

DAVE BURRELL

INTERVIEW WITH CLIFFORD ALLEN

15th July 2004

Am I correct in thinking you were born in Ohio?

That's correct.

But you were raised in Hawaii.

Partly. I was raised there after being born in my grandparents' house in Middletown, Ohio, which is right on the Kentucky border. My mom and dad and I moved to the Harlem River Apartments in New York because my dad got a job with Shell Oil. Both parents were graduates of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. After my dad started with Shell Oil, we settled into Harlem and I was there till I was about four and a half. They said we lived under Ella Fitzgerald while she was working with Chick Webb, and my parents would go dancing at the Savoy. But the most interesting part about it was that Ella used to practice in her kitchen and we could hear it in our kitchen. Everybody back in the '40s didn't quite know what she was doing (the laypeople in the building were not all that hip to jazz and scatting), so a lot of people were complaining about it.

My dad bought a service station and went in with a partner so we all moved to Cleveland in our twelve-cylinder Packard. I started school at Western Reserve (it wasn't Case Western then). In Cleveland we lived in the projects, and the projects were brand new and we didn't know that the projects would be what they have now become. I was into a whole different lifestyle, being in the snow and having a great time. My dad was politically active, and he was an officer in the Urban League. He met some Japanese Americans from Honolulu, and they kept telling him about the injustices done to their people, the same situation that's happening to the Arab Americans now in internment camps. They became very close friends of my dad and Simion Booker, the news anchor (he was in Fisk with them). [Booker] had a Japanese girlfriend from Honolulu that he wanted to marry, and that was his reason for going [to Hawaii]. My dad wanted to write his sociology thesis on Honolulu and the melting pot of the Pacific.

So we all drove cross-country in the Packard; this would've been 1946. When we got there, I didn't want to leave because I didn't have to wear shoes to school. I was having a good time, just hanging with the adults at this community center with an international buzz. It was post-World War 2, and people from all over the world were in transit, and it was a cool time for me as a kid because I was finally involved in all the activities at the center, including swimming and judo and music. Then what happened was there was a series of trips back to Middletown, Ohio or Alexandria, Louisiana (where my dad is from - he grew up in New Orleans at a Catholic boarding school). So I kept coming back and forth, and I had a busy time as a commuter as a kid.

Were you playing an instrument at this time or not?

I was playing piano by ear, and I loved to play boogie-woogie. That turned into R&B in the '50s when I first heard Fats Domino and Jerry Lee Lewis. I used to play on TV every week. My mom encouraged me. She was in the radio business and she had her own jazz show, and sometimes people would be invited to dinner, like Nancy Wilson and the Delta Rhythm Boys. My mom and dad sang Negro spirituals and Hawaiian songs, and they were both in the Honolulu Community Theatre, so there was theatre stuff going on, remakes of Broadway musicals. In particular I remember Oklahoma, Paint Your Wagon, Kismet, and South Pacific. So at least twice a week there were rehearsals for theatre productions and parties and heated political debates with celebrities that were gigging in Hawaii and going on to the Far East, in particular Tempest Storm and Herb Jeffries.

It sounds like you were pretty well surrounded by music at this point, then.

Oh yeah, and my parents' jazz collection.

And you went to school at the University of Hawaii.

Yes, for two years, before going on to the Berklee School of Music. Before that I was in the Coast Guard, stationed in California, in Alameda on Governor's Island. So I was snooping around the Blackhawk and sat in a couple of times. At the University of Hawaii I was a music major, but all they had was music education. I wasn't getting what I needed, so I went to Berklee. [When I got there] Quincy Jones was graduating, and I was much inspired by hearing his charts being played down in the basement. I was also impressed by Gary Burton and the way he and the upperclassmen were studying the music. In the dormitories it was pretty evident who was really serious about the music; Gary and his crowd were seniors, and they were bolder than we were - I was just getting started with Sonny Sharrock, Ted Daniel, and those people. I immediately saw that it had to be all or nothing at all; you couldn't just practice sometimes. I had to really study very, very hard and that's how I got the bug.

Were you gigging around at all?

I put a group together with Pete Minger, a trumpet player who was later with Basie. He was with me at a number of different gigs in Boston. Before they called it the 'combat district', there was a place called Louie's Lounge and there they had people like Aretha Franklin. I was music director for the house band, and we had music students from all over the States in this band, an international set. There was also an after-hours place called the Businessman's Club on Massachusetts Avenue; we went there with a quartet or a quintet, and sometimes Cat Anderson would sit in. I remember when we brought Tommy Flanagan over to the school to do some workshops, and I got to meet and hear him. I brought Elvin [Jones] and McCoy [Tyner] over, and also Yusef Lateef and Wes Montgomery. It became a regular procedure to see who was over at the Jazz Workshop or George Wein's club, and try to bring them over to the school.

At this point, were you still involved with boogie-woogie, stride, and early piano styles or chiefly modern piano?

I had begun really doing modern [style] because I had heard Ornette, and we were just really into playing free. Even though during school we were playing traditionally or inside, because that was the form of knowledge that was hammered into us on a daily basis, we would have [our own] sessions. The senior at these sessions was Sam Rivers, and Sam would teach me the changes and the alternative changes to a lot of the standards that I didn't know about - like "How Deep is the Ocean," for example. At the end of the session, we'd say 'let's play free' and we'd turn off the lights and everybody would just start playing. I think everybody in Berklee that was active at the sessions was into that extra thing.

This was with Sonny Sharrock and Norris Jones (Sirone)?

Norris wasn't up there, but Gene Perla was, and Bobby Kapp, and so many musicians. The sessions had started to include whoever was in town, too, like [drummer] Tony Williams. I often practised with [pianists] Mike Nock and Hal Galper. I had this room off of Boylston Street called 905 where I had a specially rebuilt upright piano that I had inherited from one of the tenants. That was the place where we would jam with the space heater (laughs). That was a good learning experience!

Did you have much contact with Lowell Davidson while in Boston?

I had sort of a sweep with all the major scholars and educators, and took lessons from Dr. George Brambilla who was also teaching Keith Jarrett. His studio was right next to the drummer Alan Dawson's, and all the drummers would be sitting outside in the hall playing paradiddles while Keith was having his lesson - of course, he was very advanced even back then. I could look through the window and see both of them at different pianos playing duets. Then it was my lesson after that, and so I would always be inspired by being in the hall with the drummers and watching Keith jamming.

You always intended to move to New York.

Yes, we always talked about when we finished Berklee how we would go on the scene. In my junior year, I went and checked it out and I somehow ended up at the loft of Roger Blank and [Charles] Tolliver on Allen Street, and Archie Shepp was rehearsing his Fire Music. Everybody on that date was there, and I was just sitting and listening to them rehearsing. I asked Shepp if he wanted to play some blues; there was a piano in the other room, and Archie and I jammed for a little while. Then I think I said to Shepp, 'I'll see you next year.'

The next year, I came down to the Bowery and got a duplex loft on Bond Street and 2nd, right across from what was in the '70s the Tin Palace (this was '65). Once I moved there, I thought I could be in the shit, right in the middle of the free jazz movement as you know, and Grachan Moncur III came by with Marion Brown and said 'I've got a gig for you at Slug's during the Winter Festival.' I said OK, this is August so maybe by December I can do that. Gil Evans and Elvin came by, saying 'oh, we just want to hear you guys play.' Valerie Wilmer came by too, and said 'I'm doing a story on the music and just want to be here for a while.'

So your loft kind of became a center of activity at the time.

Yes, Paul Bley wanted to use it for rehearsals; Shepp came by with [John] Coltrane and wanted to use it for his rehearsals. But the very first gig was probably with Grachan.

That led to that record date, Juba-lee.

That's right, that was the first date I did, with Grachan and Marion Brown. Maybe by '66 I had moved to East 3rd Street, and I started to work seriously with Pharoah Sanders (even though we only did that one record, Tauhid). We were gigging a lot in the city.

And you were part of that regular rhythm section with Bobby Kapp and Sirone at that time.

Yes, we were working on the West Side Story music at that period, and we kept going with that for what seemed like a good year. Finally Alan Douglas said 'okay, let's do it.'

How did you decide to do that as your first major recording [High, issued by Douglas in 1968]?

It was just the project that was on the table; I was fascinated with Bernstein as a composer, and I had heard the Oscar Peterson version and I thought I could do a freer version of it. When I bought the score, I felt immediately challenged and just wanted to get to the end of it. I really liked the music, and so that was on the front burner along with things Pharoah was doing with Coltrane and bringing back. He was telling me what he was doing in that group, and wanting me to do when I played with him, which was sort of stretching out in the way of Nicholas Slonimsky's Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns. This is the book that has many different kinds of scales from all over the world. Miles Davis and John Coltrane, Gil Evans, they were all fascinated and studied from this book. We were deeply into the book, Pharoah and I, playing on a daily basis.

Does your playing clusters on something like "East Side Colors" come out of that book?

That was always something different, and it's what separates the 'outside' from the 'inside,' so to speak. When you hear the medleys that Pharoah strung together you hear something that's very basic, like a chant, and in the energy playing that went over the top of it, my role was to hold the rhythm down and have this repetition and have the soloist go free.

Would it be fair to say that what you were doing [with clusters] was a superimposition of scales on top of one another?

Yes, that is correct. Exactly. Sometimes these directions just started to poke out, and when we'd listen back to the material, we'd think 'oh, this is how it's working.' We'd put it in a different context, and wonder 'could I ever do that again?' What was really interesting was that Giuseppi Logan had a gig, and he was playing 5/4. Not since Dave Brubeck's "Take Five" with Paul Desmond had 5/4 sprung up. Now Giuseppi put it in an avant-garde context, and

it was mysterious. He asked me to play it, vamping in the 5/4, and he and whoever else was soloing would go across all the borders without any concern for what I was doing. I'm holding this 5/4 down, and that gave me a whole bunch of ideas for the pianist's role in these avant-garde groups, since Ornette hadn't really been nailed down in terms of keyboards. Shepp didn't have any piano, at least when he first broke out there, and there was only really Cecil inspiring the young pianists who were coming up.

But he was very different.

He was, but still I remember from Boston hearing Cecil play "This Nearly Was Mine," the Richard Rodgers piece, that he had elongated. He had taken a motif that was probably from the first eight bars and started to interpolate it, just waltzing away into freedom. When I heard that, I thought 'here's a standard that I can recognize, and I can follow the thread.' I was really fascinated with the entire rhythm section; I think Denis Charles was on it, Shepp and Buell [Neidlinger] too. So that was sort of close to the way that I felt about going 'outside'.

There was a melodic role, as well as a rhythmic one, but keeping the pulse when people were taking it 'out' was something that pianists hadn't had to do up until this point. How did you reconcile the way you played 'free' with the earlier pianistic styles that you were working on? How did they come together for you?

I was in the *Thesaurus of Scales* one day practicing, and came across a pentatonic scale. I wanted to compose something from that scale, and it turned out to be "Margie Pargie," the ragtime piece. But I wasn't thinking of it as ragtime; I was thinking when I wrote it that I wanted to play this song by myself as a soloist. How am I going to make it swing? The only way to do that was to play stride. So then, after I did it and got Sirone to play with me, I thought 'this is not the regular stride; this is an avant-garde piece with a pentatonic scale,' but it still had that that old-fashioned stride rhythm. [Sirone] was playing free, just sort of dancing around on top of it, inside the notes. Kapp was playing just a ride cymbal, and we had this synthesis. The producer was over listening and saying 'that's it, I like that.' Whatever it came out to be, it was just me making an attempt at a new composition that started off as a solo piece.

Then, later on I met this producer who said 'I really like that rag you wrote.' I wasn't really thinking I had written a rag. So then, as I got further into the decade, I met more historians and more critics that were asking me to explain what I was doing, and I think finally Sam Charters said he heard something in my playing that he'd heard in Jelly Roll Morton's playing, and was I interested or did I know about him, and I said I only knew a little bit. Then he brought me up to date.

I remember Charli Persip told me something that stuck with me. I was passing out some brochures I'd made up in Detroit for this opera I was doing with Roy Brooks and Curtis Fuller and Marcus Belgrave. One of our artist friends had made a brochure for us with the word 'Revolution' written on the front, and I passed it out to Persip and he said 'How are you going to make something new if you don't know what came before?' That stuck with me, and I thought that before I go any further out, let me go back and make sure I have a very sound foundation. That was what I was always worried about - just being very, very sure of the tradition.

How did you get overseas a few years later?

The first time was to the Pan-African festival in Algiers with an all-star group that Archie Shepp had put together with Alan Silva, Sunny Murray, Grachan Moncur III, and we met the trumpet player Clifford Thornton there. From there the French media folks were connected to the people at BYG records, and they told us to come back to Paris and record. So after that phenomenon in Algiers, I got a chance to play on a lot of my colleagues' dates and of course two of my own.

How did the reception in France differ from that in New York?

It was much better. It wasn't so much that it was different from bebop and therefore it was bad; it was more like it's different from bebop and therefore it's interesting. It was impressive [to the French] because they thought 'these guys are angry, they seem to be rebelling against the system and we know your country has just passed integration, and we want to see what you guys are all about.'

You were there not long after the riots.

Sure, right. It was just another take on avant-garde art, and it was refreshing to us New Yorkers and the Chicago AACM/Art Ensemble people, who seemed to be right there for us to fuse with. So those sessions there became just grab-bags and parties a lot of the time. Philly Joe and Hank Mobley, Don Byas, Memphis Slim, people of those generations were just sitting in sidewalk cafes on a daily basis. Even if they were not always participating, they were always interested in the music, and the avant-garde revolution had some electricity that New York had not allowed to flare up as much.

It seems like expatriate beboppers in France and in Europe were more interested in the new music than their counterparts in the US.

I think they were. I think that over there in Western Europe, if you went to any American event in Paris— Say if I played in Montparnasse, I would see Kenny Clarke there and Steve Lacy, or I could be playing with Sam Woodyard in duets. We gathered because in some strange way we were all homesick, and we wanted to be around other Americans with our European friends. It became that you just went wherever the gig was, and you found other Americans that you could hang with. That included scientists and intellectuals as well as artists.

You eventually came back to the States. Obviously it wasn't all smiles over there.

After the first big wallop of success, I didn't want to become a local. I had a very good run for a while, a month maybe, and then when I ran out of money I came home and it was the same old same old. But I had a way of getting plane tickets, so I did some more recordings and ended up doing stuff with members of the Art Ensemble in Germany. But the basic thing is that I think that everybody of my generation was over there looking for financial stability, and it was fleeting all the time. I met people like Don Cherry who had a Volkswagen van, and he'd say 'okay, I'm driving up to Scandinavia tonight.' I thought 'wow, he's just going wherever the gigs are.' That's something I did a little bit, but I was grounded in New York and always wanted to come back. I found that if I came back quicker, I would save more money, and it was easy over there (even back then) to spend what you make.

How did opera come into it?

I was always told as a kid that the highest art form was opera, and my mother had started a guild called the Windward Opera Guild in Oahu. She was an opera singer and had studied voice, and my dad had too. I thought 'wouldn't it be great if I had improvising opera singers.' A lot of people at the time were saying 'yeah, right.' I was thinking of the ways the human voice could float and the horn could float, and I just got a little smidgen of that with Hilda Harris from the Met. I was not socially compatible with the Opera scene in New York, so I had to do a lot of homework on my own. But I'm still in that mode and would like to continue it; I have several improvising singers at the moment who are 'underground,' and we've done some workshops.

How did Windward Passages come about? I know it's very historically-based.

Monika [Larsson, Burrell's partner] and I were in Waikiki hanging out at a disco where the Lakers would visit in between games, and she managed this place called Strawberry Circus down the street from Nick's Fish Market. I said 'I want to write an opera about my childhood in Hawaii' and she said 'oh, I'd like to do the libretto.' She was married to a physicist who is a friend of mine as well, and somehow after they broke up, Monika and I moved to New York and I wrote the overture before I left Waikiki. She's a poet, and she started to write in poetry what I had told her about the statehood celebration in 1959, and we put three acts together. We got obsessed with it; we were building it together and I was shaping the music. We generated a lot of interest, and somehow between Hawaii, New York and Paris, Steve Lacy called Werner Uehlinger from Hat Hut Records. Werner said 'we'll do a concert and you can just play what you've got so far,' and that's how it really started. I'm still working on it. I've put another spin on it and changed a lot of it around, and it's now more friendly to this decade.

What are the prospects for getting it performed by a full company?

Well, I'd need a quarter of a million dollars— (laughs) That's what's kind of holding me from devoting all of my attention to it now. I feel like I can get those grants further down the road, because it eats up a lot of money. The gaps in between working on it were really necessary not only from the financial standpoint, but that it's just one facet of many.

You're also working on some strictly-composed music now.

Right, for the Full Blown Trio with William Parker and Andrew Cyrille; we just finished recording Expansion for High Two. When that came about, I wrote the piece "Expansion" and was trying to figure out exactly how to solo on it because it had nine lives before we even went on tour. I was messing with it and changing it around, so a lot of what I've been writing now is on that CD.

So "Expansion" is something that wouldn't necessarily have been improvised on.

No, it wouldn't have been improvised on. In a piano solo version, it would have just been played in its 13/8 time, and then I realized on tour that everybody was exhausted mentally from playing this 13/8 every night. By the time we got to the studio, we'd all got sort of 13/8-ed out, and the solo section that was going to be in 13/8 I eliminated and put in a different feel altogether.

What are your forthcoming projects?

We're doing things in Philadelphia, My manager Mark Christman and I, and the Full Blown Trio will be at the Equinox Festival in Boston and Cambridge this fall. I play regularly at the Art Alliance, and I will be there this fall with a Cuban ensemble that I'm putting together, and also at the art museum with an African ensemble. I will go to Milan with Roswell Rudd and Archie Shepp in November, and I plan to probably do a lot more regional solo work, including the upgrade of the Jelly Roll Morton repertoire that I did recently at Slought Foundation (in West Philadelphia), which sold out. Mark suggested that that also be one way of presenting me. When I play at the Art Alliance I play jazz standards and when it's a concert at the University of Pennsylvania it would definitely be free playing.

How do "Echo" and "Peace" fit in for you now, with what you've done since the original recording?

There's a hardcore avant-garde audience at the Vision Festival, and the Festival had been asking about the music, as it had been reissued several times. Mark said, 'why don't you put together an Echo-Peace Continuum,' and I wrote about it in Signal to Noise. I speculated about it, and when the opportunity came up, I got Sabir Mateen and Steve Lehman, and William Hooker and William Parker. We did a full blowout concert at this last festival, and that's being edited and mixed now. We kind of scared ourselves when we heard about how it came off. Some people ran out, some people said 'chaos,' some people said 'oh, it's like a painting and I can't wait to hear it back.' My feeling was that it was stronger, and Alan Silva gave me a hug and said 'You did it, you did it!', sort of like I topped the old one. We felt afterward that we were so spent and exhausted, and I need to hear it again to know where to go with it next. I feel that if we had to do it on tour, it might be a bit too much.

Does it feel different playing a blowout like that now than it did in 1969?

Yes, it does. I felt like I was a lot stronger than I was then, and a lot more able to take the music where I wanted it to go and not just let it happen. I felt in 1969 not that it was an accident, but more that the spirituality took over. I didn't blur with the pedal this last time - I chose not to - and I really did study what was done originally and tried to improve on it. I didn't know [what to think] when I looked up and saw the front line, I saw them crouching like tigers. They were totally in outer space somewhere, and I thought we could just go on forever. It was like it was our last day on Earth.