

INTERVIEW WITH ED SOPH --SEPTEMBER 1994

*Born in California in March 1945, Ed studied percussion as a youth and honed his skills working with Jimmy Ford and Arnett Cobb. Later he would work on the east coast with Stan Kenton, Woody Hermann, Clark Terry, Bill Evans, Joe Henderson and other greats. Since returning to Texas in 1987, Ed has served as head of the jazz percussion department at the University of North Texas. He has recorded extensively and can be heard playing drums on Dave's first album for Justice, 1990's **First Flight**.*

One day the phone rang up here out of the blue, and it was this fellow I'd never heard of named Dave Catney, saying that he had a record contract and he wanted *me* to record with him. Well, like I say, I didn't know who he was. First I was sort of leery and then I called around some friends in Houston--I'm from Houston--and they said, "Yeah, this cat's on the level and he's a hell of a player." Then I asked some people here at school in Denton who had been involved with Dave--as teachers--about him, and they all said, "Yeah, a very promising student, and blah, blah, blah ..." I found out that Dave was with Justice Records, which everybody knew was an up and coming jazz label. And then when he said who he'd gotten on bass--Marc Johnson--I knew he wasn't screwing around. But I never really knew why Dave called me to do his first record. I never asked him. I was too shy to ask something like that.

Meeting Dave for the first time, he was a pretty overwhelming individual with his enthusiasm; just the extreme focus and concentration he had on just one thing, which was the music. Yet in spite of the intensity you never felt ill at ease. It was still a very relaxed vibe about what you were doing, but you knew that there was one purpose, and that was to make good music. Dave was very easy to work with. He said, "Look, you guys know what to do. Just play the music, and that's it!" So that's maybe an insight into why he hired us, in that he figured we were experienced players and would bring a certain sensitivity to his music. He wouldn't really have to worry about what came out.

We played a couple of nights in the club and then went into the studio for three days. Considering the short amount of time we'd played together the recording came off beautifully. In fact, later on we played some more gigs at the Blue Moon, the sort of gigs that you remember really clearly and get goose bumps when you think about them. I mean when Catney got rolling--when his energy got rolling--it was pretty remarkable. And like anything else, it's so hard to capture that in the recording studio. Some of the stuff we did on the recording was close to that but it wasn't anything like the atmosphere of a club and just saying, "Fuck it. Let's play!" And Dave always had that attitude--a nice way of saying "fuck it, let's just play"--he never put any restrictions on you. He put tremendous restrictions on himself, in how he thought about his music. It was so structured, in what he did, in his compositions. And you could tell in his soloing. Not that he was mechanical at all, but you could tell the guy had spent a lot of time working on just structuring what he did. And it was so strong. That to me is the ultimate compliment to a person's own playing: that it's strong enough that he doesn't feel that he has to impose any restrictions on you. His energy was just so incredibly strong.

In the recording studio we did three sessions. The first one we threw away, and we knew we would. I'm sure the tapes are still around. The second session was a lot better, and we took some of those takes, and then the third session was just beautiful. It was a matter of getting used to the room. It was a matter of getting a *sound*. Perhaps just getting over a little bit the self-consciousness that we all felt, knowing that we were making an album of someone's music--new music--on such short notice. With each day barriers fell. Everybody became closer, just as in the formation of any sort of relationship.

By the third session things were smokin', and then after that we played that other gig a couple of months later, and my God! It was boiling through the roof.

I didn't know that Dave was gay at first. Marc Johnson and I were talking, and Marc just made a comment. He said, "You know, Catney's such a good looking cat, but there's never any women around him." And I thought, "Well neither here nor there." I hadn't thought about it and had no reason to think about it. It's nothing to me anyway what a cat is. And then I ran into some local musicians in Houston who made some halfway snide remarks in relation to Dave's being gay and I just said, "Big fuckin' deal. So what. What's *your* problem?"

Later on Dave told me that he had the AIDS thing full-blown. I hadn't asked him. I had heard that he was sick and when I saw him again I just asked him how he was doing, and he told me what was going on. This would have been in '93 sometime. After that I tried to call him regularly to see how he was doing. I mean the guy *never* complained and he went through hell. Absolute hell. The last gig I played with him was with a trumpet player named Marvin Stamm from New York. It was a two night gig. David made the first night and played his ass off. And then the second night Marvin and I came in and there was no Catney. A young fellow from the High School for the Performing Arts played. David had come down with one of those fevers that happens with that stuff, and then the day after that he was back in the hospital. But he'd never let on and when he played he'd be exhausted by the end of the night. You'd talk to him and all he talked about was what he wanted to do; he had all sorts of plans. He wanted to do a big band album. His first thing was to finish the solo album which fortunately he did. And the next thing he wanted to do was to do a bunch of big band arrangements. But it was awful, what he went through.

Dave was such a consistent person in that he was always upbeat, always funny, always laughing, loved to kid around, loved to joke. Towards the end he was getting sick more often and going into the hospital, and yet when he was out he was trying to get everything done, to the point that he had two answering machines in his house; one for the club and one for himself. That's the other thing of course. The fact that he was a consummate musician and composer was one thing, but on the other hand he was this rare person who could get blood out of a stone and money out of a miser. He was a wonderful businessman. He literally single-handedly created a viable jazz venue in Houston which, when you understand the scene there, you realize what a remarkable accomplishment that was or is.

He had a program where he would have corporate sponsors for various artists, in such a way that the corporate sponsors would guarantee the money for the sidemen. The door would then pay for the guest artist. So he had all these wonderful schemes worked out, and of course when Catney set his mind on something he didn't let up until he got it. It was really wonderful, and one of the many neat things about it was that he drew the musicians together. You know how musicians can be a fragmented, petty lot; undercutting to get gigs and the usual bullshit that goes down. David had this remarkable ability to bring everybody together. And here he was booking this room, and you know what sort of animosities that can generate, but there was none of that. Everybody was glad to have their turn because they knew that Catney was in it for one reason, and that was to keep the music alive in Houston.

I won't say that's what bowls me over the most, but in my experience with the business, the area where people have fucked up the most has been in that aspect, of trying to create and nurture a venue where the music can be played. Invariably somebody ends up dipping into the till or somebody ends up undercutting somebody else or somebody starts dealing drugs in the back room and the place gets busted or whatever. There was none of that sort of stuff with Catney. It

was just like a big living room where everybody would come to hear good music, and the person who was like the fabric that held all that together was David. He was straight-ahead. There's no better way to put it.

I had really marginal contact with him in that he would call me when he wanted me to come down and play. We'd have occasional conversations over the phone. I wouldn't say that we were close friends at all. We were musical acquaintances, and he would share things like, "Well, it's really tough sometimes to keep this club going and to do my thing too, but I'll find a way to do it." That was about the extent of as personal as he would get. He was not one to burden anyone with his problems.

His talent was monstrous. The tragedy of it is that the potential was never realized. Now that's a horrible, cruel thing to say and it does not detract from what David did at all, but if he did what he did in his thirty three short years--the beauty of the music he made--you can only just sit and think, "What if he'd lived another thirty or forty years? What could have been?" It's like Mozart. Catney in his way was a genius because of what he did in so many spheres, in connecting the business with the music and doing them both positively for everyone's benefit. He had his fingers in everything. He was just one of those cats.

David knew that he was dying. He tried every treatment under the sun and was very forthright about that, trying this and trying that. But he knew that the disease was going to win, and at times you got this feeling of this absolute--I don't want to say--desperation, but this fanaticism to get things done, to try to get as much done before it took him out. You think of all the energy and effort that he capsulized in that short amount of time and you think, "My God, what would have happened if he had had the leisure of good health and a long life to really just sit back and let the stuff develop?" That's the really sad thing about it that strikes everybody, besides the fact that he was a wonderful, warm and honest human being who took his great artistic potential with him to his grave.

His memorial service was great. It was like Dave; everything was planned out. It was funny because during the course of the service there was just this God-awful thunderstorm. Of course you always draw supernatural conclusions when someone whom you admire, like Catney with his creative powers ... when they pass you think all of Nature is mourning. And you almost thought that, because this thunderstorm just hit in the one part of town where the memorial service was being held. The lights were flickering at the most inopportune and coincidental times. It was hilarious! I mean everybody was cracking up, because it was like Catney was up there pulling the switches. But it was a tremendous, tremendous service. It ended with a great Gospel choir that left everybody with a really good, positive feeling in the midst of what was a very negative thing, his death.

Seeing what he did under the sentence he was under really makes your own aches and pains and institutional problems seem very inconsequential. You pinch and kick yourself and think, "Jesus Christ, what are you getting uptight for about something like this?", when you look at him and how he was able to be positive and upbeat and creative through that horrible last year and a half. So I think if anything, his strength and courage and knowing that his music gave him that strength and courage is a great lesson.

He was not one to abuse his gifts in terms of ego trips, in terms of putting other people down. I never heard him say a bad thing. I mean if a guy played strangely, he'd say, "That guy played strangely", but he never, ever cut off someone else's

head so that he looked taller. And the bottom line with someone like that is that you wish you'd known him longer. I'm very thankful that I got the time with him that I did.

He was hell on wheels at North Texas, going a million directions at once. When everybody else was studying Bird, he was studying Bartok and Stravinsky, getting very involved in that. The breadth of his knowledge was pretty astounding for someone his age, but he was never pedantic about it, never was one to show it unless it came up in a conversation. Dave was just a natural person. Not a pretentious bone in his body.

He affected a lot of people. It's strange with Catney gone. It's just sort of like the focus, the center, the core of the Houston jazz scene is gone. So it will be curious to see what happens. I hope to hell they can keep Cezanne going.

When Catney played it was balls to the wall. When he got rolling you were hoping the piano bench would survive! He was very physically involved with the instrument. From a drummer's standpoint, you could open up and know that he'd be there. If you started roaring, he would roar with you. That was one great thing about playing with David; you could throw *anything* at him and he loved it. The more off the wall, the more outlandish--but not in an unmusical way--but rhythmic, polyrhythmic stuff, he loved that. That was part of the fun of playing with him. He never put any restrictions on you, and it was one of those rare occasions where you could play someone else's music and you felt completely secure in playing someone else's music your way, knowing that's what that person wanted! I guess that's why he hired the people he hired, why he hired Peter Erskine for the second album; Peter was going to go in and play the music his way. And this goes back to what I said about Dave being so secure in what he did. So you could have an absolute ball with him. No holds barred. That was a quality I had encountered with the best people I had worked with before, the Joe Henderson's and Gary Burton's and Bill Evans's. David had that same quality, and that's what his greatness came from musically, as far as I'm concerned: he was open for any suggestions on the bandstand. He was not intimidated. And this goes along with the fact that he was such an egoless person, in that he could get on the bandstand ... He's the cat who's got the record contract, he's the guy who's selling the CD's, he's the guy who's the leader of the trio, yet he always treated the group as a cooperative effort. It wasn't like, "Hey, you guys play soft here and then do this here and then ..." We knew the tunes, and as far as David was concerned, let's do it different every night! That is rare. You find that in the great ones, that kind of openness and security and trust.

Here at North Texas we've established a scholarship fund for David, a memorial scholarship. I run a drum set workshop every year so I took some of the profits from that; one thousand bucks for seed money to start the scholarship. It needs three thousand bucks to become endowed in perpetuity, so they're publicizing it in Houston and we're getting donations. So it looks good and it will be a really nice thing. It's for any jazz student or jazz arranging student and it will be there forever. As long as the school's here, that'll be there.