

Press Release

Signs Along The Road, or Conversing with Silent Powers

The legendary bass player Henry Grimes publishes his first volume of poems with *buddy's knife jazzedition*

By Barbara Frenz

Henry Alonzo Grimes (born in 1935 in Philadelphia), who played with nearly all the great musicians in the U.S. jazz world during the 1950s and 1960s and was known above all as an early leading exponent of free jazz, has now published his first volume of poetry. The book appears in the original American English version issued by buddy's knife jazzedition, a publishing house founded in Cologne in 2006 (www.buddysknife.de). Henry Grimes's life as a musician stopped abruptly in 1968, and he disappeared without a trace until 2002, when he was discovered in Los Angeles by a social worker and went on to launch a breathtaking comeback. Most of his poems were written during his long retreat from the music world and bear eloquent witness to his experience during those years. Henry Grimes now lives and works in New York (www.henrygrimes.com).

The illustration of the Book of Job is one of the most impressive works of the English poet and fine artist William Blake (1757-1827). He concludes this narrative with a musical transfiguration, which does not occur in the Bible as such: The first portraiture shows Job praying with his family under a tree, which carries musical instruments; the last portraiture depicts the same crowd now holding the instruments in their hands. The joy of life appears to have returned, and it can be expressed with one of the most beautiful means: music. Due to a chain of adverse circumstances that remind one of the story of Job, Henry Grimes had to put down his musical instrument, and hence his calling, for a protracted period, alone rather than with family, and left completely to his own devices – until a social worker named Marshall Marrotte found him and the bassist William Parker presented him with a new bass in late 2002, almost 35 years later.

Henry Alonzo Grimes appeared in the music world around the mid-1950's, just 20 years old, initially in his native city, Philadelphia, then in New York, where he pursued classical music studies at the Juilliard School while playing the nights away in the jazz clubs. His discography, which commenced in 1957, reads like a who's-who of jazz history: Among others, he performed with Lee Konitz (1957, 1958), Gerry Mulligan (1957, 1958), Benny Goodman (1958), Sonny Rollins (1958, 1959, 1963), Thelonious Monk (1958), Lennie Tristano (1958), Cecil Taylor (1961, 1963, 1965, 1966), Don Cherry (1961, 1965, 1966), Charles Mingus (1962), Roy Haynes (1962), McCoy Tyner (1962), Steve Lacy (1963), Albert Ayler (1964, 1965, 1966), Archie Shepp (1965), Sunny Murray (1965) and Pharoah Sanders (1966). Henry Grimes also recorded his own album, *The Call*, in 1965. Interestingly, his participation in Albert Ayler's Greenwich Village live recordings in December 1966 is not the last entry in Michael Fitzgerald's Henry Grimes discography, although 37 years elapsed between this and the next entry.

In August 1967, Henry Grimes performed once again with Sunny Murray at the *Both/And* club in San Francisco. In the following year, at the pinnacle of his musical career, he disappeared from New York, heading for the West Coast. His bass was strapped to the roof of the small car he travelled in with drummer Clarence Becton, and the instrument was considerably damaged from the boiling heat of the Utah and Nevada deserts they travelled through during their journey.

Henry Grimes first settled in San Francisco and continued to be active as a musician, particularly with Jon Hendricks and Al Jarreau, but eventually, in the same year, he moved on to Los Angeles. There he sought to have his bass repaired, but he was given a very high price, and being unable to pay it, he sold the instrument to the repairman for \$500 instead. Henry Grimes hoped he would be able to buy the bass back after a while, but sadly, this did not come to pass.

The life he led from then on for a long time was characterized by hard physical labor (on construction sites, as a janitor); he worked briefly in direct marketing by telephone; he went through temporary homelessness, serious psychic crises (essentially surpassed in 1978), and self-inflicted reclusion from the public. He filled the painful gap of not playing music by starting to write, producing poems and

philosophical / metaphysical reflections that are conserved today in piles of notebooks. Meanwhile, he practiced yoga.

Former companions, journalists, and fans kept asking what on earth had happened to Henry Grimes. Some guessed that he had become an actor; others that he ended up homeless; still others declared him dead (an obituary in the magazine *Cadence* is testimony to this assumption). Years and even decades went by. Then something happened that no one would have been able to imagine: In 2002, Marshall Marrotte, social worker in Georgia, who had fallen in love with Henry Grimes's music in 1986 after he heard *The Call* for the first time, located the legendary musician living in a downtown L.A. hotel, in good health and expressing a desire to play music again.

In New York City, writer and musicians' advocate Margaret Davis began a nationwide search for a bass for Henry Grimes, and bassist William Parker responded and sent him a green bass dubbed *Olive Oil* shortly thereafter. And after just a few days of intense practice, Henry Grimes was content with his musical condition and emerged to seek out musical opportunities. First public appearances followed in early 2003 in Los Angeles with Bobby Bradford, Nels and Alexander Cline, Joseph Jarman, and others. In May of that same year, Henry Grimes celebrated a triumphant comeback as special guest at the New York Vision Festival, and he moved back to New York City two months later to stay.

Henry Grimes is now once again playing brilliantly and is very active internationally as a musician, working with such greats as Marshall Allen, Fred Anderson, Newman Taylor Baker, Roy Campbell, Jr., Marilyn Crispell, Andrew Cyrille, Bill Dixon, Hamid Drake, Charles Gayle, Andrew Lamb, Joe Lovano, David Murray, Kresten Osgood, William Parker, Marc Ribot, Alan Silva, Sirone, Cecil Taylor, and many others. Henry Grimes has also recorded numerous new albums: *Henry Grimes Trio Live at the Kerava Jazz Festival* (2004) with David Murray (ts, bcl) and Hamid Drake (dr); *Sublime Communication Vol.1* (2004) and *Sublime Communication Vol. 2* (2005) with Andrew Lamb (reeds) and Newman Taylor Baker (dr); and Henry Grimes can also be heard on Marc Ribot's *Spiritual Unity* (2005), dedicated to the music of Albert Ayler, with Roy Campbell (tp) and Chad Taylor (dr). More CDs have been issued and are being prepared for release.

And now there is another astonishing development: Henry Grimes's poetic opus from his "lost years" has come to the attention of the literary world at last, and a selection of his continuous, long-term poetic output has now been published in *Signs Along The Road*, even as he continues to write today.

It is hardly possible to grasp the scope of the book *Signs Along the Road* in a short article. However, two pieces, *Water Wax* and *Signs Along The Road Being Put There*, are subjected to more detailed analysis here, as they allow vivid insights into their author's ideas, as does the entire volume.

The poem *Water Wax* was written sometime between 1984 and 1999. It is a poetically analytical flow of ideas, ranging across a number of pages along which one can feel the rhythm, the poignant sense for colours, the toying with rhyming expressions (*heaven's skies / heaven's guise*) and alliterating chains of words (*Water Wax; worded and worded world*), seemingly without specific significance at first, but as a whole evoking a startling harmony of content. The poem neither requires nor indicates an exact dating, since it ignores all current affairs, but instead rather timelessly flows past particular events or obvious incidents. The focus is on fundamental issues. What evolved in time is subjected to an anthropological, sociological and philosophical analysis in *Water Wax*: It is a trigonometrical influence dividing up the human landscape and the poet's society into court, city and country. What authority separates matters into three remains a mystery. Henry Grimes is interested in the mysterious and searches for those signs that go beyond the simple straightforwardness of road signs, searching for the origins, including those of language and the spoken word.

Henry Grimes poses questions that lie buried under the present-day mind set, dominated as it is by technical, scientific, and other pragmatic considerations. Of course, Henry Grimes lives in this demystified world too but has not assimilated himself to it. The title *Water Wax* addresses this to a certain degree, consisting of two words that sit side by side and yet maintain a fine distance from one another: Water is repelled by wax, as is the poem from the surface of public life that it really is part of. But this title contains far more: Henry Grimes elects to converse with the cosmic powers as a poet, and even if their signs and the contradictions they produce remain inscrutable for him, he does not react to them with incomprehension, but rather by producing a free flow of words that seem to be tracing these mysteries. Reading *Water Wax* out loud leads one to hear this impenetrable depth and yet obtain new insights – but only if one is able to free oneself from the desire to rationalize any alleged meaningful relationships, and instead is prepared to get into the remarkable images that Henry Grimes draws with words.

It may well be that, amongst other things, his reflections and visionary thoughts were spurred by the spirit of his generation, which was critical of the status of civilization. However, primarily there is someone busy

here with talking and writing who has remained remarkably independent in the ways he thinks, feels and creates.

The origins of poetry can be traced back to rhythm and music, and *Water Wax* and *Signs Along The Road Being Put There* also specifically suggest that Henry Grimes's wordplay is just as much part of the Afro-American musical tradition, and specifically about raising awareness for the less obvious and unpredictable. Examples are his abstract, rhythmically colourful flows of thought that pierce familiar statements such as *When can it be that I will see her again* or *You are so naive* like arrows. This includes historical, analytical statements such as the one that human laws are a further development of archaic customs and conventions.

Henry Grimes views these standardizations as a poem that has already made it to heaven, and he points out that poets escape from subjects that require sophisticated language in order to be conveyed.

Here, too, poetry and the cited musical tradition of Jazz touch upon one another somewhat, since they both avoid virtuosity as an end in itself and draw their persuasive power from deeper and hotter spiritual sources of energy.

Prose, the ubiquitous more or less meticulously carved-out form of narration, is the pyre of consciousness, the artificial, the civilized, the surface that barely covers the simmering poetry (and music?) about to fuse as a white, blue, amber-green water flame. This is what results at the end of *Water Wax* and is to a large extent all that is left over at the end. It is not the well-established heaven that virtuosic legal rhetoric aspires to, but the hell of consciousness, which embraces the truth.

Henry Grimes the musician commands an energy the drummer Dennis Charles described: „Henry could make the bandstand shake. I thought the bass was going to explode“. And his poems have this energy too. Henry Grimes's poetry is like a rocket, which returns the reader from an orbit of rationally founded self-confidence back to the roots. This poetry embodies the archaic that lies buried within us, it reminds of the unpredictable, the unknown, the mysterious in life, and in its own way, it makes a political statement as well.

Henry Grimes, *Signs Along The Road*. With a foreword by Marc Ribot, buddy's knife jazzedition, Cologne 2007, 128 pages, paperback, 16 € (the book can be ordered on www.buddysknife.de).

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