

Wallace Roney, trumpeter

Recorded February 2015

“I first met Mulgrew when I was 15 or 16. He was playing with the Ellington Band, the Ellington Orchestra. He took Duke Ellington’s place (laughs). You knew that right? He played with the Ellington Orchestra. There might have been someone between Duke and Mulgrew, but Mulgrew played with the Ellington Orchestra, with Mercer, yeah. That’s when I first met him. And then I got to know him. I met him in, it was when I first came to New York. He was playing at the time with Johnny Griffin I believe, he was playing with Betty Carter and then Johnny Griffin, and then he went from Johnny Griffin to Woody Shaw. But we were all in New York and we were always trying to play, and Mulgrew was part of the gang from Memphis with James Williams and later Donald Brown. James first, then Mulgrew, then Donald Brown is how they came up, and that’s how I met him. And the reason why I say it like that is that we all came to New York...he might have been there, but all being there in a certain time, we all became friends, and we all were supporting each other being the cats on the scene trying to get the gig. Who’s going to play with who, you know what I mean? So we would see each other at Dexter Gordon’s gig, or Johnny Griffin’s gig or somebody’s gig, and at the end of the gig we would go to these coffee shops, and hear ‘so-and-so just got the gig with Dexter,’ you know, so that’s how that worked out. So we all were friends that way. Then Mulgrew, like I said when he got with Woody, that’s when we really started knowing, because I was sort of a protégé of Woody’s. I was hanging with Woody a lot. And like I said, we were just always around each other. We were the young guys then, Mulgrew and Kenny Washington, David Eubanks, all these guys. We were the young cats that were getting called by the master musicians that weren’t the high draw musicians like a Herbie. Like Cedar, or George Coleman, phenomenal musicians.”

“So in that time me and Mulgrew became real close. And Mulgrew was the type of guy – he was great. But not just great, he was always trying to get better. And he was sincere. He had integrity. He had all of these things in his playing. It wasn’t like ‘I’m great, and I’m waiting for a phone call.’ He was like, ‘You can say I’m great if you want to, if it helps me get a gig, but I would like to get to the next order, where I can get to to be a better artist,’ you know. That’s what Mulgrew was like then. But Mulgrew’s most important thing was, he was the nicest cat in the world. He was simply one of the nicest cats in the world, without being corny, he was funny, he was hip, he was all of that. Everybody loved Mulgrew. When you got around Mulgrew you felt good. He made you feel, he just was, he wasn’t, he was a regular guy, but and there were some people he probably didn’t care for if they were wrong, but he just had this thing about him that he made everybody feel like he was their friend, you know. He was just beautiful. He was just a beautiful guy. And he loved to play, and I’m sure there were a lot of piano players that were envious of him, but he was such a beautiful guy you just had to like him. Nobody didn’t like Mulgrew. You didn’t want to not like him. Once you met him, you’d just laugh with him and he was a beautiful guy. And on top of being everybody’s friend, and one of those guys that was also a musical seeker, me and him really did become best friends, meaning that we weren’t best friends just in the sense that I felt close and

(Wallace Roney continued)

comfortable to him – he would come over to my house every other week you know, I would go to his place – he didn't live too far from Brooklyn – and we would just hang out and laugh. He would sit down at my piano and just start playing. So we had that kind of relationship.”

“He was playing with Woody, then he got the job with Art Blakey, and of course he contributed to Art's band greatly. And then he left Art and he joined Tony Williams. But what really happened was me and Mulgrew playing for Tony Williams' record, *Foreign Intrigue*. And Tony Williams was trying to put together – well I don't think Tony set out to put together a band, to be honest. I think Blue Note offered him a record date, and they probably told him if you do a straight ahead record we'll let you do an electric record. And Tony said 'Fine.' And they were trying to get Tony guys from the Jazz Messengers. Like the Jazz Messengers were going to leave Art and go to Tony's band, so that's why there's Mulgrew and Donald Harrison, and I think Terence Blanchard was supposed to be on it, but Terence didn't make it. And Tony wasn't so happy with it at first. I play different from Terence. And when we got through making the record, a couple weeks later, I got a call from Tony and he said he wanted to build a band around me and Mulgrew. That's how that happened. He eventually called me to put the band together. Later he told me that that wasn't his intention at first, but he liked the results of what he heard, so then me and Mulgrew became the focal point of the Tony Williams Quintet. And from that point on man, me and Mulgrew just had a ball. From 1985 up until his death, and especially the years we were on the road together because we were on the road six months out of the year. And when we weren't on the road we were in New York playing together or sitting in when Mulgrew was playing with his band and I'd play with them, or he'd play with my band, and making records together, so those years man, I've never laughed so much. We both were striving for stuff. We both were believing that we had a responsibility to try to be great, try to be what the level was that we had been inspired by. And we were serious about that. That was our life. Believing we were meant to do that.”

“I had been hanging with Miles, with Miles Davis, as everybody knows, which was one of the blessings that God bestowed upon me, to hang with Miles. But when you hang with Miles, sometimes you start to take on his persona – not a bad thing, I don't believe it was a bad thing. But Miles, I think at one point Miles didn't like McCoy Tyner, and I had worked with McCoy and I loved McCoy. But I think something happened with McCoy – I interpreted that I had a bad feeling with McCoy, something had happened. So when Miles started putting McCoy Tyner down, I put McCoy Tyner down too, because Miles did. I mean it was almost like I took Miles' vamp, and one day me and Mulgrew were on an airplane and we were talking about it. And of course, Mulgrew, that's his idol – Oscar Peterson, McCoy Tyner, Herbie and Wynton Kelly, I would say, are his idols. And I mean it was a strong emphasis on McCoy, and Chick Corea. And we're talking about it, and I'm telling him that McCoy ain't...I'm saying everything that Miles said. Now I don't agree with what Miles said now, but back then I was saying, 'McCoy all he does it play this, all he does is that, he bangs on the piano, he plays pentatonic. Even when he

(Wallace Roney continued)

plays scales it sounds pentatonic. I was just saying all of Miles' stuff. And I was getting mad at Mulgrew because he wasn't – I don't know why I was getting mad at him. I really loved McCoy. I was just getting mad at him. And you have to understand why I'm saying this, because Mulgrew is such a beautiful guy, there ain't nothing else to get mad at him about. So I had to find something to get mad at him about. So I got mad at him, and we argued. And Mulgrew is such of a pacifist, he didn't want to argue. It was like, 'okay, I don't agree with you.' So the more he didn't agree with me, the more I took it literally, and I wouldn't talk to him. And this is my best friend, and we're arguing about something stupid like this. I remember this went on for about a week. Every time I'd see Mulgrew I'd put my shoulder up. We'd meet on the bandstand playing and I'd turn away from him, and I don't know why. And again, the reason why this was important, because other than that there was simply nothing to get mad at Mulgrew about. So one day Mulgrew knocked on my door, and I remember we had a day off and I was trying to get some rest, and I had all the lights out. Well, I saw it was him and I turned all the lights off purposefully, I didn't want to be bothered with him. And Mulgrew got right into my room, I mean just walked right by me, like he was going to dare me to hit him, and he's a beautiful guy, he ain't never going to fight you. But I guess he figured if I was going to hit him I was going to have to hit him, we were just too good friends to go through this. And he sat in the room, and went over to my table and just sat at my table, pitch black. I wouldn't cut on the light, I won't turn on the TV, I just stayed in the bed, and he just sat there, he sat there for three hours. And me being as stubborn as I was, until after awhile we both started laughing. We knew this was so stupid. I remember we hugged each other and I turned the lights back on, and that's how we ended the only argument I ever had with him. He was just that beautiful. You couldn't – I had nothing to be mad at him about."

"He told the silliest jokes, and the dumbest puns, but they all made sense. Every damn day he had a billion puns and jokes. So one day I said to Mulgrew, "I'll bet you my week's salary that you can't not tell a joke or a pun for a week." So we made a bet. I was waiting for him to slip up and just say anything. He made it through the first day. He made it through the second day, he made it through the fourth day, he made it through the sixth day. The last day, he made it, took my money, and then Mulgrew looked at me and said, "Wallace, I'm glad I won, but I've got to tell you, y'all missed some of the best jokes I ever had." (big laughs) He would tell so many jokes, all day, you know. There'd be some cows out there, or some lambs, and he'd say, "There you go, outstanding in your field." He couldn't stop, but for one week, he had to stop. So when it was over he said, "Man, those were some of the best I ever had." (big laughs) I tell you man, I've got many Mulgrew stories. He was my best friend."

"When he first had a stroke, when he had his first stroke, or the first one that I knew of, I had just got through playing on the Jimmy Fallon Show. Nobody knew I was going to do it – it was a big surprise. And after I got through playing I came home, and I called

(Wallace Roney continued)

Mulgrew. He said, "I'm Mulgrew, I've had a stroke." As soon as he got better he could talk. I said, "Man you had a stroke the day I got on TV." He said, "Yeah, I didn't want to see you on Jimmy Fallon." We laughed. He said "that's my excuse, was not seeing you on Jimmy Fallon." Then he had the last one, was actually on my birthday. He was my best friend, man, my best friend, my best friend."

"I miss my friend, man. I miss him."

"Maybe in this world he did what he had to do, maybe the world wasn't, maybe he went to something better. Sometimes the world don't deserve somebody, or not that it doesn't deserve, but sometimes the time and place isn't ready for you anymore, can't sustain what you need, so maybe Mulgrew was too much for what the world could handle at that point, you know what I mean? I don't know if that makes any sense, but it does to me."

"Thank you Wallace for that tribute to a great friend, and I'm sorry for your loss."

"Oh thank you, thank you. And it's the world's loss. Well, do what you're doing, and make a good tribute to him."

Tony Williams, drummer

Recorded May 6, 1986, in San Anselmo, CA

“Mulgrew was great. First time I’d had a chance to work with him, and I was really pleased with his playing. I hope to do that again too. And Bobby [Hutcherson] was on my first record, *Lifetime*, so it seemed only fitting to do it again. We enjoy playing together.”

“They were recommended to me by the president of the company, and they – I think Donald still plays with Art Blakey and I think Wallace use to play with Art Blakey, but that’s what they’ve been doing. I wasn’t that familiar with them either, but they sound great. And then Mulgrew does as well. Mulgrew and Donald and Wallace I had never met, so it was a new experience to do it that way. I just said to get some musicians and they came up with these names, and I said, ‘Okay, I’ll be there.’ It worked out real well.”

“It was just a great feeling to tell myself that I wanted to make a record, and then put it together in the fashion that I did it. To be able to write songs and complete them as easily as I had hoped to.”

“We’re trying to put that [a tour] together now, and it seems like it just depends on everyone’s schedules. Timing...timing.”

Donald Brown, pianist

Recorded February 2015

“It was just special for me because I felt like I was having a hard time just really playing, and Mulgrew always found the right thing to say to you. He would say certain stuff to you and had a way of lifting you up.”

“I started at Memphis State in '72 and he came in '73, the year after. And you know, James [Williams] was there about three years before I was, so it was a great time to be there, with James and Phineas playing around the town. And Mulgrew just brought a different kind of image and spirit to the place. So yeah, I was excited having him there. And it was kind of interesting, because the band director at the time at Memphis State, he was a really good jazz pianist himself, and he asked me, he said, ‘There’s this kid coming up from Greenwood, Mississippi, a piano player,’ and he asked me would I show him around the city. And I forgot the story but Mulgrew reminded me, he told me a few years later, ‘You know Brown, you don’t remember the day you showed me around Memphis and stuff?’ He said we went to this place, the Ranch House, to get something to eat, and he says, ‘You spilled a milkshake on me.’ And after he told me about it I kind of remembered. And then later I told him, I said ‘Mulgrew, I probably spilled that milk shake on you on purpose, cause I knew you were going to be a lot of problems for me.’ So we had a good laugh out of that, but uh, like I said, we spent a lot of time away from the bandstand as well as just playing together, duos, trios with James.”

RT: Is there a trick to pianists playing together?

DB: There’s definitely a trick to it, but uh, I think besides the fact we were all great friends, we had a lot of the same influences, whether it was Phineas, or Monk, or Chick Corea. So you know, we kind of heard the same sound colors, and then having the rhythm section made it easier, with Christian McBride and Tony Reedus. So it was kind of functioned like a small sax quartet, if you want to think of it one way. We all had parts to play on some of the melodies and stuff, and then there was room for being spontaneous within the melodies and so on as well as then there would be parts where sometimes we’d feature one person solo piano, or sometimes Harold and Geoff would be featured in a duo context, or Mulgrew and James, or Mulgrew and myself or Harold. But it was one of those bands that I hate we didn’t get to even play more, because there was so much magic happening on the bandstand, and you know, Mulgrew was definitely the guy that no one wanted to follow, in one way.”

“Mulgrew and I did a recording with a local singer in Memphis by the name of Lee Miles. It was Lee Stone, and he had this small club where Phineas would play and James might play one day of the week. He was a vocalist that played under Lee Stone, and he played drums, but I just remember he did a recording, it might have been like a 45 but it had four tracks, and I played the electric bass on it and Mulgrew played piano. And I’ve asked many people if anyone has a recording of that. We got to spend a lot of time just talking about music life, and playing together. And he was one of those guys, along with

(Donald Brown continued)

James, but Mulgrew just has this, he always played at such a high consistency level, that he was one of the guys that I kind of measured what I was doing by, you know. And just as I had such respect for him as a musician, just as a human person he ranks up there in the top lists of great people that I've met in any walk of life – just a really great human being.”

“He was there when I recorded this ballad that Bill Evans recorded, and I just remember coming in from playing it, and he said, ‘Brown, man, that was one of the most beautiful things, what you played on it was so beautiful man.’ He affirmed us. I knew he was sincere about it, but it just meant a lot coming from him, because I felt like I was struggling, and you know, he was very supportive. And he knew I had some surgeries at least a couple years before he passed, so I was having difficulty performing, and really was not performing a lot. And he'd just call me, and I could tell, I just kind of felt like he was checking in on me, like ‘Hey man, you gotta get better cause we need you out here,’ but really just caring you know. So it meant a lot, even though that was common through the years, but I just felt like as the paths changed we were just kind of thinking about each other more.”

“I arranged once for some of my students to get a lesson with him and one of the students was my youngest son Keith, who's a pianist. A really good player, but he's actually in the process of trying to get a publisher for a book he's done of some of Mulgrew's transcriptions. But I used to tease Mulgrew, because my son used to not only play some of Mulgrew's songs, but some of his solos. I'd call Mulgrew and say, ‘Man, it's bad enough I have to hear you on the radio, but I have to hear my son playing all your sad songs and stuff.’ He knew I was teasing him. I said, ‘Man, my son plays more of your licks than he do mine.’ But like I say, my son was really close to Mulgrew as well.”

Steve Turre, trombonist

Recorded February 26, 2015

“I mean he could play man. He was the real deal. Yeah, he’s a young kid coming up and all of that, but he already was right in the right feeling, and he stayed there. He was searching, but he was searching within the feeling, not being in and out in terms of getting it. He always got it, from the beginning. And that’s cause of the way he was raised, you know. He came up through the church, and blues, and R&B, and he even had a Fender Rhodes piano. I remember he played it on a couple of gigs with me. I’m a little older than Mulgrew. And then when he joined Woody’s band, I realized how ridiculous he was. He did stuff that was incredibly difficult, but he made it look so easy, that if you were looking at it through rock and roll eyes, like it’s show business, because in rock and roll they play stuff that ain’t that hard but they make it look like a real big effort and everybody trips because they’re making faces and all that. But Mulgrew would play the hardest stuff and make it look so easy that unless you really knew music you may quite not realize how incredibly gifted he was. To me that’s the sign of a true master. You know, there’s a lineage of piano players within our music, you know it’s the whole lineage. And he’s definitely the last real innovator, for me. I haven’t heard any real innovators – I’ve heard guys trying to do hip hop and combine that and say that’s innovative, but I’m not buying that, because hip hop is watered-down R&B in a big sense, except that they’re using electronic drums a lot of the time and all that. And it’s not as funky as James Brown. And Mulgrew did all that, but he took it way further than that. So you know, he’s a true grandmaster.”

“The critics never really gave Mulgrew his due, but ALL the elders in the lineage did, Cedar and Hank Jones and Herbie and Chick, all those guys, they loved Mulgrew. McCoy – they were all aware of him and they loved him, because he was the real deal. It wasn’t about just trying to be different, what you do is you learn how to really play and then be yourself. We’re all naturally different. It’s hard to be yourself, because that means you’ve got to be honest. Mulgrew wasn’t doing it just to be famous and get his name in a magazine so he could be a star and make money and all that shit. He was doing it because he loved the music.”

“What a beautiful human being, and it’s all connected. Whatever you are in your heart, that’s what comes out in the music. Yeah, Mulgrew was one of the warmest most humble gentle souls, you know. Very encouraging, and what’s the word? He nurtured people, you know. He wasn’t mean spirited at all. He was the opposite of that.”

“We both were with Woody Shaw during a very formative period in our musical lives, and I know I found my own voice during that period, and I kind of feel like Mulgrew did too. And I know this, because we kind of grew up, matured, so to speak, musically, during that period with Woody Shaw, and we played a lot of difficult challenging music, and we all wrote for the band and we were all in awe of and inspired by Woody, that he was my favorite accompanist. It’s like because of that time together, he could feel what I was going to play before I played it almost. It was like many bodies one mind, you know what I mean. It’s intuitive, very intuitive. And he accompanied my natural phrasing, I wouldn’t ever have to force it. He’s never be in the way but he’d always lift you up. And

Steve Turre (continued)

you know Herbie and McCoy played it that way too, but he's in that league. And that's not said frivolously. I mean it. For me, he was one of the great ones, and I haven't heard any young kids coming along that can really accompany like that. You know, everybody wants to be a soloist and get a record deal and be a star, but in the tradition, it's just as important to be a good accompanist. You know, Herbie Hancock, McCoy Tyner, Chick Corea, as great as they are as soloists, and they're really off the hook, they're that great as accompanists too. But there's a lot of people out here today that can solo impressively, run a bunch of chops and make you say 'wow,' but then when you go to play they don't give you anything. It's all selfish oriented. Mulgrew was not selfish, he was very giving, and that's very important, because our music by its tradition, is a collective music. It's not about me me me, it's about us, we, it's a collective."

Donald Harrison, saxophonist

Recorded March 18, 2015

“I would love to be a part of it. He was like a big brother to me in so many ways. And yeah, as a person, so yeah, it would be great.”

“Mulgrew was playing with Woody Shaw the first time I met him. And when I first came to the east coast I was in Boston, and he came to Boston to play with Woody Shaw. Some kind of way maybe I sat in with them, because Woody Shaw told me I needed to come to New York, when I met Woody. But Mulgrew was of course a young guy, playing with a master. So I was looking up to him already, because I wanted to be in those kind of bands, even though I was playing with Roy Haynes. And he had a lot of proficiency at a young age, and was already playing a lot of well-formulated ideas. I was immediately looking up to him, and when I talked with him he was a very warm person, and very sharing. So I always thought of him, from the moment that I met him, as a friend, and a guy who was a little older, who could lead me in the right direction, to being very comfortable with playing with great musicians. So that was like maybe '79 or '80, some of those years in there.”

“Mulgrew was affirming and he was also a role model because for guys who wanted to understand tradition and then move forward from the inside, he was always doing that. That was always my goal, so I wanted to hang around somebody like him. I remember one of the people that was influential on Mulgrew was Professor Fielder at Rutgers University. Because he showed us a line that Donald Byrd had played on a diminished chord, and Mulgrew picked it up. And at the time I didn't think anything of it, it was just a different way of looking at a diminished chord. But nowadays a lot of us play that line. It really comes from Donald Byrd – Mulgrew picked it up and then he expounded upon it, and then took those ideas, so many ideas from so many great musicians in different directions, that I realized that I needed to explore that assignment that Professor Fielder had given us a long time ago. So it was through Mulgrew, who really paid attention to what Professor Fielder showed us, that I became interested in this line that's heard so much in my playing. And later on we would play and we would be on the same page with that, so that was a huge part of my career.”

“Mulgrew was definitely one of the biggest influences, on pianists of course, so many pianists, and horn players, a lot of horn players picked up on things that he did – I know one of the biggest things was that Donald Byrd line that we all picked up on, the way that he played that diminished thing. Because Mulgrew explored it and showed us all the possibilities inside of it, I know for sure that I picked it up because of Mulgrew. It's fascinating how one little thing that you don't think can mean anything, that someone sees the possibilities of it and they show you all of the possibilities of it, and then you kind of pick it up and see other possibilities. For me that's a true influencing.”

“We all learned so much from Art, you know, he was a great teacher. I used to watch how Mulgrew would connect with the drums when he was comping behind you. See the

(Donald Harrison continued)

rhythm section when he was soloing, Mulgrew had a way of understanding what Art was doing, and then becoming involved rhythmically, and also changing the harmony of it. He was one of the first guys from my generation, besides Kenny Kirkland, that was moving harmony around underneath you. So you had to be on your Ps and Qs with Mulgrew. It was, everybody was, Art Blakey has a way of pushing you to your limits. We were all striving to learn as much as we could about music, and at that Mulgrew was the most seasoned and had the most experience, and had the most concise statements. And now that I'm listening to those records, the trombone player Tim Williams, he really was concise and had great things to say on the trombone. So those two guys were the big brothers in the band that that time. But Mulgrew had so much together, that you had to, for me if you had any sense you had to look to him for guidance."

"Those guys who are, every moment, they're reacting and moving the music around. People say being in a jazz band is like being on a basketball team. I liken it to being in a school of fish that just moves in unison, when you're with a great band, with great musicians who have so much talent, it's an understanding of a lot of music, and then maybe it's ESP, extra-sensory perception. I don't know how we do that, but when we get on the same page like that, it seems that Mulgrew was even advanced in that."

"Just every time that I was around Mulgrew, he brought out the best in me, and really I felt like we were really connected when we got back together on some later records that I did, on a few of the Nagel Heyer records and also on the Impulse Records. Actually he played on a lot of my records, when I finally started getting some decent record dates. So all of the stuff – I think there's two records on Impulse he played on, and then maybe three or four records on Nagel Heyer. I remember one, we did like a hip hop record, *Freestyle*, well, hip-hop influenced, and I asked him to play keyboards. And as much as he knows, he's such a giving person. He said, 'I'm going to buy a Rhodes, and I'm going to practice, I'm going to get it. When I come I'm going to be ready for you, Donald.' He also had that side of him, where, whatever you were thinking of, he wanted to help you to do that. Because, you know, he played acoustic piano, but at that point, when I said I wanted the electric piano, he just changed modes to try to get whatever I was thinking. He wanted to come in and do the best that he could, and that's really a great heart, to me."

"At that point I feel maybe I had matured enough to be really in the pocket with Mulgrew on a lot of it. Right now I would really like to play with him now, because I've matured even more. You like to make those connections with the people who have influenced you and that maybe you've had a little influence on as well, later on maybe in my career. I wanted to be around him to have him on the records. He always added so much to any situation, and of course he added a lot to those he, uh showed us different things that we could do with the music while we were playing. It was always about unlocking possibilities and every time you played with him you heard more possibilities, and hopefully at that point we were sharing possibilities. Right now I wish I could share those

(Donald Harrison continued)

possibilities with him. When I learned that he had left us, that was a tremendous blow to what could have happened creativity wise with Mulgrew, and then missing him as a human being – all those things. I have to just remember the things that I understood he was working on, and expound them, keep that in my psyche and expound upon it.”

“First of all Mulgrew was just the calmest person, and always having a good time. He had good spirits, and never had anything bad to say about anybody. Always looked for the positive in people. So those are traits that I looked to – I used to tell him all the time, ‘I want to be like you,’ and he’d be, ‘No, don’t be like me, be like you.’ And I’d say, ‘No, if anybody’s looking for me you’re showing them the way.’ And of course he was a great family man. So those are all things that I aspired to be more like him with, and just a fair person. Everybody he came around, they loved him. I would get angry that the critics didn’t talk about him as much, because I knew how much of an influence he was. All of the young pianists were talking about Mulgrew, and things that they got from him. And even some of the horn players like myself, we would say, ‘Oh yeah, you need to check that stuff that Mulgrew’s playing,’ and we would be talking about him. So I don’t think that they really got that he was such a huge influence on so many people. Although he was, ‘Oh relax man, don’t worry.’ He was just as calm as ever. It was like the last thing on his mind. He was trying to be the best musician he could, and playing with I guess the people that he liked to play with, and a great human being. One funny point about my relationship with Mulgrew – James Williams was involved with this too – we used to have these discussions on who was the countryest person, or the country-est city. He would tell me that New Orleans was country-er than Greenwood, and James would say, Greenwood and New Orleans were country-er than Memphis, so we would always go back and forth. And he came up with something, that I was the kind of the alligator races here in New Orleans, and I told him that he used to have a pet possum, which he really did, in Greenwood, for awhile. Everybody would be laughing, because we would go on and on about who was the country-est person. (laughing)”

“He would tell the corniest jokes in the world, like if you were sitting at a table, he would pick up his glass and move it across the table, and he would say, ‘My cup runneth over.’ And then he would say, ‘Corn feeds half the world, corn feeds half the world.’ He would walk up to you and say, ‘It’s Miller Time.’ It was so funny. He came up with corniest jokes, and he would say, ‘Corn feeds half the world.’”

“Just get up there and play from your heart, and try to touch somebody with it.”

“When he plays it just grabs you in the heart, just grabs your heart, and massages your soul. You feel good after you hear Mulgrew. His trio was so beautiful, wow. Everything he did, the trio with Ron Carter, stuff with Tony Williams, everybody he played with, he added so much to it. That’s my guy, man, that’s my guy. He came up when we were playing, I was playing with this young pianist, Victor Gould, who’s playing with Wallace Roney now and turning into a phenom, but at that point he was in the band, and Mulgrew came up. I mentioned to Mulgrew, just tell him anything that can help him. And he was

(Donald Harrison continued)

so gracious, and fortunately Victor Gould was open and they shared a lot of information. We played a week at the Blue Note, his band and my band, so that was another great experience, hearing his great trio every night and sitting there with my pianist and my guys and telling them, 'Listen to what he's doing and listen to this,' and having them understand. So many great nights with him."

"He wrote so many great songs and brought so much to the table as a composer. He was like the Monk of our generation. You hear a song he wrote and think, 'Okay,' but you get inside of it, you're in some treacherous water harmonically, the way he moves stuff around was just so advanced for any of us at the time. His understanding of harmony was so advanced. Every once in awhile he would say, 'You know, pianists have a lot of understanding of harmony.' And I would say, 'Yeah, you know you do.' Another level, his understanding of harmony. His songs are very difficult, and on the edge of what's going on."

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"I remember Mulgrew used to talk about playing those long 'snakes' on the piano, and wiping the piano, like being able to play so fast, having the technical facility so advanced that it looked like you were cleaning, you know, wiping the piano instead of playing. He could do all of that stuff, so anything he could think of could come out like it was nothing. I think he studied with Madame Chaloff in Boston, well. He showed me some of those techniques that he was employing on the piano, the things to practice. I've always been a guy who asks a lot of questions, because I wanted to have the right information. Maybe that's the thing that makes me a decent teacher now, because I'm able to say, 'Mulgrew showed me this. I was watching McCoy and he was doing this.'"

Speaking of Mulgrew Miller and Kenny Kirkland... "People don't realize those were the two big guys on piano that a lot of people looked up to."

Educators

David Demsey, Professor of Music & Coordinator of Jazz Studies,
William Paterson University of New Jersey

“As an onstage performer, it could be said that the toughest role for any jazz musician was to be the soloist who had to follow Mulgrew Miller! That said – having Mulgrew as your accompanist often felt like working with a mind reader. At the end of your solo, you might ask yourself, ‘How did he take me to such a beautiful place?’

Since we lost him, I have often wondered just that about our partnership in leading the William Paterson University Jazz Program: how did Professor Mulgrew Miller take our students to such an amazing artistic and musical level in his eight years as our Jazz Studies Director? Not many people realize that Mulgrew taught at the same high level as his stellar musicianship. Perhaps he taught at that level because he cared at that level.

Mulgrew often spoke warmly about his childhood in Greenwood, his family and his musical upbringing there. It was obvious to me that his Greenwood roots were the source of his beautiful, caring attitude toward his students, his colleagues and his friends.

Mulgrew Miller will always be one of the world’s great pianists. His greatness was recognized early on, when one of his first major professional associations was with the Ellington Orchestra, sitting in the piano chair of the legendary Duke Ellington only two years after Duke’s death. He went on to play with a who’s-who of jazz greats, including Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, trumpeter Woody Shaw, drummer Tony Williams, bassist Ron Carter, and his own Trio and six-piece group Wingspan. Not long before he passed away, he told me that he had just made his 50th tour of Japan!

But, with all of this worldwide renown and fame, not a hint of that ever came out as ego when he took time to work with his University students. He was always humble, always in that moment, giving his best to help that student get better and grow, person to person.

It is of my life’s great honors to have known and taught alongside Mulgrew Miller. The wonderful personality that grew out of his Greenwood roots now belongs to the world, and I am proud that his William Paterson students are among his greatest legacy.”

Dr. Bill Bares, Professor of Music/Piano/Jazz Studies, UNC-Asheville
Recorded January 6, 2015

“I feel like I’ve gotten into Mulgrew more the past four years as someone who feels like he knows more about jazz now (laughs). There’s people like Tommy Flanagan and Mulgrew and Cedar Walton to some extent, Barry Harris, these people for me, piano player wise, they’re for grown-ups. They’re for people who already understand and have already gone through their chick phase, their Keith Jarrett phase, their Bill Evans phase, their Oscar Peterson phase. Then you ask, well what else is out there, and then you start looking at these guys, and Mulgrew is one of those guys. Couldn’t ask for a better piano player. His voicings are just incredible, his intros, his outtros are great, his sense of swing is just as deep and as groovy as you can get, and he had a total command of the whole history. And from all accounts he was a great guy – I met him once. And a great educator.”

Greenwood roots

Albert Harrison, Mulgrew's piano teacher in Greenwood

Interviewed 3-25-15

"I taught him basically, piano, classical music, and he was able to come up with a very unique jazz technique as a result of having had technical training in his early years. I know people have talked about how smooth he played, and his technique, and he was just a very talented young man. And I often asked him, 'What did I do?' He was just so smart. And he said, 'You inspired me, and then the technique that you taught me, I was able to employ some of those techniques to my jazz skills.

He was an exceptional student. He lost his father at an early age, and I agreed to teach him free of charge. But he was such a responsible person, he made plans to pay me for his own piano lessons, which was only \$2.

I don't try to get all the credit for his success, because there were other people in his career that inspired him, as well as his parents."

Beverly Harrison, Mulgrew's Sunday School teacher in Greenwood

"I did teach him in Sunday School, at Decell Methodist Church, and even at that age he was just, um, an outstanding personality. I knew he was going to be successful. He had an outstanding personality. He was a people person. I remember in Sunday School one little girl was giving me problems, and he stood up and he told her that was wrong, that was not a Christian attitude. And I forget the exact age, but I'm thinking he was probably second or third grade. And I never will forget that. He just stood up for what was right, even if he was the only one."

Dr. Alphonso Sanders, Chair of Fine Arts, Mississippi Valley State
University

Interviewed on 3-30-15

“Mulgrew and I used to talk at least once a week on his drive to work from Pennsylvania up to New Jersey. We even consulted on our jobs, cause I took a chair position here at Valley State years before Mulgrew considered – you know, when James Patterson (Williams?) passed, that kind of led Mulgrew to a different side of music, because he was asked to chair that department, the jazz studies thing. And he and James were so close, along with Donald Brown and the other guys, but we’d talk about that, and I just gave him my best advice. But he turned out to be not only a great player, but he was motivating administrator as he took that job on. People might not even know that side of his life, but he certainly contributed a lot to jazz music.”

“We had the idea to put together, with him coming back here and recording nothing but blues and ballads. We were going to do them really from the Delta/Mississippi side, you know. And of course we started the collaboration, and he had an early stroke, I don’t know if you knew this. He had an early stroke, and he never could get one of his fingers the way he thought it should be, and he didn’t want to record. He said, ‘Man, I just can’t record with this finger,’ and I talked to him about some other guys. He just didn’t want to do it, you know, cause he had seen like when Parker wasn’t at his best and he recorded, and the guys – he started naming people that recorded that weren’t at their best, and he didn’t want to do it. And so he got better, and then...as we got closer to doing it, he uh, got sick again, he got sick again, man. So it never did take place, and I don’t know if I could find any – I might have some live stuff that we did when I was at another university here, at Delta State, and I’m not sure. A lot of that stuff was on like ADAT tapes and stuff. But you know, Mulgrew recorded so much stuff you don’t need nothing else but what’s out there (laughs). I think the last time we thought about it, shoot, he was on about 600 recordings man. That’s a lot of recordings. I was telling Mulgrew, ‘Man, that’s a lot of recordings, man.’ But we were really close in many ways, and like I said, we talked a lot. And I’m quite sure his connections with me were probably more rooted, like just culturally we kind of knew each other through people, and we met and kept that cultural thing alive, you know, that southern thing that we have. And a lot of his other acquaintances were probably more music associates, you know. Like I said, there are a lot of stories. He read the paper – he never did miss reading the paper, the local Greenwood paper, he never missed it.”