



Once More, Jazz With Feeling

Nearing 70, pianist [Andrew Hill](#) rejoins the Blue Note roster with his new album, *Time Lines*, featuring some of the freshest music of his career.

BY DAVID R. ADLER

"You're not trapped in that room, you know," Andrew Hill called out from his kitchen as he heated brandy and cider on the stovetop. It was a cold day in Jersey City, N.J., but Hill's welcome could hardly have been warmer. Granted, reports of his gnomic, round-about style of conversation are true. His mild stammer and bouts of coughing—a sign of his struggle with lung cancer—make him all the more difficult to follow.

But he is also empathic and generous. His endearing, high-pitched laugh is spontaneous and nothing short of musical. Though frail, he is positive, full of fun. "I was talented but crazy, semiautistic and eccentric," he has said of his youth. This may be the stuff of genius, but in Hill's case it is not in the least forbidding.

At the age of 26, Hill altered jazz history, recording five visionary albums for Blue Note in just eight months in

1963 and 1964. In the pace and uniqueness of his achievements, he rivaled more famous labelmates such as Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter. Among his collaborators were Eric Dolphy, Kenny Dorham, Bobby Hutcherson, Freddie Hubbard, Joe Henderson, Richard Davis, Roy Haynes, Elvin Jones and Tony Williams. Hill made several more records for Blue Note as the '60s

progressed, but much of the music remained in the vaults. He left New York in 1970 and recorded sporadically for other labels over the next two decades, becoming, in Gary Giddins' words, an "outlying cult figure." Anthony Braxton, in the liner notes to his *Nine Compositions (Hill) 2000*, wrote: "This is a private musical universe that is not always appreciated by the greater jazz business complex."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN ABBOTT



In 1989, Hill grew a bit more visible, reuniting with Blue Note to release *Eternal Spirit*, followed by *But Not Farewell*. Aficionados greeted his rare New York concerts as major events. In 1995, after years of low-profile playing and teaching in California and Oregon, Hill (who is originally from Chicago) returned to the East Coast and began “participating again,” as he puts it. He now shares a modest three-story house across the river from Manhattan with his third wife, Joanne. His second wife, organist Laverne Gillette, died in 1989. (He lightheartedly declines to name his first wife.)

Frank Kimbrough, a fellow pianist and longtime friend, remembers: “When [Andrew] told me he was coming back to New York, it excited me a great deal, because at that point there were young musicians who had grown up listening to his music. I knew he’d find lots of people to play with. I knew he would have a resurgence.” Mosaic Records’ seven-disc box set, comprising Hill’s 1963-66 Blue Note work, helped lay the foundation.

Later in the ’90s, Kimbrough visited Hill in the hospital after minor surgery. “I peeked into his room and saw him lying there. I knocked quietly and he sprang out of bed—I couldn’t believe it. He said, ‘Hey, come on, let’s go to the lounge. I’m going to put together a new band.’” Hill envisioned a sextet with the same instrumentation as his 1964 landmark *Point of*

“These magic moments, when the rhythms and harmonies extend themselves and jell together and the people become another instrument. These are things that are priceless and can’t be learned; they can only be felt.”

Departure. “We sat in the hospital lounge and discussed who should be in that band,” Kimbrough recalls. Hill soon formed the group that would record *Dusk* for Palmetto in 2000.

After *Dusk* came Hill’s big-band offering *A Beautiful Day* (musically directed by trumpeter Ron Horton). Gigs became more frequent. Hill appeared overseas with his Anglo-American Big Band, featuring Horton and the sextet with such top British players as Denys Baptiste, Jason Yarley and Byron Wallen. (A recording is planned for 2006.) In 2003 Hill won Denmark’s JAZZPAR Prize and recorded *The Day the World Stood Still* with an American-Scandinavian ensemble. Blue Note began reissuing Hill’s early albums in earnest, including the priceless and long-lost *Passing Ships* and *Dance With Death*. In 2005 Mosaic brought out its 16th “Select” edi-

tion, a three-disc box containing yet more of Hill’s Blue Note sessions: astonishing, polyglot work that spanned the years 1967 to 1970, most of it previously unheard. And Test of Time Records reissued Hill’s three mid-’70s titles for East Wind (*Hommage*, *Blue Black* and *Nefertiti*).

Conditions were ripe for Hill to ink his third Blue Note contract. *Time Lines*, the resulting album, can leave you speechless. It features trumpeter Charles Tolliver, himself an underrated master, a presence on *Dance With Death* and two of Hill’s Mosaic Select sessions from January 1970. Joining Tolliver and Hill on *Time Lines* are three younger musicians well established on the New York scene: Gregory Tardy on reeds, John Hebert on bass and Eric McPherson on drums. Hill lauds their ability to play “three or four different ways. Whenever you hit a musical mood, they can enter it.” He casts doubt on the alleged creativity deficit among younger players: “I hear about everything that they’re not. Very few people talk about everything they are. There are so many flowers on the scene, it’s utterly amazing.”

Younger musicians also forestall what Hill calls “chronological disengagement,” which is simpler than it sounds: “[Young] people might look at the bandstand and say, ‘Well, he looks like my uncle.’ When they see someone their age participating, that gives them a different type of visual reference.”

Listening to *Time Lines*, there’s no mistaking what Nat Hentoff, in the liner notes to *Shades* (1986), meant by “the time-within-time-within-time of Andrew Hill.” Richard Cook and Brian Morton, discussing Hill’s earlier work in *The Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD*, refer to tempos that are “too subliminal to be strictly counted,” harmonic language “that isn’t so much minor-key as surpassingly ambiguous....” These elements are present on *Time Lines*, although the tone colors of the title track are disarmingly bright. Tardy festoons the album with ravishing clarinet and bass clarinet. The piano sound is vast. “I’ve made it a project to figure out how to record the piano,” Hill says. “The key is not to approach it as an accompanying instrument. Instead of instruments accompanying each other, have equal volume on all, so they all can stand on their own.

Otherwise it throws off the quality of the performance.” Michael Cuscuna, who produced *Time Lines* and the Mosaic sets and also recorded Hill for the Freedom label in the mid-’70s, had no trouble harmonizing with Hill’s intentions.

Bob Blumenthal, in the reissue liners to *Judgment!*, sheds light on a disagreement between Leonard Feather and A.B. Spellman over the categorization of Hill’s music. Spellman, in his *Black Fire* notes, placed Hill within the second wave of the avant-garde. Feather, in his original *Judgment!* essay, cautioned listeners against this term, making a case for Hill as part of the mainstream post-bop continuum. Classifying Hill is no less contentious today. In *The Oxford Companion to Jazz*, Blumenthal aptly describes Hill’s approach as “a way of opening up jazz through an exploration of complex chorus structures rather than the obliteration of formal signposts.” Hill, in a typically offhanded but suggestive aside, volunteers his own description: “It’s jazz with a feeling.”

Hill’s 1967 Mosaic Select sessions with Robin Kenyatta are decidedly “out.” The same can be said for his 1980 trio date with Alan Silva and Freddie Waits, *Strange Serenade*, or his 1966 *Involution* tracks with Sam Rivers. But Hill has written expressively in an “inside” vein (“Laverne,” “East 9th Street,” “Samba Rasta”); delved deep into the blues (“Yokada Yokada,” “Chilly Mac,” “Today,” “Tail Feather,” “The Rumproller”); crafted simple groove-based tunes like “Ocho Rios,” “Soul Special” and “Diddy Wah”; and burned over fast but abstract 4/4 swing on pieces like “Interfusion” and “Chained” (see sidebar). He has made use of multipercussion (*Compulsion*), two basses (*Smoke Stack*), choral voices (*Lift Every Voice*) and strings (the Mosaic Select “B” sessions). In Hill’s world, moreover, strings are not a sweetener; on the contrary, they heighten dissonance and otherworldliness.

At the time of this interview, Hill was working on a string quartet he plans to premiere at New York’s Merkin Hall in spring 2006. Booting up his computer, he let roughly 80 bars play through headphones. The music—sparse, harmonically dense and texturally engrossing—brought Hill’s decades-ago studies with Paul Hindemith rushing to mind. “He was a nice man,” Hill recalls. “I could do certain things naturally. One of his things was like G7 with F, G, A and B together—cluster tones. I could hit things like that and understand them. But what we talked about was musical shapes and spaces more than harmony.”

There are certain Hill-like shapes and spaces in the “Entombment” movement from *Mathis der Maler* (hear Hill’s “Ode to Infinity”), or in Glenn Gould’s rendering of the Hindemith piano sonatas. (Incidentally, Hill uses two violas in his 1969 string writing. Hindemith was a violist.)

“In Chicago they expected you to be good at

everything,” Hill remarked in the liner notes to *The Day the World Stood Still*. He met that challenge handily, backing Charlie Parker and Miles Davis on their respective jaunts through the Midwest and later accompanying the singers Dinah Washington, Johnny Hartman and Al Hibbler. He debuted as a leader in the mid-’50s with two singles (four songs in all) for Ping Records, followed by a Warwick LP with Malachi Favors and James Slaughter called *So in Love*, reissued by Fresh Sound in 2001. Soon thereafter he made notable sideman appearances with Rahsaan Roland Kirk (*Domino*), Walt Dickerson (*To My Queen*), Hank Mobley (*No Room for Squares*) and Joe Henderson (*Our Thing*).

Blue Note’s Alfred Lion saw Hill as a successor to Thelonious Monk and Herbie Nichols. Hill’s roots in the “percussive school” of jazz piano, reaching back to stride, are especially clear

on his solo discs: *Hommage, Live at Montreux, From California With Love, Faces of Hope, Verona Rag* and *Les Trinitaires*. Given his emphasis on original material now and in the ’60s, it is easy to underestimate his versatility, as Gary Giddins did in a 1996 review reprinted in *Weather Bird*: “[Hill’s] opening set at Iridium...settled any fears that he might actually have learned a standard over the years....” In fact, Hill has performed a number of standards on recordings from 1974 to 1998, including “Darn That Dream,” “Come Sunday,” “Afternoon in Paris,” “Invitation,” “Sophisticated Lady,” “What’s New” and “I’ll Be Seeing You.” On his first album, *So in Love*, he plays only two originals and is positively Red Garland-esque on “Body and Soul,” “Old Devil Moon” and several others.

It made sense some years ago for Blumenthal to conclude that Hill, thanks to extended

A Day in the Life

Andrew Hill’s Mosaic Select “C” session, a trio date with bassist Ron Carter and drummer Teddy Robinson, was shelved until 1982, when it was prepared for release as *Chained*. Instead, it remained buried in the Blue Note vaults until 2005. Comprising seven tracks (including an alternate take of “Nine at the Bottom”), the hard-hitting session is notable for its surprises: Hill plays soprano sax on “Six at the Top” and organ on “Resolution” and “Nine at the Bottom.” The recording date is listed as May 17, 1967. Location: Rudy Van Gelder’s studio in Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

At this time, of course, Ron Carter was at the peak of his tenure with the Miles Davis Quintet. Incredibly, the discography in *The Miles Davis Quintet, 1965-68: The Complete Columbia Studio Recordings* (Columbia/Legacy) contains an entry for May 17, 1967, when Davis was in the midst of recording *Sorcerer*. On this particular day, at 30th Street Studios in Manhattan, the quintet recorded the master takes of “The Sorcerer” and “Masqualero” and an alter-

nate of the latter. On the previous day they recorded “Limbo” and “Vonetta.” The following week they waxed “Prince of Darkness” and “Pee Wee.”

It’s something to imagine: Ron Carter rushing from an Andrew Hill session in New Jersey to a Miles Davis session in New York (or vice versa). In a brief phone interview, however, the bassist was skeptical. Most Miles Davis sessions began in the early afternoon, he recalled. But Hill’s session, he estimated, would have started around 10 a.m. and kept him busy until about 4 p.m. “The process was we’d go to a place called Len Oliver’s and rehearse for two days—and then go to Rudy’s the following day,” Carter says. “Alfred [Lion] would bring sandwich supplies: bread, knives, cold cuts and stuff, and we’d do the date until it got done.”

Additional research revealed Carter’s skepticism to be warranted. Michael Cuscuna contacted Van Gelder, who consulted his studio log and found that the *Chained* session took place on May 19, not May 17. “Apparently, Alfred entered the wrong date,”

Cuscuna says.

Still, it is striking that Carter helped create these extraordinary documents in the space of three days. Listening to *Sorcerer* and *Chained* with this in mind is a new and revelatory experience. Both albums transcend the mainstream jazz conception of the time yet can’t be pigeonholed as avant-garde. In the ferocity of Hill’s “Interfusion,” or the darkly drawn mysteries of his “MOMA,” there are hints of the compositional economy and improvisational abandon of Miles’ second quintet.

“What sticks in my mind,” Carter recalls, “was I wondered why Andrew didn’t play more trio, since he did it very well. I also wish I had played with him more outside the studio, to see what kind of development we could bring to these tunes.”

Carter went on to record with Hill on *Grass Roots, Passing Ships*, the Mosaic Select “A” and “B2” sessions, and the six 1970 bonus tracks to be found on *Lift Every Voice*. Hill returned to the trio format in subsequent years with *Invitation, Nefertiti* and *Strange Serenade*. DAVID R. ADLER



absences from the performing circuit, has had “little impact on fellow musicians.” But evidence is beginning to indicate otherwise. Along with percussive-school peers like Jaki Byard, Muhal Richard Abrams and Randy Weston, Hill has energized today’s young modernists, in particular Vijay Iyer and Jason Moran. In a recent issue of *Down Beat*, Iyer cited Hill’s *Smoke Stack* as an example of “the perfect record”; in *Signal to Noise* he credited Hill as “a major influence on my own playing and composing, as well as a friend and frequent advisor.” Moran, who performed piano duos with Hill at Merkin Hall in 2004, based his “Gangsterism on Canvas” partly on a melodic fragment from Hill’s “Erato.”

“The incredible thing about Andrew,” says bassist Scott Colley, “is the way he writes for horns, and can imply so much harmony, sometimes over a very simple chord base. I’ve tried to emulate that in my own writing.” Ron Horton, a bandmate of Colley’s in the *Dusk* sextet and the big band, had been transcribing Hill’s music for years when Hill decided to hire him. (His transcription of “Erato” can be heard on Ben Allison’s *Buzz*.) Another Hill devotee, Greg Osby, took part in the pianist’s late-’80s renaissance and then featured him on *The Invisible Hand* in 2000—the same year that Anthony Braxton recorded Hill’s compositions on two discs for CIMP.

Examples of Hill’s influence continue to mount. Nels Cline, the West Coast avant-gardist and guitarist for Wilco, has just recorded an

album of Hill’s compositions for Cryptogramophone, with a sextet featuring clarinetist Ben Goldberg and trumpet veteran Bobby Bradford. “When I was discovering jazz in my late teens,” Cline recalls, “my brother [drummer] Alex and I listened to *Point of Departure*, and we developed a great love of *Judgment!* I’m also quite enamored of *Compulsion*. But I wanted to do our own version of this music. It’s not going to be a slavish Blue Note tribute.”

Independent thinking of this kind is precisely what Hill expects from his own band members. After a run-through at his first rehearsal with the *Dusk* sextet, Scott Colley asked Hill, “Was that the direction you had in mind?” Hill replied, “I don’t play the bass. You play the bass.” To work with Hill, then, is to trust one’s own instincts and not look to the leader for direction. Even Hill’s charts might offer minimal guidance. Standing near John Hebert at a rehearsal for the *Time Lines* recording, Frank Kimbrough noticed that the bassist had turned over his sheet music. “I don’t want to get distracted,” Hebert explained. Better to look at a blank page, perhaps, than to try to account for Hill’s innumerable points of departure.

According to Ron Horton, Hill would stop tunes short in rehearsal rather than go through solo rotations. “He didn’t want to work on improvising,” Horton says. “He preferred to keep it fresh for the gig. But he never said as much. He’s not the type of person who tells you

things.” When called upon, Hill would reluctantly clarify chord voicings, only to play something entirely different on the bandstand.

His approach to big-band work is just as intriguing. In lieu of set lists, he devises cut-and-paste instructions for the band to follow—“the sketchier the framework, the better,” says Horton. “For a while he had a road map where he would go from a section of one song to a section of another one. Or he might ask the saxes to go to bar 18 of one arrangement and the brass to bar two of something else.” Horton often led the band through these transitions with a system of cue cards. “Andrew would give you the directions about five minutes before you went onstage,” he adds. “One time at the Jazz Standard he had me hand out a photocopy [of instructions] and everybody was thinking, ‘What, we’re not playing every chart down from top to bottom?’ And the next thing you heard was, ‘Ladies and gentlemen...’”

As Colley puts it, “In the true sense of the word, Andrew is an improviser, more than any other musician I’ve ever met.” To keep one’s audience guessing, Hill seems to suggest, it helps to keep one’s musicians guessing too. It’s a seat-of-pants methodology he might use in any situation, including duo. Several years ago, he and Colley waited in the wings at the Caramoor Jazz Festival in suburban New York. Colley remembers: “I said, ‘Andrew, you have any idea what

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ANDREW HILL

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you want to play today?' He answered, 'I thought we'd play the "Tough Love Suite." This is while they're announcing our names. Now, I had never heard of the 'Tough Love Suite,' nor did I have any music for it. But we went out and made a 70-minute live recording that felt great to me. The last thing he said before we walked onstage was, 'Well, I thought it was a good title.'"

Much like his speech, Hill's titles are cryptic, comic, sui generis: "Snake Hip Waltz," "New Pinnocchio," "New Monastery," "Blue Black," "For Blue People Only," "Black Sabbath," "Insanity Riff," "Flea Flop," "Kin'ler," "Ry Round," "Violence," "Lust," "Nine at the Bottom," "Six at the Top." He has drawn upon Spanish ("Mira," "Enamorado," "Siete Ocho," "Cantarnos"), French ("Le Serpent Qui Danse") and even both ("Hermano Frere"). Sometimes confusion can arise: "Laverne" and "La Verne" are two different pieces, while "Verne" and "La Verne" are the same, but in different keys. "Nefertiti" and "Nefertisis" are the same piece a whole step apart. But one would search in vain for a link between "Not Sa No Sa" and "Not So." In Ron Horton's experience, Hill swapped and altered titles fairly rou-

tinely, for no apparent reason.

Whatever Hill chooses to call them, as Anthony Braxton has written, "These compositions are sonic gold and can be mined for musical secrets forever." As a measure of their expressive purity, consider the halting repetitions of Hill's speaking voice and the tone parallels to be found in his music. In "Refuge," at the end of the form, an oddly placed counter-rhythm (articulated mainly by Richard Davis) interrupts the tune's brisk 6/8. A similar but more subdued effect can be heard shortly before Tony Williams' solo on "Spectrum." In Hill's current work as well, a "stammering" motif will occasionally surface: at the beginning of his piano solo on "Divine Revelation" from *A Beautiful Day*, or in the main melody of the title track from *Time Lines*.

An unconscious impulse? Almost certainly, but one that underscores the genuine and searingly individual quality of Hill's output. His art may be a perpetual work in progress, premised on instability and a willingness to experiment in public, but Hill is always after something specific: "These magic moments," he says, "when the rhythms and harmonies extend themselves and jell together and the people become another instrument. These are

things that are priceless and can't be learned; they can only be felt." **JT**

Listening Pleasures

"I'm always looking for someone new—like you have Orrin Evans—you have so many new players out there. I like Dave Holland's big band. It reminds me of some of the things with my Anglo-American band. There's so much stuff out there—just to hear a small portion is good enough for me."

Gearbox

Hill owns a Baldwin piano, "even though there's no piano to compare to a good old Steinway, at least 30 or 40 years old—that's when they had this individual quality. If I traded up it would be a Steinway, but I can't afford the type I would want. As they say, let's get real."

Sibelius music software, Macintosh laptop. "I use the computer to hear music back. It's good to hear it in your head, but there's nothing like hearing it in your ears. Most things I still work out on the easel before I turn the computer on."

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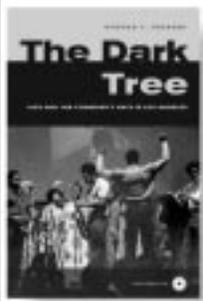
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