

Horace Parlan Interview: 16 October 2000

Q: It was your association with the Blue Note label that brought you to the attention of the jazz world, your first recordings as a leader were with a trio — *Movin' & Groovin'* and *Us Three* — back in 1960 and you went on to record, I think, another five albums for the label. How did it all begin and what are your recollections of those days?

HP: Well, of course you know the history of the company, it was started by the two Jews, Alfred Lion and Frank Wolf, back in '39, they came to America fortunately just before the out break of the war, Second World War. They were two men who liked jazz very much, in other words they weren't so much interested in making money as they were in producing good music, and for a lot of years they didn't make a lot of money! Anyway, they started the company and recorded in most cases the music they liked. Of course, the label became popular later on but it was always high quality music. When I came into it, it was in the late Fifties, it was '59, I made a couple of records with Lou Donaldson. The thing I liked it was it was always a very relaxed atmosphere in the studio and also the way the studio was set up, technically we used to do it in a way almost like when you set up to play on a bandstand in a club. It made it much more relaxed in comparison to today's methods where everybody is separated in boxes and you can't see each other and you have to use headphones all the time. It creates better music the other way — anyway, I made the two records with Lou and afterwards he recommended to Alfred,

thought it would be a good idea if I was to start to record things under my own name, they were also keen with the idea and that's actually how it started with me and Blue Note.

Q: You started with two trio albums, but the group with the two Turrentine brothers, Tommy and Stanley, you never played in public?

HP: No, we never actually played in public. I played in public with Stanley and that actually was a recording, that was at Minton's — *Live at Mintons* — but otherwise it was very seldom because at the time we were doing this, both Tommy and Stanley were members of Max Roach's quintet. Actually, it was a quartet, because there was no piano, so the opportunity for us to play together — we played more together in my hometown [of Pittsburgh] than we did in New York! There were more opportunities there for that, and later at the, well, New York is the kind of place everybody gets separated sooner or later because it's a question of survival, actually, you take the jobs that come, and sometimes it doesn't always work out that you play together. I played with Tommy, together with Lou Donaldson, in a quintet context for a while and that was also the beginning of my association with George Tucker and Al Harewood, [that came together on *Us Three*] who were also in that same group and that coincided with the fact that I was beginning to record for Blue Note as a leader.

Q: Where was your main income from in those days?

HP: It was coming from touring with various groups and I was also beginning to record not only for Blue Note but as a sideman for some other companies. I made recordings with, for example, I made recordings with Dexter Gordon, and for other labels with Clark Terry — actually those recordings were under another name, the drummer Dave Bailey had put together a group for some recordings on a label called Epic which was a subsidiary of Columbia, I recorded a couple of things for them, I was touring, and freelancing around New York, playing with different people. I did a few gigs with Coleman Hawkins, a couple of singers such as Irene Krall, for example, and that's the way it was going — occasionally a Monday night jam session at Birdland or one of the other clubs in Harlem, like Smalls Paradise or Count Basie's, it was an active time.

Q: A very creative time but then we had the rise of rock music.

HP: Well, that really changed the whole thing, especially after the mid-Sixties, for me at least, it began to go downhill, that was part of the reason I eventually left, but that's another story.

Q: You left in '72?

HP: I left in '72.

Q: Was it just the work situation?

HP: Well it was partly that, partly social, I could feel a rise of overt racism over there, also the fact that socially the atmosphere had changed, there was a lot of crime in the streets, the increase of drugs, I actually was mugged twice over a two year period, not physically, just robbed on the streets, once by some teenagers and later, a couple of years later, the same thing happened again on a street in Harlem. That actually was what triggered my decision, I decided it was time to leave. Try and get into a more constructive atmosphere.

Q: And what made you choose Denmark?

HP: I visited Denmark when I was on a Scandinavian tour with the South African singer Miriam Makeba in 1970. We finished the tour in Denmark in Copenhagen, we were supposed to do a couple of concerts there but they were both cancelled because she had some throat problems, so I had five days to go around and more or less check out the scene, the local scene. At that time the old Montmartre Club was thriving, actually, there was a lot happening and also there was a kind of colony of American musicians who were living there at that time: Dexter Gordon, Ben Webster, Kenny Drew, Sahib Shihab, all of whom I knew and all of whom I had played with — not of course Kenny, I knew Kenny personally — I had played with the others already in the States at one point or another, and to me it seemed like a good place and that's why I decided that if I should make a move, that would probably be the place to go and that's the way it turned out. Actually, it was the widow of Ernie Wilkins the arranger, her

name at that time was Jenny Armstrong and she was a booking agent and arranged some things for me to do over here in Denmark also a couple of other tours in Europe, and then in the meantime I met my wife here — well, that's also a great part of the reason I'm here!

Q: The recordings you did after you moved to Denmark, they were with the Steeplechase label.

HP: Yes, that's right.

Q: What ones stick in your mind?

HP: OK. Actually the first one that comes to mind was the very last one I did for Steeplechase, that was a quintet recording with Thad Jones and Eddie Harris and a Danish rhythm section called *Glad I Found You*.

Q: How many albums did you make for Steeplechase?

HP: To tell you the truth, I think it was seven — I actually can't remember, I did two solo recordings, three quintet recordings, a trio recording with guitar with Doug Raney, there was another trio, two other trio recordings that's more than seven, must be seven or eight, can't remember exactly now...

Q: After Steeplechase there were a lot of sessions, for different European independents weren't there?

HP: Last year I did a solo album for a label called Storyville called *Voyage of Rediscovery*, it got a pretty good response and yes, I made a couple of other recordings for labels in Europe, a trio recording in Munich in a place called the Domicile, with Alvin Queen and Reggie Johnson back in the beginning of the Eighties, I also did a quartet for a label in Italy called Soul Note and that was with a European band, with Per Goldschmidt [baritone sax], Klavs Hovman [bass] and I think, Massimo De Majo [drums] called *Little Esther*, quite a few actually.

Q: What I wanted to ask you is the contention about European and American rhythm sections.

HP: There may have been a time, actually there was a time that I felt it in the first years that I was here, in the years that I have been here the gap has kind of closed, in other words it's actually difficult for me to hear the difference between an American rhythm section and a European rhythm section these days. I guess probably the weakest point in some European rhythm sections is the drummer, but I think the quality of European rhythm sections has risen to a very high level, actually.

Q: I think a lot of Americans are not aware of what is going on Europe; every large city has something going for it, an active scene

HP: Yeah, right. Just here in Denmark the number of confident — very confident — bass players is incredible, there's quite so many, there's a bass a tradition here in Denmark, any number of very fine players

Q: Neils Henning Ørsted Pedersen is a great example

HP: Well, he is the star, but there others who for me are equally as good, I think so

Q: What about Don's film, how did that come about

HP: I was approached by Don McGlynn, he's a film maker who has been making documentaries for the last fifteen years or so, and he, I don't know how he happened to choose me, although I guess he talked with an American, a young — well he's fifty years old! — an American from San Francisco called Steve Schein who has had a record shop in Copenhagen called Steve's Books and Records, but now he's starting to branch out into other fields and he was actually the co-producer on it, he spoke to Don about me and Don came to hear me in a club in Copenhagen. I was playing an afternoon concert with the same duo that's on the video and he was very impressed, and immediately said he's like to do this and he contacted the sponsors and said it's no problem,

Celia Mingus, and they, we went ahead ahead with the project, it's as simple as that really.

Q: You must be very pleased with it, I was amazed how vibrant your playing was, you're 69

HP: 69, yes, don't remind me!

Q: Sorry! But I have to say you're playing has still got that rhythmic attack which has always been a hallmark of your style...

HP: I'll be 70 in January, a Capricorn.

Q: Ah, same as me. Just to sort of wind things up, perhaps you can talk about the main areas of activity over the years, an overview of your European career

HP: Well I guess you could say it's a career again of continual freelancing, I haven't had a group that works all the time since I freelance a lot. I've done a lot of festivals and concerts and solo and a lot of things in duo with Archie Shepp, we worked together for approximately 15 years doing concerts, doing duo and quartet, and the only reason I'm not doing it now because I have given up doing long tours because of my health, so I'm concentrating mostly on concerts now and recordings. The last thing I did with Archie was last June [1999] — we played at the Montreal festival, but that's one of the main things



I have have done, as I say, it's been playing festivals and playing solo, a few trio things, I've also done some teaching — I just did a Workshop in Sweden in a town called Gothenburg, just a few days ago – that pretty much wraps it up. If was to go into detail, for example a small tour with a big band Clark Terry put together, that was back some years ago, after I first had been here about a year, I played one festival concert with Sonny Rollins a few months after I arrived over here, a lot of other things, tours, back about 15 years ago, tours with two singers, Jimmy Witherspoon and Leon Thomas, that was kind of interesting. Al Cohn and Zoot Sims, I toured with them, also a couple of years after I arrived here, we made actually a recording while we were on that tour, so there's a lot of examples, in other words I've been a lot on the road, that's the point

Q: Were you surprised you were able to pick up your career so quickly after such a big change in your life?

HP: I guess you could say it was a surprise, it took a little time because even thought people knew who I was, they were a little hesitant about calling on me because they weren't sure I wasn't staying in Europe, or whatever reason, but anyway it took a couple of years before things began to happen and more or less to fall into place, but I tell you, I definitely do not regret making the move, it probably saved my life actually, I think!

Q: In what way?

HP: Well I'm thinking about it again, just being in that rat race that we call it, and the stress of being in New York, that takes its toll on all musicians, especially jazz musicians. So being away from it, being in a relaxed and more peaceful atmosphere has given me more of an incentive to create and to continue to do it is what I do, and I'm not sure that would have been the case if I had been in New York.

Q: You said one of the reasons that you left was social, so what changes hit you when you arrived in Europe?

HP: As I say, just the idea of being able to walk down a particular street at different times of the day and different times of the night, without having to look over your shoulder all the time, just that one aspect of it, it's quite something that, and being among people who are friendly, even though you don't really speak their language, a lot of them speak English and that made it easy to communicate and there is an openness, I guess you could use that word here, I don't think you'd find that so much in the States, at least at that point in time, at least I didn't feel it, everybody seemed to be withdrawing within themselves because of the question of survival again.

Q: Well, it's been great to talk with you Horace, it's not every day I get to talk to a jazz legend, and it's been an honour.

HP: Well, thank you.

Wind Up.

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