

**Justin Robinson**  
**Alana's Fantasy: A Tribute to Dwayne Burno**

With **Alana's Fantasy**, alto saxophonist **Justin Robinson** makes his first appearance ever on **Criss Cross**. But sadly, this is also one of the last sessions to feature **Dwayne Burno**, a titan of the bass lost to complications of kidney disease on December 28, 2013. Burno was 43, in the prime of his career, having honed his authoritative sound and feel in the bands of Betty Carter, Freddie Hubbard, Bobby Hutcherson and countless others. His eight sideman appearances on this label date back to 1993. "Dwayne was one of my dearest friends," Robinson says. "One of the most upright, straightforward people I've ever met, especially in the industry."

With Burno's death, **Alana's Fantasy** became a tribute album, as well as a stark piece of evidence that we lost one of the most effortlessly swinging and musical bassists of our time. "Dwayne was a great study," Robinson offers. "You could give him something and two minutes would go by, he'd be ready to play it. He had great intonation, perfect pitch. He'd sit down, listen to a record and then just pick up the bass and play whatever it was he was listening to."

In 2001 Robinson and Burno both joined the Roy Hargrove Quintet and spent six years "on the road pretty much year-round." Drummer and Hargrove straw boss **Willie Jones III**, already a good friend, became an even closer one during that time. Jones subsequently hired Robinson for his own powerful sextet, and his strong rapport with the leader is a key factor in the success of **Alana's Fantasy**.

A native of Hollis, Queens now based in northern New Jersey, Robinson took up music in middle school and "started venturing out" by age 15 or 16. He earned a scholarship to study with the great Frank Wess, "my first serious saxophone teacher," he says. "I learned to read music, learned harmony and changes, which eventually led me to Barry Harris and George Coleman further down the line."

Robinson's first high-profile gig was with the Harper Brothers quintet, which debuted on Verve in the late 1980s. "When I met Philip Harper at the Blue Note," Robinson recalls, "he was hosting the jam session with Ted Curson. We started going around to all the different clubs and playing, and eventually he introduced me to his brother Winard, who was looking for a tenor player, but I wound up being the best fit. When Philip left to go with Art Blakey, I took over the Blue Note jam session. That's where I met Gerald Cannon, Ben Wolfe — pretty much everyone I know now."

After various freelance jobs, including a two-year stint with Little Jimmy Scott in the late '90s, Robinson took the Hargrove gig, which is still bearing fruit. The current pianist with Hargrove is **Sullivan Fortner**, heard on **Alana's Fantasy** to great advantage. "He's one of those special talents," Robinson says. "You can pretty much throw ink on the wall and he'll read it. Sullivan's first gigs with Roy were also with Burno, and I always wanted to play with the two of them again. We played Minnesota, it was Sullivan's first gig and he did such a great job. He's a great talent and also has a great mind. I took to him right away as a musician."

One of the chief attractions of trumpeter **Michael Rodriguez**, aside from being a brilliant soloist and ensemble member, is that he's a fellow Queens native. "We hit it right off," Robinson says. Rodriguez appears on Yosvany Terry's **Today's Opinion** (Criss 1343) and Dayna Stephens' **Today Is Tomorrow** (Criss 1345) as well as his own **Reverence** (Criss 1356). His work with the likes of Charlie Haden, Gonzalo Rubalcaba and Kenny Barron has distinguished him as one of the most promising and exciting trumpeters of our day.

Starting with Jackie McLean's classic off-kilter ***Little Melonae***, Robinson reveals a tough-as-nails and sometimes free-leaning approach of his own. "Growing up in an edgy neighborhood, I've always had an intensity that I've tried to temper through meditation and martial arts, stuff like that," says Robinson. "My tone is a reflection of things I've gone through and seen in my life. It's not been an easy ride and it's made me the person I am today." Rodriguez and Fortner follow the alto solo and do not relent in terms of swing and invention. Burno solos on the bridge both times through the head, just as Paul Chambers did with Coltrane and Miles (and Doug Watkins did with McLean).

***Eazy E*** is named for bassist Eric Lemons, "my buddy growing up," Robinson says. Burno starts alone, keys in the ignition if you will, setting up a syncopated bass line before the band joins. The written bass figure is continuous in the A sections — that is, until Burno decides it's not, and begins to walk, lifting the performance into another space. Robinson looks to sports to explain that kind of band chemistry: "It has to just happen, you can't browbeat it. Like a great coach — in the gym he's killing you, but when it's time for the actual thing he lets you play. And if the system breaks down, so what, we'll recover. The Phil Jackson approach."

***Alana's Fantasy***, the title track, is named for Robinson's young daughter. It begins as a dreamy minor-key ballad and transitions — via a Burno bass interlude — to an open medium swing feel, inspiring one of Robinson's fiercest and most soulful flights on the record. Fortner takes over and cools the temperature, showing fine harmonic instincts and a brilliant touch. That beautiful contrast, between Robinson's fire and Fortner's restraint, anchors much of the album.

***Jeremy Isaiah***, named for Robinson's son, dates back to senior year in high school: "I went to school with a talented pianist, Stephen Scott [of the Harper Brothers], and he was very much into counterpoint, writing for each part, he always used to talk about it. That was my first attempt at that sort of thing. I made the third voice the bass. I had the song in my repertoire but it never fell together. I knew having Sullivan and Burno together that it would."

***When We Were One***, a haunting ballad by tenor immortal Johnny Griffin, has a Roy Hargrove connection: Griffin played it as a guest on *With the Tenors of Our Time*, Hargrove's 1994 quintet release. Robinson subsequently played it with Hargrove and Griffin live. (There's video online of Griffin playing it with Kenny Drew, Jimmy Woode and Kenny Clarke in 1970.) Fortner solos on the body of the tune, Rodriguez lays out entirely, and Robinson restricts himself to stating the theme, drawing implicitly on the legacy of the great Johnny Hodges. "While reading *The Little Giant: The Story of Johnny Griffin*," the leader says, "I realized that Griffin reminds me of my father, not only feature-wise but in terms of how he delivers his thoughts. My father was a bigger guy, but their sense of humor and larger-than-life personas were very similar. So I took to Griffin, I was drawn to him."

***Eronel***, like most Thelonious Monk compositions, presents a heightened challenge. Robinson tackles this one in a quartet, giving Rodriguez another break. After a formidable, bebop-rich alto turn comes another impeccably paced Fortner solo, then a relaxed and absorbing chorus from Burno. What makes Monk's appeal so inescapable? "The purity of the motion, the movements," Robinson responds. "That's the biggest obstacle. And Monk's ability to write a melody of such substance: sometimes it can be really advanced but the changes are so simple or vice versa, and you think, 'How did he come up with this?'"

***Libra***, by master altoist Gary Bartz, is a staple in the repertoire of Willie Jones' band, and a fitting feature for the drummer here as well. The tonality is thoroughly modern, the theme

funky in a shifting and ambiguous way, with solos by Robinson, Rodriguez and finally Jones. “I’ve always liked Gary Bartz’s compositions,” Robinson says. “He and Charles McPherson are my two favorite saxophone composers right now. They have a unique way of writing. I knew with Willie loving Max Roach so much that it would be a perfect vehicle for him.”

**Answering Service** is a slow Sonny Stitt blues in B flat, from the 1965 Prestige album *Night Crawler* featuring organist Don Patterson. “Absolutely brilliant recordings,” says Robinson of the Stitt/Patterson oeuvre. Burno’s huge walking beat starts it off, leading into the simple riff-style head. Fortner solos first, swinging and leaving ample space, followed by Burno, who quotes the melody going in and makes his two choruses count. Robinson and Rodriguez play last, and only when Rodriguez enters does one realize he doesn’t play on the heads, at least not until the final tag.

Jones sets up Cole Porter’s **Just One of Those Things** with a short intro before the band enters at a blistering tempo. Robinson states the melody, cedes the bridge to Rodriguez, and takes off at a mad gallop. Fortner stays silent for Rodriguez’s first two A sections, giving us a chance to hear Burno and Jones exposed, in all their hard-swinging glory. Jones follows the trumpet with a short drum feature before the band takes it out. If it sounds like a jam session vibe, there’s a reason. “This is a thing we always did at the Blue Note,” Robinson says. “Eric Lemons always loved that song, from *A Tribute to Cannonball* by Don Byas and Bud Powell [1961, released 1979]. He loved that record.”

The evocative pedal-point harmony in **For Heaven’s Sake**, the final track and the third quartet feature, shows again how Burno could transform an arrangement with the simplest of tools. “The bass line was kind of my idea,” Robinson says, “but with Dwayne’s ability to pick things up, he made it his own.” The alto swoops upward at the start and the band is right there, delicate and harmonically inspired. Robinson truly sings the melody on the horn, his legato phrasing deep and impassioned. Fortner plays on two laid-back and gorgeous A sections, showing a maturity far beyond his 27 years, before Robinson returns to end the session in a romantic vein.

“It’s a lifetime study,” Robinson says of the jazz endeavor as a whole. “The geniuses of the music, you spend your entire life investigating them. In the martial arts we have a saying, ‘You’re only as good as your basics.’ Your foundation is probably a better term. If you don’t know certain moves or countermoves, you’re done. If you don’t know the proper defense, you’re done.” Robinson knows, much to our listening pleasure, and yet part of the challenge is not to show all those moves, countermoves and defenses. The audience should just hear great music, and that’s exactly what **Alana’s Fantasy** delivers.

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New York, April 2014