was a ray of sunshine coming in through the window onto this golden horn. I screeched on the brakes, like in a cartoon, and I ran in and I started blowing on it. The band director came out and gave me my first lesson on the spot. I realized when I saw the clip that there was a connection between it and learning to play the tuba. That ballet experience sunk into my head and it changed my life. Since then all I ever wanted to do was to have kids and play the tuba in that order.

TNYCJR: And because of that first desire you also became a lawyer.

DO: I did. In the beginning I tried to keep it secret that I was a lawyer because I didn't want people to think I was a part-time musician. I found a position where I could cut out to do gigs and I never turned down any gigs. I didn't make huge amounts like some lawyers do, but I made enough to assure an income and I was able to do gigs along the way. I had worked for two years for a lawyer who did personal injury and divorce cases and I really hated it. So, I quit without another job. I wasn't married at that time. When I did go back to being an attorney, during my interview my prospective employer allowed that he'd spoken to my old boss and learned I'd leave the office for a gig from time to time. I wanted to be up front about it, so I told him that most of my gigs are at night or on weekends so those won't affect the job. I added that occasionally a gig will come up during the day and I won't turn it down. Let me assure you, I said, if you hire me, I'll continue to do that. He hired me and it worked out. I've been very lucky.

TNYCJR: How do you feel about the future?

DO: We can't be stopped. At some point we're going to be back at Birdland. I'm sure of that. I think that, before you know it, things will ease back into where they were. Hopefully, having lost so much, I think that people will appreciate more what they have, because of

what was taken away from them. And so, I'm optimistic about the future, not only for my band, but also for humanity. As for streaming and virtual concerts—for music, it really needs to be live, so those platforms we rely on now will fade away eventually. And on a bright note, things are beginning to pick up. On April 30th on International Jazz Day, we're going to be doing a live stream from Flushing Town Hall. We're going to be playing at the Newport Jazz Festival on July 30th and we also have a concert that Ricky Riccardi of the Louis Armstrong House runs at Ocean County Community College in Toms River, New Jersey on June 27th. ❖

For more information, visit ostwaldjazz.com. *Ostwald's Louis Armstrong Eternity Band live-streams Apr. 30th at flushingtowhall.org.*

Recommended Listening:

- Big Joe Turner—*With Knocky Parker And His Houserockers* (Southland, 1983)
- Gully Low Jazz Band—*In Dreamland* (G.H.B., 1983)
- David Ostwald's Gully Low Jazz Band—*Down To Earth* (G.H.B., 1985)
- The New York Allstars—*We Love You, Louis!* (Nagel Heyer, 1995)
- David Ostwald's Gully Low Jazz Band—*Blues In Our Heart* (Nagel Heyer, 1998)
- Randy Sandke and The New York Allstars—*George Avakian Presents: The Re-Discovered Louis and Bix* (Nagel Heyer, 1999)

(ENCORE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8)

the clubs, met a lot of musicians and did a few sessions and I said, 'there's still something I wanna do'. Then I got a call from Ray Charles. I think I joined Ray in 1970 and I worked with him '70 through '72 and part of... actually I worked with Ray off and on for the next 25, 30 years."

It was also in 1970 that he met Gene Russell, who was about to get Black Jazz Records off the ground. Keys realized his dream of producing his own albums, *Shawn-Neeq* (1971) and *Proceed with Caution* (1974). "Cause it was a movement going on then. Whatever you're about you better proceed with caution in this madness. And I had that experience. We were going through the same thing that we're going through now, but it was 50 years ago!"

In 2020, Keys took part in the Black Jazz 50th Anniversary tour with Doug Carn, Henry Franklin, Michael Carvin and Jean Carne, breaking attendance records at performance halls in Paris and Berlin before the pandemic put a stop to everything.

After his first stint with Charles, around 1974 is when Keys got the opportunity to join Jamal's trio with bassist Jamil Nasser and drummer Frank Gant. "He called me and he gave me a couple charts and we started playing some of his music. He looked at me and he said, 'Calvin, do you read that well?' I said, 'tell you the truth, no, I don't, but I know all your music because my aunts and uncles used to play it on the weekends, that's how I learned most of the stuff.' [laughs] He was just an incredible master of this American classical art form." Between Charles and Jamal, when he wasn't working with one, he was working with the other for decades to follow.

Keys has two albums in the can, including *Silver Keys* dedicated to Horace Silver and *Simply Calvin* coming out on LifeForce Records. As soon as the venues start opening again, he'll be back on the bandstand as he's been for over 60 years.

"I've been so blessed, it's unbelievable, to be able to play this music. I'm fortunate enough to [have been] in the company of some of the greatest musicians on the planet and I'm still searching for that note. This music is one of the most powerful forces on the planet. It's all about life and love... Without this music, what

would it be?" ❖

For more information, visit calvinkeysjazz.com

Recommended Listening:

- Calvin Keys—*Shawn-Neeq* (Black Jazz, 1971)
- Ahmad Jamal—*Steppin' Out With a Dream* (20th Century Fox, 1977)
- Calvin Keys—*Standard Keys* (LifeForce, 1992)
- Calvin Keys—*Detours Into Unconscious Rhythms* (Wide Hive, 1999)
- Gloria Coleman—*Sweet Missy* (Doodlin', 2007)
- Calvin Keys—*Electric Keys* (Wide Hive, 2012)

(LEST WE FORGET CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8)

using elements of classical music and jazz, the latter heavily influenced by Ellington."

His Ellington connections also continued in his semi-retirement years. "He got to play Duke Ellington's role on piano in Clark Terry's Spaceman bands, tributes to the Duke, on summer tours in the '90s," remembers Bell-Stevens. Aaron Bell died in 2003 at 82. He would have turned 100 this year on Apr. 24th. ❖

Jazzmobile's "Keep The Music Playing" celebrates Bell's centennial on International Jazz Day, Apr. 30th, on JZMTV. For more information, visit jazzmobile.org.

Recommended Listening:

- Aaron Bell—*After The Party's Over* (RCA Victor, 1958)
- Duke Ellington Orchestra—*The Nutcracker Suite* (Columbia, 1960)
- Duke Ellington—*Piano in the Foreground* (Columbia-Legacy, 1961)
- Duke Ellington—*Meets Coleman Hawkins* (Impulse, 1962)
- Cat Anderson—*Plays W.C. Handy (Definitive Black & Blue Sessions)* (Black & Blue, 1978)
- Harold Ashby—*I'm Old Fashioned* (Stash, 1991)

(LABEL CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9)

expect to make money. Some of the albums have met their buy back and the artists make money off of it and we make a bit to put towards future releases. Overall it has been incredibly successful and we're going to keep pushing forward and putting music out."

Whereas Hopkins and Clark schedule the physical releases so they are far enough apart that they can devote attention to the production and marketing, they aim to issue Untamed albums as fast as possible. Upcoming physical releases include *Asp Nimbus* from cellist Christopher Hoffman's quartet and a solo guitar/banjo outing from Wendy Eisenberg while the latest editions of Untamed are live documents from Jonathan Goldberger/Simon Jermyn/Mat Maneri/Gerald Cleaver and a saxophone/drum duo from Chicago pair Nick Mazzarella and Quin Kirchner.

Beside sharing music, OOOYH has engendered other benefits. "In hindsight it was a great thing for me to start when I left NY. The record label has been an incredible way, especially during COVID, to stay in touch with people, still be involved in the music scene and hear about all this great music that's coming out. I was pleasantly surprised that my friends kept calling me to play with them." ❖

For more information, visit outofyourheadrecords.com. Live-streaming events this month are Nick Mazzarella/Hamid Drake on Apr. 4th at constellation-chicago.com; Anna Webber with Simon Jermyn, Devin Gray/Simon Jermyn with Nick Dunston, Cansu Tanrikulu, Jim Black on Apr. 6th at a-trane.de; and NEA Jazz Masters Presents: Henry Threadgill with Christopher Hoffman, David Virelles and Román Filiú on Apr. 22nd at arts.gov/about/news/2020/national-endowment-arts-announces-2021-nea-jazz-masters.