



NOW'S THE

# TIME

## ANDREW HILL FINDS BEAUTY AS MUSIC HELPS HIM SURVIVE CANCER

**T**ime is of the essence for Andrew Hill. Right now, though, it appears plentiful. It's the day after Thanksgiving and in the stately Jersey City, N.J., brownstone in which Hill lives with his wife, Joanne, there's a peaceful silence.

Inside Hill's study, decorated with various books, CDs, an old console hi-fi stereo and various awards, there's clear indication of the pianist's activity, such as his forthcoming composition written for string quartet, commissioned by New York's Merkin Concert Hall. The untitled piece furthers Hill's development and reputation as a distinctive composer. He plays snippets of it on his Apple Powerbook, which display Hill's adventurous nature in their jaunty rhythms, leaping harmonic intervals and dramatic melodicism.

Hill isn't sure which string quartet will perform the piece, but he hopes that his regular tenor saxophonist/clarinetist Greg Tardy will play with them. The Doris Duke Foundation has awarded Hill a grant to rewrite music for his sextet. He's also fronting two big bands: one based in New York and another, the Anglo-American Jazz Orchestra, composed mostly of musicians from the United Kingdom. All of these enterprises aren't a sudden spurt of productivity. Hill has always been a prolific composer. But now, time is more crucial than before, because he's playing to stay alive.

In February 2004, Hill suffered a heart attack in Portugal. Shortly after, he learned that he had lung cancer. With bills running as high as \$7,000 every few weeks for chemotherapy, he has to make his music work for him financially like never before. It's a situation that can paralyze most people, but at 67 Hill exhibits a valiant spirit. "It's something that you learn to live with," he says. "It makes everything a bit more serious. Then again, cancer has restored my feelings for love. It's opened me up to the beauty of life instead of all the terrible preemptive things."

When talking about lung cancer, there's no commiseration in Hill's voice. He's as affable and avuncular as ever. "He's not a complainer," says producer Michael Cuscuna. "It hasn't affected his personality. It certainly hasn't affected his

productivity. There is a hard reality during those spells when he had to go through chemotherapy. Other than that, I don't notice any difference. He's never felt sorry for himself."

"I've never known him to be shy about telling you what he thinks, but now he's not shy to ask for something," says pianist Jason Moran. "Not for repayment, but asking you to help in his situation. That takes courage."

There's an almost defiant spark in Hill's eyes, but it's couched in his tender demeanor. "Oh, bless your heart," is one his frequent responses when paid a compliment, revealing his gentleness.

A lover of ballads and composer capable of writing some of the prettiest melodies in jazz, Hill, ironically, comes across as anything but gentle in his music. It's captivating but not exactly catchy. Even during its most hushed moments, a restive sensibility permeates. Dissonant harmonies jolt unexpectedly, serrated melodies plummet atop of each other and rhythms shift at multiple directions, requiring exemplary technical facilities from musicians playing it. Still, it's somewhat anti-virtuosic in the sense that it's not flashy. His piano playing is intrinsic to his formidable compositions, which can be likened to origami. The song might be as gorgeous as a paper rose, but Hill makes sure to convey the flower's thorns.

The prickly seductiveness of Hill's music is

evident on *Time Lines*, his newest disc, which signals a third return to Blue Note, with which he recorded some of his most memorable LPs in the '60s. The disc also finds him reuniting with trumpeter Charles Tolliver, who played on some of Hill's early Blue Note albums such as *Cosmos* (1965) and *Dance With Death* (recorded in 1968 but first released in 1980 in Japan).

"Going full circle" is how Hill describes his return to Blue Note, referring to his first tenure with them as a "discovery," while his second return in the late '80s — when he recorded *Eternal Spirit* (1989) and *But Not Farewell* (1990) — as a time when the label was "re-inventing itself." "I came back on my own," he says. "This time, it was like the people's choice rather than me doing anything on my part."

The impetus for *Time Lines* took place May 20, 2005, at New York's Birdland, where Hill was initially going to feature his quartet with Tardy, drummer Eric McPherson and bassist John Herbert. According to Hill, the club offered him a handsome salary (he declined on disclosing the actual amount), such that he felt a bit insecure on whether he could actually deliver. "I would hate to have this salary and not an audience to justify the fee," he says. So as a bonus he enlisted Tolliver.

The quartet had been together for about two years prior to the gig, allowing it to develop a near

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telepathic accord. Tolliver's fluid trumpet lines, flaring tone and stabbing attacks offered a new dimension to the ensemble's dynamics. Tolliver says he only had a couple of rehearsals before the Birdland gig, but insists being undaunted by plunging into Hill's inimitable music.

"I don't have to catch up to it. [Hill's music] is always in my ears," Tolliver says. "I had to get an idea on the rhythm section. Coming in cold and playing Andrew's music would take a minute to sort out what the rhythm section is doing. I had to know the rhythm section's capabilities. It gave me some time to think about the improvisational part of the music."

With new material, the Birdland date had the markings of something worth recording. But even Cuscuna, who produced *Time Lines*, was amazed at performances' brilliance. "I had high anticipation, but it surprised me that his writing had taken another turn," Cuscuna says. "I was shocked and delighted about what I heard, which was about half of what ended up on *Time Lines*. Andrew added a warmth that a lot of his earlier work didn't necessarily have."

Cuscuna and Hill have a near 40-year history working together. When Hill returned to Blue Note in the late '80s, Cuscuna produced his discs. He's also responsible for the spate of '60s Blue Note reissues (*Black Fire*, *Point Of Departure*, *Andrew!!!*) and first-time releases (*Passing Ships*) from the era that has helped propel the renaissance of interest in Hill's music.

Hill enjoys working with Cuscuna because of his knowledge of his music's history. "Most producers won't let you do your own thing, especially if they don't have any knowledge of your music," Hill says. "Many discs now become more of a generational music than music that transcends all the generations as part of an evolving tradition."

*Time Lines* embodies its own time and space, sounding modern without pandering to any stylistic idioms or trends. The disc opens and closes with two moving renditions of "Malachi," one interpreted by the quintet, the other a piano solo. Dedicated to the late bassist Malachi Favors, the quintet version takes on an elegiac character, distinguished by McPherson's orchestral drums and shadowy cymbal work, Herbert's discreet contrapuntal bass lines, and Tardy and Tolliver's lamenting melody. Underneath, Hill lays sparse chords, punctuated by a joggling melodic theme.

Naked anguish doesn't distinguish *Time Lines* entirely. There are moments of capricious joy, too. Whereas "Malachi" accentuates Hill's predilection for melancholy, the title track emphasizes his flair for concocting intriguing grooves and fanciful melodies. "Times Lines" begins with an undulating, push-pull bass line groove that West London's electronica mavericks like IG Culture and Kaidi Tatham would kill to use for a funky, broken-beat joint. The group's interaction grows more intense, catapulting the horn players to deliver rapturous improvisations atop a jostling rhythmic bed. If

the melody were stated more legato, it might resemble African highlife.

**T***imes Lines* is Hill's most emotionally gripping album since *Dusk* (Palmetto, 2000). Ever since the release of *Dusk*, Hill's career has experienced a remarkable comeback. Musically speaking, it's been on his terms. Instead of being buffaloes by record companies to churn out easily marketable "song-book" projects or nostalgic reunion bands, he presents challenging works that push the enve-

lope of modern jazz.

Then again, Hill has always been his own man as a recording artist. *Black Fire*, his 1963 Blue Note debut, documented a decidedly individualistic artist who teetered between the avant-garde and hard-bop. He sounded like the heir apparent to Thelonious Monk and Herbie Nichols. His compositions revealed a deep knowledge of blues, hard-bop, modal and Caribbean grooves, but it was translated through cubist-like lenses. And to give testament to how much the label respected his song craft, *Black*

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*Fire* was composed entirely of originals.

Hill says that at the time of *Black Fire*'s release, there weren't any imperatives to do standards. "It depended on how you were marketed," he says. "Francis [Wolff] and Alfred [Lion] didn't steer me into doing standards. They allowed me to follow my own direction. They thought my compositions were strong enough to stand on their own."

Prior to recording his solo debut, Hill played on tenor saxophonist Joe Henderson's *Our Thing*. He says that his entry point to the label came through drummer Philly Joe Jones, who was originally slated to be on *Black Fire*. "[Philly Joe] was desperately trying to get the people at Blue Note to hear me," Hill says.

After *Black Fire*, Hill continued to record a series of provocative albums that drew upon the talents of advanced players such as vibraphonist Bobby Hutcherson, trumpeter Kenny Dorham and bassist Richard Davis. Albums such as *Judgment!* and *Point Of Departure* remain high-water marks of that period.

Hill certainly wasn't the only experimentalist on Blue Note's roster at the time, which included Sam Rivers, Eric Dolphy and Cecil Taylor. But Hill's probing, often brooding compositions earned him the reputation as the dark horse of the label's stable. It's an assessment that doesn't sit well with him. "A lot of '60s critics were neophytes," he says. "They were new to jazz. Jazz was a popular music in the neighborhood, and a lot of things that were looked at as provocative were the normal stuff that was playing in the neighborhoods."

Part of Hill's mystique was that it was long believed that he hailed from Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Certainly, the titles of his compositions, such as "Le Serpent Qui Danse" (from *Andrew!!!*) and "Les Noirs Marchant" (from Hutcherson's *Dialogue*), conveyed such West Indian origins, as did some of his covert Caribbean grooves.

Hill says that the Haitian rumor started when he and drummer Andrew Cyrille (who's from Haiti) used to run tight. By association, people assumed that Hill was from the island. But instead of correcting people, he built a mythos around the confusion. Hill says some insiders were privy to truth, including A.B. Spellman, who wrote the liner notes for *Black Fire*. He even says that Spellman helped fuel the myth by giving him Haitian literature.

The pianist's true birthplace is Chicago, where he was born on June 30, 1937. As the youngest of three, Hill was a "sickly child" growing up on the city's South Side. "I had tuberculosis and anything else that people died of, but I continued to live," he laughs.

Hill remembers "banging on the kitchen piano," before his parents got him a small accordion with which he would earn money on the streets performing alongside Leo Blevins. "A lot of people now get into the music because of the history and stuff," he says. "I got into the music because it paid money. And the better I got, the more money I got."

By age 13, Hill began playing piano, soon attracting the attention of pianist Earl Hines and composer Bill Russo, who introduced him to classical composer Paul Hindemith, with whom Hill studied between 1950 and 1952. He attributes baritone saxophonist Pat Patrick for first showing him blues phrases.

Chicago's bustling r&b and jazz scenes offered Hill many gigs with visiting musicians, such as Miles Davis and Charlie Parker. He eventually formed a trio with Favors and percussionist Gerald Brown.

Some of Hill's formative years in Chicago were captured by Frank Evans on his Ping Recordings. On those rare sides, Hill played with many of Chicago's heavy hitters, such as drummer Wilber Campbell and saxophonists Patrick and Von Freeman. In addition to recording his own sides — "Mal's Blues" and "Dot"

— he did Patrick's theme song, "Down Pat," and Freeman's "After Dark." "What made 'After Dark' so different was that Andrew played organ," Freeman says. "But no one knew how to record the organ around that time. You can't hear it."

The veteran saxophonist adds that Hill was extremely talented during his early years. "Andrew always had a unique way of playing — trying to find new ways to voice chords."

While still in Chicago, Hill recorded his first LP in 1955 for Warwick, *So In Love With The Sound Of Andrew Hill*, featuring Favors and drummer James Slaughter playing mostly standards while introducing a couple of Hill's originals: "Chiconga" and "Penthouse Party." He continued to secure high-profile gigs, most notably with multireedist Rahsaan Roland Kirk and singers Dinah Washington and Johnny Hartman, before moving to New York in 1961.

Because of his work with Kirk, Hill moved to Los Angeles, but he returned to New York in 1962, a year before he began recording with Blue Note. Toward the end of the '60s, when the label was undergoing directional changes after being bought by United Artists and as jazz fusion began to become the new vanguard, Hill parted ways. "It didn't make sense of me to stay during that period," he says. "I could have stayed but not without having to compromise."

During the '70s, Hill recorded intermittently for indie labels such as SteepleChase, East Wind, Inner City and Freedom, and for much of the '80s he recorded for Soul Note. He also delved into academia, earning a doctorate at Colgate University, where he served as composer-in-residence between 1970 and 1972. Soon after, he relocated to Northern California, teaching and performing at public schools and prisons before landing a teaching position at Portland State University, where he established its summer jazz program. He remained on the West Coast with his first wife, organist Laverne Gillette, who died in 1989.

Hill's return to the East Coast was rather secretive. After the 1990 release of *Eternal Spirit*, his appearances on the jazz scene were comet-like — at least in the realm of recording — although he did record *Summit Conference* (Postcards) in 1993 with bassist Reggie Workman. Also with Workman, Hill formed a trio with drummer Pheeroan akLaff, before building his Point of Departure Sextet, which was the quiet before the storm of resurgence.

The Point of Departure Sextet performed at the Knitting Factory as part of the 1998 Texaco Jazz Festival, garnered rave reviews and built high anticipation for Hill's return to the studio. Earlier that year, he had recorded a solo piano disc, *Les Trinitaires* (Jazz Friends), but *Dusk* proved most galvanizing.

Even after 40 years of going against the grain and overcoming the odds, Hill's influence is difficult to quantify. His compositions aren't played by many and his approach to the piano

isn't that imitable. "I disagree that having lots of imitators is what makes your work important," says multireedist Marty Ehrlich. "Andrew is not a stylist. He hasn't codified an Andrew Hill way of playing for people to imitate. I don't know how you would even sound like him. To play his music, you have to enter the world of each composition."

"For people of my generation, we've paid attention to what Andrew's brought rhythmically," Moran says. "Then, if we delve into what he's done compositionally, there's a strong dedi-

cation to artistic principles. The musicians who are making waves in today's jazz are greatly appreciative of Andrew's presence on the scene."

When reflecting on his still evolving career, Hill sees the recent accolades as justification for his career and life choices. "Look how fortunate I am," he says. "I've always lived comfortably playing this music. People have always supported me, so I don't want to compartmentalize any praise of my music. "I look at the blessing of being able to continue working and for the previous music to stand the test of time." **DB**

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