Andrew Hill Interview 28th April 2000

Q: Can we start at the beginning — a lot of the history books say you were born in Haiti but I read that you said it was wrong, that you were born in Chicago, so can we set the record straight!

AH: Sometimes a lie travels faster than the truth! In those days when I was recording, the journalists — not like now — then they would get part of an article written and dovetail everything on top of it instead of doing the necessary research to see if was rumour or fact. In the past few years I have been able to get to everyone and tell them I was born in Chicago.

Q: Right. Your Blue Note recordings in the Sixties are now regarded as jazz classics, but I understand you left the label because someone insulted your wife LaVern

AH: Frank, Francis Wolff, didn't appreciate my wife at one of the sessions. It had changed after Alfred had sold the company and Frank at that time was just interested in keeping his job with the corporation to retire, and the whole mood for music had changed. The musicians, it wasn't economically expedient for the younger musicians to play jazz anymore and it was time to leave, but Alfred had fixed it so that I could have stayed at Blue Note forever but I noticed the records weren't as good — the times had changed, it was when jazz to me was going into a siesta, or making a transition from popular music to classical music, to America's art form as they call it.

Q: So this was the last straw

AH: Yeah, it was the end of a period.

Q: During the '70s and '80s you entered academe, I believe you got a doctorate of music from Colgate is that right?

AH: Yes, but I don't speak of that because I found out that there are some people that can be, the Renaissance man as I call it, and do everything but even with that degree certain things for me during that time wasn't possible — it was like an empty title, so during this resurgence I'd rather be known for what I did musically than what my hobbies were

Q: Right, that's interesting because you went on to write – did you ever record that symphony the Oregon Nikki Symphony

AH: The Nikki Symphony? No we did it, we got a commission from the Oregon museum to write it and from three or four philanthropic foundations, but I never did record it.

Q: And you wrote for chamber groups as well

AH: Yes, I did a few chamber groups, well Oregon was a nice — a great period while I was recovering from the death of my deceased wife, and with Oregon I had a tenure track position at Portland and got almost every grant that Portland had to give, so I could write symphonies and do things with choral orchestras, I could do anything and I found out that at Oregon I can be a good educator and a greater musician at the same time

Q: I read that one of the reasons why you weren't engaged in active performance was the illness to your first wife LaVern

AH: Yes, really that was one of the reasons I left New York in the Seventies, the environment for the situation she was in, at first we brought a place in San Francisco, but San Francisco was too much of an imitation of New York, and we found a place in California

Q: In Portland?

AH: In California. Soon after my wife had died a friend of mine, a food and liquor manager at a place called the Salashine Light in Oregon, invited me up there and I went in the spring of

1990, and in September it was time for me to find another location, I didn't want to go back to New York so I went to the biggest city, which was Oregon and everyone was generous and supportive

Q: You began to do a lot of solo concerts at the Old Church

AH: At the Old Church amongst other things

Q: What sort of material, was it unrecorded

AH: Unrecorded. The good thing about being on the fringe of fame and fortune but not having, not being a household name is that you can continue to create and the constant glare of society isn't on you so you don't have to stick to any formula that you think is responsible for your success.

Q: A blessing in disguise

AH: A two headed sword!

Q: In 1992 you got married to Joanne Robinson, she is a dancer?

AH: Yes, she is a dancer. I met her when she was on the faculty at Portland State

Q: I read that you said that gave you a new zest for living

AH: Yes, well. It was difficult, even though Portland is beautiful and everybody was into the quality of life, and I had a beautiful place in a great location, but it was something to me and nothing, and I joked with her seriously that when she came to get me, all of a sudden it was a searing connection that was made that opened me up to the possibilities of life instead of having a secure but stagnant life position

Q: I just want to get the chronology right here. Did you make those two records for Blue Note before you met your second wife?

AH: Yes, I made them in ’88 and ’89. I remember I made the first one, no ’89 I made the first one, right before my wife died and then I did the second one shortly thereafter.

Q: They were very well received, did you not feel like pursing then

AH: When I made those two records I was jaded about a lot of things, so I figured with Blue Note I recorded, the statute of limitations where you can sue someone had run out, so that revived the statute of limitations and I made a class action suit against them with Hank Mobley and two other people

Q: What was that about?

AH: It was settled about royalties, not receiving any royalties and bad royalty counselling and stuff so it was settled upon my return to New York in ’96 and since then they have been very generous with their royalties.

Q: In fact you went from Oregon to New York in ’96

AH: The dance department at Portland State was dissolved so my wife got a position at the Joyce Theatre in New York, were they have dance all the time, so I went back to New York, not for my career as I usually do but for love to a certain extent, and a good part about that it was catalytic to my getting venues and situations that I had not dared to dream of in decades

Q: I notice you played at places like the Alice Tully Hall and places like that

AH: Yes and I finished performing again at the Lincoln Center again so I was getting incredible jobs come to me, and then I started rehearsing this sextet and the musicians who first started this sextet were kind enough to rehearse with me two or three nights for one job, the job at the Knitting Factory, and after that I found out that the sextet had a life of its own, where I was working incredible venues with that and from that it, and from that I found that I was getting more visibility as an artist from working in New York again, so people now look at me in sense retrospectively, also mostly in Europe where they say instead of a sextet we want you as a soloist or in a duo, but that's pretty accurate there

Q: How when you look back on your career, you mentioned it was like a two edged sword, you were able to expand your musical personality because you weren't weighed down by the past but on the other hand if you stayed in music and retained the visibility which some former Blue Note artists achieved, do you feel that was an area you missed out on?

AH: Almost, by my having left the scene and being able to look at it from my experience as a social scientist and educator I am able to analyse that period and analyse what I call the 'human resources' to steady that period that are still are available on the scene like musicians who stayed there during that period who didn't leave. I feel that it was the best thing that could have happened for me to leave because I'm not embittered and I study the history books in college because, you know, I had to teach oral history, the teaching about that period was like socially and I see a lot of pianists who have played through those years have problems like tunnel syndrome and I say I had the advantage of living a completely different lifestyle so now everything is fresh. In the scene when I first came here [to New York] they had a situation when the younger musicians played with the the older musicians, everyone was trying to position themselves for visibility or any economic gain that was available to them and I was able to bypass that. Even with the sextet I had three, sometimes four generations of musicians on the stand and the younger musicians by playing with them I see that the music isn't dead. They say it was something unique that happened in the turn 20th century and I'm glad it's still alive because I see where the music has changed and become what the younger musicians and older musicians ones who are still playing who are not jaded have that passion for music and

anytime there is a passion for the music, instead of an academic continuation, that means the music is alive again and that was the greatest discovery for me to see the music is alive — you have this intelligent demographic, a younger audience who love the music, and all of sudden anytime you have younger artists like Wynton [Marsalis] and like any aesthetic, he introduced the music to a lot of people who hadn't heard the music and he introduced it on a higher level than what it was on before so the results of that is that he helped build up the jazz audience, but people enter it as a retrospective music defined as bebop — it's like Dixieland music used to be when I was a kid. You must have a healthier environment to see it growing

Q: You made an interesting distinction between the musicians of your generation and the younger musicians, there is a sense in which musicians of your generation walked and talked the music whereas a lot of the young musicians are college educated

AH: It is a distinction because a musician can go to college and study the music, like there is a joke around New York, you can listen to some of the younger musicians and tell which school they went to, Berklee, New School, but still in general you have a situation where someone can go to school and plan and make a career out of music, not like us, we may have made money but it wasn't like anything where I can have a middle class lifestyle, cars, you know, materialism, the age of materialism, so naturally the passion is not there they may like the music they may respect the music because they have studied the music but a lot of them don't have a passion for the music because the passion wasn't really necessary in college, well now it is beginning to become necessary because of the reissues and the newer music is selling more than the retrospective things

Q: Do you think the retrospective thing has been a bit of a roadblock

AH: No, I think there's really been catalytic to the music, because the music had been bad for a long period of time, and the retrospective thing in the clubs of New York and different jazz clubs in the world, they're now very decorative, even though you have places like the Knitting Factory, but as the whole it has been really upscale you take someone to hear jazz and you

spend over $100 for the night, so the retrospective thing in a sense legitimised it enough where its appealing to the upper aspects of society, even though it may mean the meal fights the music unless you're into jazz, and I see the same type of relativity always existed where Europe is the same way, so I think the retrospective was necessary to help develop peoples ears, like any aesthetic the more you hear stuff, even if you pretend not to like, all of a sudden you hear it in a way that can't be defined in books so the retrospective was a partial guideline for introduction, what to listen for, which were things people never listened for, it helps give some people a guideline where to start listening

Q: There's a sort of like when you were with Blue Note in the Sixties you did something like six albums straight off which was a remarkable period of creativity, do you see young musicians being able to do that, do you compare them to what you were able to achieve

AH: What I figure I do better than that, trying to analyse it; analysing anything you have to use certain situations as a given to create that type of relativity, and I see that type of relativity and creativity still exits, its just how involved the younger musician is in his research, I see they have a lot of repertory companies, like redoing Lennie Tristano music, all that music may come but if it's approached academically instead of any type of compassion, the main ingredient of the music, the main given of the equation isn't there so you can't expect the same type of results. You have had players growing up where their parents loved the music and moved in to rock, and then they come back so I notice you do have a small group of younger musicians really in a sense studying with the older musicians, that's why I call New York a big university, and I can see the music moving so I don't know what the level of creativity will be but I see the ingredients for it at least

Q: With your latest album *Dusk*, what criteria did you use to pick the musicians?

AH: Well I figured I would pick musicians who had an open mind and weren't stuck in one period who loved the music and by having an open mind and not being stuck in the past was a lot, we wouldn't have to play in a monotone all number, each number could be different to

another one, you know, you hear certain bands and they sound the same all night which is good but it's really not, people are very respectful and they applaud but everyone leaves not really having enjoyed the music, so I tried to place my concept for this group on Louis Armstrong performance I heard as a kid. In Chicago they had a place called the Blue Note so when Louis Armstrong would play the people loved it, satisfied they had heard something, instead of place and meet, and they were intellectually stimulated, it was a synergy with the audience and that synergy lasted, that's why the audience could hear Coltrane, people said it was experimental, it wasn't experimental, you just had developed an audience that could hear these things so that was what I was striving for, some minds that were open enough to have the freedom to interpret the music the way they heard it, but had the passion to try and play different things not be caught into cliches that don't really fit together because that is the common problem for me — everyone studing everyone else's solo, so instead of playing with their personal experiences with the music they would put someone else's solo with the music and the solo really wouldn't fit because really weren't developing the material in a way that would have creative contact

Q: So where would you position your music now

AH: Well what I try not position but let it grow on its own and reach a certain type natural flow because anytime you position anything it becomes contrite and stagnant because creative music is not a situation where you have control, like old Charlie Mingus bands in the way he sat at the piano bench I don't listen to that because it sounds like Louis Jordan or some junk, even though it's great music but I found that things you don't control, where people have a certain type of respect for each other and try to play with each other, the music takes a natural shape — if they are really into the material that they are playing everything don't come out sounding the same

Q: So is that the key to why your records in the Sixties sounded — well exciting

AH: To me, what makes everything exciting — I see everyone is doing what [bassist] Israel Crosby used to tell me, he said when black musicians started playing with white musicians with the emergence of Benny Goodman the music was concertised, the music was playing in a more concert type, solo orientated situation. But Fatha Hines, you can listen to him on certain records he was an avant garde — he would extend the song past its original form and go into something else, there a lot of interesting things that are going on and a lot of people aren't really stuck in any camp where they can use the complete vocabulary from the past to do their thing, so it really makes it exciting and the musicians of all ages are playing together too, so you get the enthusiasm of youth who are exposed to experienced elders and instead of approaching the tradition academically they approach it historically, so that mean the nuances of the music have a different meaning and understanding that and the difference in jazz that — jazz is a western music that's really based on an old African concept where rhythm is more dominant than melody and harmony, it's is based on a tonic dominant oral protestant tradition and different things were magnified through each period, so when that knowledge assessed it's really interesting to me audiences are hungry for accepting good, but it must have the magic, like in Portland that's the reason I left. It was a very upscale way of living but nothing had any meaning, you go to jazz concerts everything, incredible locations where the audience is waiting for something to happen and the audience is respectful of anything that happens but they leave not having heard the magic that once existed

WIND UP