

For Clyde

A remembrance by Peter Hillman

Clyde Criner (1952-1991) was an acclaimed musician, composer, and educator, who unfortunately passed under circumstances that shrouded his many lasting contributions. We will be presenting a live Musical Tribute to him on Saturday, June 14, in Williamstown 1-2:30 pm. Also, please see the three-part video series, available at 75creates, YouTube, and Facebook.

Clyde Criner III—who forged a distinctive form of Black music from elements of straight jazz, classical, rock, electronic, opera, liturgical, gospel, and reggae—died in December 1991, at St. Joseph’s Hospital, Manhattan after a long illness. He was 39. His wife of seven years, and his parents, who requested privacy, survived him.

Clyde’s unique approach to music calls to mind German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer’s concept of genius: “Talent may hit a target no one else can hit; it is genius that hits a target no one else can see.” Clyde played the records of his idols Ellington, Monk, and Coltrane backwards, memorizing them note-by-note until he realized the “true spirit of African-American music innovators.” They created their own unique styles “yet were also firmly based in a tradition or traditions.” He heard in the evolution of Black American music the “synthesis of a variety of world musics.”

With his deep roots in African-American keyboard traditions and thorough understanding of cutting-edge technology, he carved his own unique space. He made a style and sound that traversed centuries and engaged diverse musical genres like the multi-patterned intricacies of a great mosaic. He sought to “capture the spirit of what makes great black music: that

unpredictability, that synthesis of black and white influences without particularly pointing and saying this is black and this is white.”

He was playing the Chinese game “Go” while everyone else was playing Scrabble.

“Criner’s “The Color of Dark” is a masterful, music-is-music production that, while keeping true to the non-automated precepts of straight jazz, unites seemingly unlikely musics into a glorious gestalt. *Who else could bring together strains of the impressionist composers (Ravel, Debussy), Monk, and Bartokian opera with sounds from the Pentecostal Baptist Church, West Africa, and Tibet?* [emphasis added]”¹

He stayed true to that artistic ideal, even as the record labels implored him to “play more like Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea.” And it is a further measure of Clyde’s greatness that he persevered and got up each time the industry knocked him down. The Jazz Messengers rejected him for nebulous reasons after its leaders promised him the spot, a sure springboard to fame. Clyde persisted, constant to his ideal. “I don’t audition,” he simply said the next time. *From now on he’d let his talent speak for itself.*

He brought the same single-minded drive to his many students, including at Williams, where he designed and taught the first “Introduction to African-American Music” in 1982-83 to a record enrollment of 150 (!). After the 1985 ground-breaking “New England” debut album, he made the buoyant, up-beat, funky “Behind The Sun.” The music poured from him—12 new compositions!-- and the next year Clyde produced the “glorious gestalt” that is “The Color of Dark.”

It is hard to tell if room existed in his last dozen years for the younger Clyde we knew in school, who was funnier than hell, ginning up pranks, always looking to jam, a lit fuse of energy and glee with a child-like side. “Check this out! You gotta hear this!”

The pressures of having to build his name, earn a living, deal with the nonsense of the merciless music industry, were wearying. And still—the social conscience that jump-started at UMass held sway in his art: songs that reflected Black identity, the plights of South Africans and Tibetans, wounds to nature. He took all these things to heart, he *felt* them, and from those

feelings produced music that was painful and beautiful. "When my music is played, I hope people say, 'that's Clyde Criner.'" *Let us celebrate the targets his genius hit, that no one else could see.*

PLEASE JOIN US ON SATURDAY, JUNE 14, REUNION WEEKEND, 1-2:30, IN THE '62 THEATER, FOR A TRIBUTE TO CLYDE FEATURING LIVE PERFORMANCES OF HIS MUSIC BY HIS ALL STARS AND OTHER SPECIAL MOMENTS

¹ Glaser, Mark, "Criner's Corner," CMJ New Music Report, October 6, 1989, 25.

Source notes for other material appear in the Credits at the end of Part 3 Video, "Tribute to Clyde Criner: An Unfinished Life," on 75creates, YouTube, and Facebook.

CLYDE CRINER DISCOGRAPHY

I SOLO/BANDLEADER ALBUMS

1. "New England," Terra T4 1985
2. "Behind The Sun," Novus/RCA 3029-1-N 1988
3. "The Color of Dark," Novus/RCA 3066-1-N 1989

II AS SIDEMAN

1. Victor Bailey, "Bottom's Up," Atlantic 81978-4 1989
2. Anthony Davis, "The Life and Times of Malcolm X," Gramavision/Polygram R2-79470 1992
3. Chico Freeman, "Tradition in Translation," Elektra 60163-1 1982
4. Michael Gregory, "What To Where," Novus/RCA 3023-1-N 1988
5. Hannibal, "Visions of a New World," Atlantic 81973-4
6. Craig Harris, "Blackout in the Square Root of Soul," JMT 834415-1 1987
7. Craig Harris, "Cold Sweat Plays J.B.," JMT J00J20288 1989

8. Andre Jaume Five, "Something," CELP-C15 1990
9. Alphonso Johnson, "Spellbound," Epic/CBS EPC 82197 1977
10. Geoffrey McCabe, "Tesseract Complicity," Timeless SJP 212 1984
11. Noel Pointer, "Never Lose Your Heart," Shanachie/Cachet 5007 1993
12. Sanford Ponder, "ETOSHA-Private Music in the Land of Dry Water," 1985
13. Avery Sharpe, "Unspoken Words," Sunnyside SSC 1029-D 1988
14. Archie Shepp, Attica Blues Big Band, "Live at the Palais Des Glaces," Blue Marge 1001 1979

III COMPILATIONS-Examples

1. Carlos Santana and Various, "Playin' With Carlos," Raven 24 RV C8 200 2005
2. Alphonso Johnson, "Guitar and Bass," Sony 2004
3. JMT Jazz Sampler: "Songs and Dances for Real Moments," JMT 880-018 1988
4. NOVUS Jazz Sampler, Novus 3039-1-N 1988