

Remembering Mulgrew Miller (1955-2013)

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(written the day after Mulgrew's death)

Mulgrew Miller, a friend for over thirty years and one of my all-time favorite pianists, died at the age of fifty-seven in Allentown, Pennsylvania, near his home. I am still in a state of shock. So young, so talented and so human! His loss leaves a huge gap in the music world and the lives of the many people he touched, mine included, in the many countries he visited. He was a giant of nearly unmatched stature, in the tradition of an Art Tatum or an Oscar Peterson, and a kind and eloquent man.

In the late 1970's, I happened to be in Memphis. There, I had meditated in front of the motel where the Reverend Martin Luther King had been shot and watched the majestic Mississippi, which still carried the blues and remembrances of Mark Twain in its mighty waters. Someone invited me to a jam session, where I was stunned by a young pianist. From where did all those incredible notes come? I could not believe my ears. The phrases flowed, endlessly logical and beautiful. The chords were lush and every single note swung. He told me his name was Mulgrew. This rather unusual moniker stuck in my mind, as did his music.

Not long after, on the West Coast, I attended a concert of the Duke Ellington orchestra led by Duke's son Mercer Ellington. The young pianist captivated me. Suddenly, I realized it was Mulgrew! One day, the Duke Ellington orchestra had happened to be in Memphis, where Mulgrew was living and studying. Saxophonist Bill Easley, who worked with Isaac Hayes and recorded for the Stax label, sat in with the band. As Mercer's pianist was reluctant to travel, Easley recommended Mulgrew, who subbed for him. At the age of twenty-one, Mulgrew then became a full-fledged member of the Duke Ellington band. In 1980, I heard Mulgrew with Betty Carter (and Curtis Lundy on bass). Betty could be exacting with her music: the dame was not always tame, but Mulgrew was his usual brilliant self.

The following year, bassist Nat Reeves, who later worked with Jackie McLean, took me to the small Brooklyn apartment where I think Mulgrew lived. If I remember correctly, he shared it with the late Tony Reedus, who later played drums on Mulgrew's CD *Time and Again*. Kenny Garrett, a friend from the Ellington Orchestra, was also there. The piano occupied almost the whole room. Mulgrew delighted Nat, Kenny, Tony and me

with a memorable “Lush Life” and other numbers, and Kenny jammed with Mulgrew. Whenever Mulgrew played a prodigious, impossible to duplicate phrase, the type of dazzling phrase only he could pull off with such dexterity, he would modestly exclaim: “Something like that!” I then timidly tried to play a two-handed line. “You’re not supposed to do that!” Mulgrew joked with his usually good-natured sense of humor.

Over the years, I heard him countless times with many artists, including Art Blakey, Woody Shaw, Tony Williams, and Rufus Reid, and with his own trios or solo. He was a master at playing solo. I took a few lessons with him. I remember him sitting at the piano and piling one inventive chorus upon the other with “rhythm changes” and the blues, some of which I still know by heart. There was no stopping him! In 1982, I wrote a profile on him for *Jazz Spotlight News*, along with profiles of two other greatly admired pianists, Kenny Kirkland and Dom Salvador, and in 1985, I interviewed him for *Jazz Magazine*, a French publication. The editor-in-chief, who did not know who Mulgrew was at the time, was reluctant at first to publish the interview. At that time, Mulgrew had not yet recorded under his own name and hardly anybody knew him in Europe. I insisted, telling him Mulgrew was a shining star. Years later, he wrote the entry on Mulgrew for *Le Nouveau Dictionnaire du Jazz!* At the New Morning, a club in Geneva, Switzerland, Mulgrew, who was then playing with Woody Shaw, launched into dizzying improvisations on “Green Dolphin Street.” Not a single note was lost on me.

One day, Mulgrew told me he had fallen in love with a young woman named Tanya. “She’s very spirited,” he added. Tanya became his wife and is the mother of his children. She comes, I think, from a prestigious dynasty of musicians, among them Ray Bryant and Kevin and Robin Eubanks. I had the pleasure of meeting her in Interlaken, Switzerland, in the 1990’s, where Mulgrew, along with Jimmy Heath, Terrell Stafford, Rufus Reid, Lewis Nash, and Deborah Brown had been invited to give master classes. Mulgrew shone again during the opening concert, backing Brown with utmost finesse and sensitivity. Mulgrew’s repertoire was staggering: he could play any tune on request without for a second having to think of the chord changes.¹ The next day, someone photographed him next to a cow. He said, laughing, that he would put the photograph on his Internet site. Nothing came out of it. Maybe the photograph got lost.

¹ Another musician with this talent was the great Hank Jones. I once heard him in a New York restaurant where he was performing. He complied with all requests, including from patrons totally ignorant of jazz, with competence and grace.

Mulgrew taught by playing rather than preaching. To a German student who asked him what he should do in order to swing, Mulgrew answered, "Just do it!" "You have to eat chittlins," I said kiddingly. "That's it!" exclaimed Mulgrew. Another student asked him if he could play like Erroll Garner. Immediately, Mulgrew offered a perfect imitation. After classes were over, the students would leave the room, but he would stay at the piano and continue to play for himself. I would sit there transfixed, ears and eyes glued to the keyboard. He confided that when he was learning music, he never made transcriptions—his fine ear could indeed catch everything at once—and he added: "When I was young, I wasn't as disciplined as I would have liked to be." What would it have been had he been more disciplined? His playing was faultless! He had a marvelous crystalline touch. This touch, he told me, he had studied for a whole year with Serge Chaloff's mother. He modestly admitted, "I'm a rather good comper. That's why people hire me." More than "rather good," he was a consummate accompanist, with vocalists, in particular, and like other great "compers" such as Horace Silver, Wynton Kelly, Oscar Peterson, and Herbie Hancock, his comping always "told a story." I have transcribed some examples of his comping, for the sheer joy of penetrating deeper into his music and savoring it further. His accompaniment always forms a song in itself, which provides counterpoint to and perfectly complements whatever is being sung or played, never being obtrusive or overshadowing the soloist. Three of his recordings with singers particularly delight me: *Blue Skies*, with Cassandra Wilson, *My Marilyn*, where he backs Miriam Klein on songs by Marilyn Monroe (his solos on this recording are little gems), and *That Day*, with Dianne Reeves. His piano sang as much as the vocalists he so well supported and highlighted. "When you play a song, you have to know the lyrics," he explained. "It makes the melody more meaningful." The jazz he played was nearly almost lyrical, except when he throttled at fearsome tempos.

In the early 1990's, I invited him (along with Christian McBride, Anthony Cox, Jay Hoggard, Terri Lyne Carrington, Danilo Pérez, Mike Cain, Daniel Ponce and others) to the jazz festival I was asked to organize at Le Marin in southern Martinique. The piano, left day and night near the sea with no cover on it, was in rather bad shape, but Mulgrew managed to coax extraordinary sounds from it. And I still remember the hilarious conversations between Mulgrew and Christian McBride at the hotel, full of African-American wit. Around the same time, I invited Mulgrew to perform at the Forum des Halles in Paris (managed by the prestigious Théâtre du Châtelet) for which I was in

charge of the jazz, Latin, and African music program. After the concert, I asked Mulgrew to play me some gospel. I love gospel and it was not the first time I had made such a request to him. With his customary kindness, he immediately granted me this favor. Here, too, his repertoire was infinite. He had lost nothing of his past as a church organist and was a sublime gospel pianist, as can be glimpsed, for example, by listening to his introduction to “He Knows How Much You Can Bear,” a tune recorded with Terrell Stafford. (There is a beautiful live version of this on YouTube.²) Mulgrew also made a rather confidential record of spirituals, *Count It All Joy*, with singer Lance Bryant. Indeed, his ballads often had a spiritual quality. “I try to play them like hymns,” he told me.

At the Munster Jazz Festival in Alsace, France, Mulgrew dazzled the audience with Danish bassist Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen, with whom he later recorded Duke Ellington compositions as well as two blues, one by Ørsted Pedersen and the other his own. We walked along fields full of storks (Alsace is famous for these birds, who fly to Africa during the winter and come back in the spring). Mulgrew suddenly became concerned, and, dedicated family man as he was, told me with upmost delicacy of some problems his son Darnell was then going through.

One evening, I invited the French pianist Bernard Maury, another outstanding artist, to listen to Mulgrew at the New Morning in Paris. (Mulgrew jokingly called the club, run by a certain Madame Fahri, “the Madam’s joint.”) That evening, among other tunes, Mulgrew played “Body and Soul.” Maury, who heard everything, immediately caught every single note of every single voicing that Mulgrew had played. He proposed ingenious alternate voicings, which Mulgrew, open to all suggestions, immediately “dug.” I had transcribed Mulgrew’s and Maury’s voicings for the sake of comparison, and lent them to one of my students, who lost them, unfortunately. I once played one of Mulgrew’s recordings for Maury, who was a fantastic harmony teacher with an uncanny understanding and command of modes. “He stole all my licks!” Maury said laughingly about Mulgrew. Of course, at that time, Mulgrew had never met Maury. Once the gig at the New Morning was over, Maury sat down at the piano, and Mulgrew’s bassist (I forgot if it was Derrick Hodge or Ivan Taylor) spontaneously grabbed his instrument to accompany him. Mulgrew often began “Body and Soul,” of which he cut several versions, by playing the bridge, and in his solos he used sophisticated altered modes. In one of his several versions of “Here Is that Rainy Day,” for example, he displayed his rich palette in

² Incidentally, other jazz pianists who play great gospel include Eric Reed and Johnny O’Neal.

the course of his solo, using Dorian, Aeolian and Locrian modes, and minor harmonic, minor natural, altered and other scales, as well as modulating lines, altered chords and chord substitutions. Sometimes he changed the chords to fit the line he was playing, yet this always sounded justified and right. It was never for the mere sake of reharmonization, as I have heard some pianists do, but because it enhanced his solo and created beautiful changing colors, a tapestry of sound. Mulgrew never tried to be outlandish, never being one for facile effects. His left hand was varied: sometimes rolled chords, sometimes just one note to punctuate a phrase. On *Footprints*, a CD recorded with Toots Thielemans, he played an exquisite rendition of Eric Satie's "Gymnopédie N° 1." It is nectar for the ears. In 2007 and 2008, Mulgrew worked with Dave Holland's sextet. In 2008 also, with his last trio (Ivan Taylor and Rodney Green) at the Duc des Lombards in Paris, he dazzled once again with his virtuosity and gave a moving rendition of "It Never Entered My Mind," a song famously recorded, in particular, by Miles Davis with Red Garland on piano. Mulgrew was equally at ease with breakneck tempos, ballads, or Latin tunes, where he would sometimes skillfully resort to *montunos*.³ During the summer of 2011, Mulgrew gave a series of concerts with Rufus Reid and Lewis Nash. He swung mightily in "Come Rain or Come Shine," "Have You Met Miss Jones" and "The Song Is you," with an admirable art of accents, which give music its character. In "Embraceable You," introduced by a marvelous piano solo, he performed equally marvelous filigrees under Reid's bow and ended with a gorgeous coda.

Mulgrew's biography is now too well known, as are his musical influences (Oscar Peterson, Phineas Newborn, McCoy Tyner among others) for me to repeat all this here. He was born in Greenwood, a town on the Mississippi Delta where important civil rights action took place in the early 1960's. A child prodigy, he was already a seasoned musician by his teens, but he left for Memphis to further his musical studies. Although socially conscious—and he probably witnessed quite a lot of racial incidents as he grew up—he had no bitterness and not a single ounce of prejudice. The whole of mankind was his family, and I have never met anyone who didn't like Mulgrew, whether as a musician or a man. He was no fool either, well aware of the injustices of the music business and the promotion of some artists at the expense of more deserving ones.

One day, at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, famous for the ducks that crossed its lounge every day and took the elevator to go to the roof, I was looking at a pianola

³ Latin patterns of Cuban origin, essentially consisting of quarter notes played on offbeats.

playing a jazz tune. Seeing the broad voicings of the depressed keys, it dawned on me that pianists born or living near the Mississippi, in Memphis in particular—Mulgrew, Phineas Newborn, James Williams, Harold Mabern, Donald Brown—all had a very orchestral style, somewhat reminiscent of what that pianola was playing.

Mulgrew had the genius of music, the gift of friendship, deep generosity, evident in his constant praising of predecessors and fellow musicians, an acute sense of humor, as I already mentioned, and he had retained the earthiness and soulfulness of his native Mississippi. His presence as an artist and a human being is irreplaceable.

I add to this text my transcription of his interpretation of Cole Porter's "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye" on his album *Keys to the City*, and the few first bars of his solo on that tune. I heard it for the first time nearly thirty years ago and it still thrills me to this day.

Selective discography (from my own record collection)

As a leader:

Keys to the City, 1985
Wingspan, 1987
From Day to Day, 1990
Time and Again, 1992
Hand in Hand, 1993
With Our Own Eyes, 1994
The Countdown, 1994
Getting to Know You, 1995
Chapters 1 and 2- Keys to the City/Work, 1998
The Duets (with Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen), 1999
The Sequel, 2002
Live at Yoshi's Vol. 1, 2004
Live at Yoshi's Vol. 2, 2005
Live at the Kennedy Center, Vol. 1, 2006
Live at the Kennedy Center, Vol. 2, 2007
Solo, 2010 (recorded in 2000)
Grew's Tune (with The Kluver Big Band), 2012

As a sideman:

1982
Night Music, Woody Shaw

1983

Time is Right, Woody Shaw

Call it Whatchawana, Johnny Griffin

1984

New York Scene, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers

1985

Introducing Kenny Garrett

Confessin', John Stubblefield

1986

Discernment, Terence Blanchard and Donald Harrison

Live at Kimball's, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers

Color Scheme, Bobby Hutcherson

Double Take, Freddie Hubbard and Woody Shaw

Foreign Intrigue, Tony Williams

1987

Civilization, Tony Williams (recorded in 1986)

Wind Inventions, Bill Easley (recorded in 1986)

Keeper of the Drums, Marvin "Smitty" Smith

Countin' on the Blues, John Stubblefield

Viewpoints and Vibrations, Steve Turre

1988

Blue Skies, Cassandra Wilson

Trio Transition (Reggie Workman and Frederick Waits)

Harlem Blues, Donald Byrd

Give and Take, Billy Pierce

Yardbird Suite, Frank Morgan

The Eternal Triangle, Freddie Hubbard and Woody Shaw

Intuition, Wallace Roney

Angel Street, Tony Williams

1989

Superblue (Bobby Watson, Roy Hargrove, Bill Pierce and Kenny Washington)

The Far Side, Tony Reedus (recorded in 1988)

Garrett 5, Kenny Garrett

A Higher Fire, Monte Croft

Rejuvenate! Ralph Moore

Brilliant Corners, James Spaulding (recorded in 1988)

The Standard Bearer, Wallace Roney

1990

Communications, Steve Nelson

Footprints, Toots Thielemans (recorded in 1989)

Storm Rising, Jim Snidero

Lotus Flower, Woody Shaw

Native Heat, Tony Williams
The Standard Bearer, Wallace Roney

1991

Benny Golson Quartet "Live" (recorded in 1989)
Tomas Franck in New York
For the First Time, Antonio Hart
One for Chuck, Billy Pierce
The Lure of Beauty, Gary Smulyan (recorded in 1990)
Horn of Passion, Jesse Davis
Evidence, Vincent Herring
Another Hand, David Sanborn
I Remember, Dianne Reeves

1992

It Ain't What it Was, Sonny Fortune
Six Pack, Gary Burton and Friends
It's not about the Melody, Betty Carter
What Am I Here For? Harold Ashby
Setting the Standard, Dave Liebman
New York Summit, Steve Wilson
Neptune, Tony Williams
John Swana and Friends (recorded in 1991)
Sam I Am, Sam Newsome (recorded in 1990)
Six Pack, Gary Burton and friends

1993

Rhythm Is my Business, Lewis Nash
The Key Players, The Contemporary Piano Ensemble (Mulgrew Miller, Harold Mabern, James Williams and Geoff Keezer)
Real Book, Steve Swallow
Jewel, The Robert Watson Sextet

1994

Until we Love, Gabrielle Goodman
The Red and Orange Poems, Gary Bartz
Reaching Up, Ernie Watts
Up Jumped Spring, Benny Golson

1995

Moody's Party, James Moody
Come Play with Me, Charles McPherson
Live at the Village Vanguard, Joe Lovano

1996

Benny Golson Quartet
Young at Heart, Tony Williams
I Remember Miles, Benny Golson
Four Pianos for Phineas, The Contemporary Piano Ensemble (recorded in 1989)

Live at Small's, Vol. 1 & 2, Bill Mobley Jazz Orchestra
Young at Heart, James Moody
New York Second Line, Terence Blanchard and Donald Harrison

1997

Tenor Legacy, Joe Lovano
Trumpet Legacy, Nicholas Payton, Lew Soloff, Tom Harrell and Eddie Henderson
That Day, Dianne Reeves

1998

Memphis Piano Convention (Mulgrew Miller, Donald Brown and Harold Mabern)
Astronauta, Joyce
Mirrors, Joe Chambers
Serendipity, Gregory Tardy
Classic Moods, Ernie Watts
Generations, Steve Wilson
Jazz Masters, Jerry Bergonzi
First Insight, Jesse Davis
A Cloud of Red Dust, Stefon Harris
Manhattan Nocturne, Charles McPherson

1999

New Beginnings, Steve Nelson (recorded in 1997)
Bridges, Dianne Reeves
Just For When You're Alone (compilation)
Live at the Montreux Festival 1999, Buster Williams
Freedom's Serenade, Ronald Muldrow
Dizzy's World, The Dizzy Gillespie Alumni Allstars

2000

Restoration Comedy, John D'Earth
Promised Land, Harold Land
How Can I Keep From Singing, René Marie
Tribute to the Trumpet Masters, Vol. 2, Bryan Lynch
Day Dream, Trudy Kerr

2001

For Hamp, Red, Bags, and Cal, Gary Burton
The Calling – Celebrating Sarah Vaughan, Dianne Reeves
Moodsville, Bennie Wallace
Destination Up, Jim Rotondi
One Day, Forever, Benny Golson
Simple Pleasure, Vincent Herring
Cliffhanger, Randy Sandke (recorded in 1999)
Memento, Rick Margitza
My Marilyn, David Klein
Blue Black, Jean Toussaint
TNT, Steve Turre
Vertigo, René Marie

2002

In Blue, Karrin Allyson

The Best of Dianne Reeves

2003

State of Mind, Dave Ellis (recorded in 2001)

The Golden Striker, Ron Carter

New Beginnings, Terell Stafford

Close to my Heart, Jeremy Pelt

2004

Eternal Journey, Sean Jones

Bush Dance, Johnny Griffin

The Spirits High Above, Steve Turre,

With All My Heart, Harvey Mason

2005

Gemini, Sean Jones

Dance Delicioso, Chris McNulty

2006

Count it All Joy, Lance Bryant

Pretty Blues, Antoinette Montague

Dizzy's Business, Dizzy Gillespie All-Star Big Band

The Survivor, Donald Harrison

Deep in a Dream, Pierrick Pedron

2007

Sound-Effect, Steve Nelson

Moodscape, Bill Mobley

2008

Pass it on, Dave Holland

Rainbow People, Steve Turre

Diaspora, Ronald Muldrow

The Best of Ronald Muldrow

2009

Mirages, Alex Sipiagin

The Lure of Beauty, Jimmy Knepper

Live at Smalls, Neal Smith

2010

Lineage, Jerry Bergonzi

Motherless Child, John Blake Jr.

2011

Bach: Brandenburg Concertos 1, 3 and 5, Benny Golson's New York Orchestra

2012

Live at San Sebastian – Golden Striker Trio, Ron Carter, Mulgrew Miller and Russel Malone

2013

Pushing the World Away, Kenny Garrett

Uncertain date:

A Blast of Love – Jazz Currents

Ev'ry time we say goodbye

Transcription : I. Leymarie

Exposition du thème par Mulgrew Miller

Intro

A $E_b \Delta$ $F-7$ $G-7$ $F-7$ $E_b \Delta$ $C7$ $F-7$ $Bb7$

$E_b \Delta$ $F-7$ $Gb \Delta$ $Bb7$ $Bb-7$ $Eb7$ $Ab-7$ $Db7$

Ev'ry time we say goodbye

Exposition du thème par Mulgrew Miller

B Eb Δ F#^o F-7 Bb7 Bb-7Eb7 Ab Δ

Ab-7 Db7 Bb7 Eb Δ Bb7 Bb^{7sus4} Bb7

A' Eb Δ G-7 F-7 Eb Δ C7 F-7 Bb7

Eb Δ F-7 Gb Δ Bb-7 Eb7 Ab Δ Db7

Ev'ry Time (Expo)

Ev'ry time we say goodbye

B' Eb 6/G F#° F-7 Bb7 Bb-7 Eb Δ Ab-7 Db7

25 26 27 28

G7 C7 F7/B Bb7 Eb Δ Eb Δ

29 30 31 32

lead-in to the solo

33 34