

My Conversation with Horace Silver

September 1999

By Fred Jung

<http://www.allaboutjazz.com/iviews/hsilver.htm>

Horace Silver's popularity should be on the same level as the band that came up with the genius buzz word "nookie", but that would be a perfect world and for the time being I am content with having the honor of speaking with him about his stellar recording career (which is mammoth for all of you who want to start a Horace Silver record collection), his sidemen (one of whom was trumpet/composer Tom Harrell), and his latest album for Verve, "Jazz Has a Sense of Humor" and the new retrospective box set highlighting his marvelous Blue Note output. Here is one of the living legends of this music, unedited and in his own words.

AAJ: Let's start from the beginning.

HS: I've always loved music since I was a small boy. I used to go to the five and ten cents store and buy the old 78s rpm records. I was into all the big bands in those days. I used to buy records by Tommy Dorsey and Jimmy Dorsey and by Glenn Miller and Count Basie and Duke Ellington and Earl "Fatha" Hines, and all of the big bands. I used to collect their records. I was really into that. I've always loved music and it's funny that I just kind of gravitated towards wanting to play the piano. I did play the tenor saxophone for a short while too, but piano has always been my mainstay.

AAJ: Why not play both?

HS: I think I was biting off more than I could chew. I wanted to play the tenor. I wanted to play the piano and I wanted to compose and arrange. There was so much for me to try to get into that I would find one week that my chops were up on the piano and down on the saxophone and then the next week, I'd be up on the saxophone and down on the piano. In the middle, I was trying to write music and arrange music and finally I just got to the point where I said, "Well, I'm going to have to make a choice, because I can't handle all of this at once, in one scoop." So I decided to let the tenor go and stick with the piano and with the composing and arranging.

AAJ: What influenced Horace Silver's music?

HS: Basically my influences have been American influences. It's been blues, gospel, swing era music, bebop music, Broadway show music, classical music.

AAJ: Does that diversity lend to the overall appeal of your music?

HS: Yes, definitely. Yes. It's like making a stew. You put all these various ingredients in it. You season it with this. You put that in it. You put the other in it. You mix it all up and it comes out something neat, something that you created.

AAJ: You were a Blue Note artist for over twenty-five years, how did your relationship with Blue Note initially begin and why do you think it prospered for both you and the label through the years?

HS: I met Alfred Lion at a club that I played at called The Paradise Bar and Grill, which is 110th Street and 8th Avenue. It was located at that spot at that time. I played there with a really fine tenor saxophone player named Big Nick Nicholas. He had played with all the big bands. He was with Dizzy's band and a lot of different big bands. He had a little combo there, playing right about

five nights a week there. On the weekends, we would play for floorshows and during the front part of the week when there was no floorshows, a lot of musicians would sit in and jam with us. How I met Alfred was at that club called The Paradise Bar and Grill. It was kind of a little neighborhood kind of a joint and we played in there about five nights a week. Ike Quebec was a good friend of Alfred Lion. Ike Quebec, the tenor player, he brought him in several times. Alfred was always going out to hear music, live music. I met him at that time. It just so happens that I was on the stand, jamming with Lou Donaldson. Alfred really took a liking to Lou Donaldson and asked us to record for him. Lou, in turn, asked me to be his piano player on that session. So that is how I got acquainted with Alfred Lion. It was a very nice association, because we were not only employer/employee relationships were good, but we were friends too. We used to go out to eat. Alfred loved to eat good cuisine, all different types of different foods. I was into that too. Me and Alfred and Francis Wolff, his partner, we used to go, a lot of times, they'd call me and say, "Let's go out to dinner." We'd go to an Italian restaurant. He knew all the great restaurants in New York. We'd go to smorgasbord, get smorgasbord one weekend. Next week, we'd go to a British restaurant and get the British type of cooking or a French restaurant or Indian restaurant. We were just all over the place, eating some great food.

AAJ: You made over forty albums of your own as a leader for the Blue Note label.

HS: Good Lord's been kind to me, that's all I can say. I wake up in the morning with music in my head a lot of times. I won't say every morning, but I wake up in the morning sometimes with eight bars in my head and I just go to the piano. It's almost like taking dictation, Fred. I will end up writing a channel or a bridge to the tune, but the first eight bars of the tune I get a lot of times when I wake up in the morning. I hear it in my head and I just go check it out on the piano and put it on my tape recorder and develop it.

AAJ: But what was it about the Blue Note label that allowed Horace Silver to harness that creativity?

HS: They let me do my thing. They allowed me to do my thing. Alfred said, they didn't dictate to me as to what kind of music that they wanted me to play or what tunes, what musicians that I was going to use. They let me do my thing. That's one reason I stayed there for twenty-eight years.

AAJ: Blue Note has just put out a box set retrospective of those twenty-eight years.

HS: I don't have the box set as of yet, but I got a listing of the tunes that are on there. I think Michael Cuscuna did a wonderful job. He approached me. He got it together and he sent me a listing, he faxed me a listing of all the tunes that were going to be on there. I approved of all of them. I made about three different changes. I think there are forty-five, forty-six tunes on the album, on those four CDs rather, and I only asked them to change three of them, not that the ones he picked weren't good, I had a couple of others that I thought were more important pieces of music to put on there. He made about three different changes at my suggestion. The rest, he put together all himself.

AAJ: During that period, you had a very close association with Art Blakey.

HS: Art was a great guy and one hell of a drummer. One thing, well many things I learned. I learned something about working with all of these great musicians, but one great thing that I think I learned from Art is to give all of yourself when you get up on that bandstand. That bandstand is like an altar. It's like holy ground or sacred ground. When you get up on that stage or that bandstand, throw everything else out of your mind and just give one hundred percent or a hundred and fifty percent of yourself. Give your all. I remember one time, Art giving us a lecture at the Café Bohemia. I guess he wasn't satisfied as to what the band was doing. He said, "Look, you guys. I don't care if you had a fight with your girlfriend or with your wife, or whatever

problems you have got outside. When you come into this club, leave that shit outside and come up here onto this bandstand and let's take care of business. When you want to pick them problems up when you go home, that's your business. When you come in here, leave that shit outside and let's get up on there and cook." Get up on the bandstand and take care of business. And that's what he did. That's what he encouraged us all to do.

AAJ: And Miles Davis?

HS: Oh, Miles was a genius. He was a great, great, great musician and a beautiful guy too. He was a little eccentric some times, or a little, he's a Gemini. Geminis, they have this, what they call dual personalities. One minute they are jovial and the next minute, they're kind of on the grouchy side. When he was grouchy, I just kind of stayed away from him. When he was in a good mood, I tried to be around him. It was just great to be around him when he was in a good mood. We would always talk music. I always found that when great musicians get together and they start talking music, they become like little children. They become giddy and silly and laughing and talking. They love the music so much that it is such a joy to talk about it. I think we met at Birdland. I'm not quite sure how we met. I think it was at Birdland where we met though. He heard me there and I was introduced to him.

AAJ: Milt Jackson?

HS: Milt, I can't remember how we met, but it might have been at Birdland too. Everybody came to Birdland. I did a few records with Milt. It was always a joy to play with him. He's such a great, great artist.

AAJ: Journalists credit you with being one of the pioneers of hard bop, what is hard bop?

HS: Oh, that's a term that the critics put out on the music, but I would say that it's bop with a little more energy to it. There was polite bop and then there was hard bop. The polite bop was more sophisticated or more, the hard bop is real slam, bang, kicking ass kind of music, Fred.

AAJ: So you are fine with the nickname "Hard Bop Grandpop"?

HS: The "Hard Bop Grandpop"? Oh, yes (laughing). I get a kick out of it. Yes, I get a kick out of it.

AAJ: Why is it your music lends itself better to a quintet format rather than the conventional piano trio that your peers utilized?

HS: I like to hear my music played with something larger than just a trio. There's nothing wrong with playing with a trio either. It's OK, but I've always liked to hear my music played with some horns and sometimes a larger instrumentation than the quintet. We've done "Silver 'n Brass." We've done "Silver 'n Woodwinds." We've done "Silver and Voices," "Silver 'n Percussion," "Silver 'n Strings." We've done septets, sextets, octets. I try to stretch out and do something a little bit more different than just a quintet, but the quintet is my mainstay. The quintet is what the people love me for. They love Horace Silver in a quintet. I love the quintet setting. It's just that every now and then I just need something different.

AAJ: Let's touch on a former member of one of your quintets, Tom Harrell.

HS: Tom is a great artist. Yes, Tom, I just heard about Tom from Woody Herman. I was playing in Chicago and Woody was in Chicago. He wasn't playing that night or something and he came by the club to hear us. I saw him standing out there at the bar, so when I came off the stage, I went over to him to say hi. I think that was the first time that I had met him and I introduced myself to

him. We got to talking. We had a couple of drinks and he said, "Man, I got a fine young trumpet player in my band. He's crazy about your music." I said, "Gee, I've got to check him out sometime. Maybe I can use him." The next time I saw him, we played up in Boston at the Jazz Workshop in Boston. In the back of the room, there was another jazz room called Woody's band was in one room and we were in the front room called the Jazz Workshop. Naturally, during our intermission, we'd run back into the other room and try to catch one of Woody's tunes if he was still on, the same thing with his band. When they got off, they came running into our room and try to catch us. I went in there one night, between intermissions, and heard them playing their last song of their set and this trumpet player stood up and took a solo. And I was knocked out. I said, "Damn, this cat is playing his ass off. Who is this cat?" I went over and introduced myself and we met. I got his phone number and everything and it was Tom. At that time, Randy Brecker was playing trumpet with the band and when Randy left, I said, "Well, I know who to get. Let me call and see if Tom is available." I called and I got Tom. I have had some great players in my band. I've been very fortunate. They are all good. I love them all. And they've all added to the Horace Silver sound and I thank them for it.

AAJ: If you were putting a band together of players, past or present, whom would you have filling the saxophone, trumpet, bass, and drum chairs?

HS: Good question, Fred. It would depend on what project I got going. It could be a big band project. It could be a small band. It could be a quartet, a quintet, a sextet, a septet. It could be a certain type of jazz. It could be all Latin music or it could be all blues. It could be an album of all ballads. I would have to find out what the project was first and then I would go zeroing in on what musicians I would use. I wouldn't just say I would use this guy or that guy or another because they may not fit that particular project. I look at my project. What am I doing here? Is this like the regular Horace Silver thing or is this an album of all ballads or is this going to be an album of all Latin music. Who's going to fit this music? I try to decipher that. I would hate to name names. I'm not going to name no names because there are too many good musicians out here. For example, the guys that are on my last record, "Jazz Has a Sense of Humor." They're great and I am hoping to use them again because they sound so well together, Ryan Kisor, Jimmy Greene, John Webber, and Willie Jones. They are all good players, but the five of us seemed to gel well together. I am hoping to use them again on something else. But there are other players out there too. They're not the only ones, Fred.

AAJ: Are you and Elvin the last of the leaders mentoring young musicians?

HS: Well, I don't think it is dying per say, Fred. I think that, well, most of the heavyweights, the giants are dead. All these great, of course there are some people with us, of the older guys who are masters, like Milt Jackson or Ahmad Jamal or Cedar Walton and oh, I don't know, I'd hate to leave anybody out, but I mean some of the ones from the older generation who are really masters. There are so few of them left, especially those who would have a quintet or anything larger than a quintet. You've got some piano players. They can mentor a bass player and a drummer, but I mean, you don't have the Art Blakeys and the Jazz Messengers group anymore to bring young guys into the fold and train them to move on in their careers. You don't have Dizzy Gillespie. You don't have Cannonball anymore. You don't have those kinds of groups anymore so those guys can get that type of experience.

AAJ: Let's talk about your new album on Verve, "Jazz Has a Sense of Humor," and does jazz really have a sense of humor?

HS: Definitely. I think all music should have a sense of humor at some point, not that every piece of music has to have humor, but, well, speaking for myself, I like the bulk of my music to have humor. There are times when I want to get very serious with my music. I might have a very serious song title for a tune and I might have a very serious lyric, which is very in depth and very profound and very serious, so therefore there is really not a sense of humor to that, but that is just

a small portion of my music. I would say seventy-five to eighty percent of my music, I try to keep it on the light hearted side with some fun and laughter in it. It's uplifting and it's entertaining. I love all of those band members. They are great players, each and every one of them. And if you look back at Horace Silver's career, you will find that a lot of my music has a sense of humor, tunes like "Juicy Lucy," They have humorous titles. They have humorous lyrics to them. I'm a lover of comedy. When I was a teenager, I used to play in a local club back in Norwalk, Connecticut, a local Black club on the weekend. They would always have a comedian on the floorshow. We would have to play for the floorshow, a striptease dancer, a singer, and a comedian. I used to listen to those jokes, a lot of them were dirty. I would go the next day on a Monday and I would tell them to my classmates. They would crack up. I love humor. I love Richard Pryor and Jack Benny, all of those great comedians. It's important, I think, just as important that the world have music to give us some happiness and joy, to uplift them. They need some comedy to uplift them too. I'm a great lover of comedians. I love, what's this guy's name? This Jewish comedian, Jackie Mason. He's funny. I've got a couple of videotapes of him. He's a really good comic.

AAJ: Is laughter the best medicine?

HS: Laughter and music, both of them. They go hand in hand. They're both light hearted and they both can help you forget some of your problems sometimes, until you can find a solution to them. In the mean time, it can take some of the pressure off your butt.

AAJ: At this stage of your career, what is more important to you, your artistry as a piano player or your artistry as a composer/arranger?

HS: Well, both, I like both. If someone was to come to me and put a gun to my head and say, "Look, you've got to make a choice. Either you are going to go on with the piano or you are going to go on with the composing, because you can't do both." I would have to say composing, because there is no end of joy, well, I get joy out of playing the piano and playing for a live audience and getting their reaction, but there is nothing like the thrill that you get with it when you write a song. It's like pulling a rabbit out of a hat. There's nothing there. All of the sudden, you get one little gem of an idea and you keep working on it. You develop it and it develops into a beautiful melody, a beautiful harmony, a beautiful rhythm. And then you arrange it and you rehearse it and you record it. Boy, that is a thrill, Fred.

AAJ: Where do you see the future of this music?

HS: I see all of these elements will come into play in the future. I think if you look at music from way back, different elements kind of come together. It's like, well, for example, I don't know if it's a good analogy or not, but yesterday I went out and bought some vegetables. I bought something called broco-cauliflower. It's a hybrid between broccoli and cauliflower. It looks like a cauliflower, but it's green like broccoli. I think that's the way with music. All these different elements mix with each other and you get a hybrid. Eventually, somewhere down the line, it's going to be a hybrid of music with all these different influences coming together. Does that make sense, Fred? I hope.

AAJ: And the future for Horace Silver?

HS: I'm working on another album now. I haven't got in the studio, but I'm writing the music for one now, for next year's CD.

AAJ: Another quintet album?

HS: No, it's going to be something a little different.

AAJ: What is jazz to Horace Silver?

HS: It's my life, my love, my everything.

AAJ: Can you imagine doing anything else?

HS: Oh, no, no, Fred. Who would want to do anything else?