

INTERVIEW WITH STEVE HUFFSTETER -- AUGUST, 1995

Born in February, 1936 in Three Rivers, Michigan, trumpeter and flugelhornist Steve Huffsteter has lived and worked in the LA studio scene since 1959, performing with the big bands of Stan Kenton, Louis Bellson, Ray Charles, the Akiyoshi Tabackin Band, Benny Carter, Bill Watrous and many others. He has appeared on over sixty albums and has backed such notable entertainers as Ella Fitzgerald, Tony Bennett, Sarah Vaughan and Dianne Schurr. Steve was the featured guest with Dave and trio one weekend at Cezanne in the summer of '93 and again on the last weekend of April in 1994.

My wife is from Houston. Up until a couple of years ago her mother was still in Houston--now we've got her over here with us--but we used to go to Houston periodically to see her, and I always tried to book something when I went. Bob Morgan was usually my connection over there to find out what was going on. I think he set me up with Dave. I didn't know anything about Dave. Bob said he was very good, but you never know what someone's idea of very good is.

As it turned out, I was really blown away by Dave, so I was really looking forward to the second time we'd play together. Of course he had AIDS already the first time, so there was always some doubt about whether he'd be able to make that second gig, but he made both nights of it. And the amazing thing was the energy he had. What a spirit.

I hadn't met him before the gig. We all showed up and played. It was obvious right away that Dave was great. The rhythm section on the first set the first time was playing what I considered to be "too polite." They didn't know where I was coming from so they were playing on the conservative side. So on the break, fortunately, there was a really hip record playing, and I suggested to the rhythm section that we do more that kind of thing, and of course they were very happy about that. From then on it was no limits, no holds barred, and that's the way I like to play.

Dave was one of those people who could play within or without any limits. He just went with the flow. Whichever way everything was going, he was just right there like it was the most natural thing in the world. Dave would have been a perfect one for the festival circuit, because they love rhythm players who can play any style comfortably. They like to mix up the players; put a bunch of old guys with a bunch of young guys and stuff like that, and it doesn't always work out unless you've got some rhythm section players who can give a lot in any direction. There are as many conceptions as there are players, and I'm always amazed at the guys who can be so flexible and play more up on it or more back on it or a little hipper or not. Some guys just do it naturally, and some guys don't; they're great players but they're just more rigid in their particular thing. Dave was such a natural that he just fell into anything and made it sound like that's all he does.

I played at Cezanne in the summer of '93 and then in April on '94, and also did some stuff at HSPVA. That's always a problem; booking our trips at a time when school's in session, and thinking about it in time that they can put us in their budget. If you try to get over there too late in the year, they've already blown their budgets. In '93 I think we did it later in the year, and I didn't do anything with Bob Morgan at the school.

An interesting thing happened the last time. After the gig we were all standing around talking excitedly; you know how it is after a gig when everybody's all jazzed. Dave was talking and he ended up "spitting" in my eye, the type of thing that happens when somebody's talking to you and you get a little spittle in the eye. Normally you don't think anything about it, but in his case I did. I didn't want to say anything right then, and there were a bunch of other people around, so I just walked away and ended up going to the bathroom and washing out my eye. Then I felt silly about it and later I got together

with Dave and talked to him about it. He was very reassuring. Actually the AIDS virus is very fragile, and any place that it would strike you where you have natural defenses, like your eyes... Your eyes have all kinds of natural defenses in them because they're so exposed to the elements all the time, so I didn't have anything to worry about.

Actually he was telling me about one time when he and some people were sitting around smoking a joint, and suddenly the people realized, "Hey, we're sharing a joint with Dave. Is this OK?" And Dave said, "Actually I'm the one at risk because I don't have any defenses against your germs, but you have defenses against mine." And then later after I got back to California, he wrote me a note about it and I think he may have even enclosed some literature to reassure me.

While we were having that talk he was also telling me what his normal schedule was to deal with this thing. His whole day was taken up just taking medicine! And on top of it he was running a jazz club and keeping his chops up ... God, I just couldn't believe it. On the other hand, as Samuel Johnson said, "Nothing concentrates the mind so much as the threat of death." When you know you're dying you want to do as much as you can, I'm sure. I get a spark lit under me every time one of my friends my age dies. I'm fifty nine and I've seen a lot of people die. It's amazing. Of course we all have to, and you want to dot all those i's and cross all those t's before you do. I've got a lot of writing to do yet.

One of the things I talk about when I give clinics is the left brain versus the right brain phenomenon. It's a description of the two processes that go on--deductive and inductive processes--and when you're playing, both of these things are feeding 100%. Yet it's very easy to get too much in one side or the other and forget to keep track of the changes--forget your left brain stuff--or else get too much into the left brain and sound contrived. The earmark of this phenomenon, when one brain kicks out and the other one kicks in, is that there is always a difference in style and feeling at that point. So often I've had times when I was being recorded that I thought, "Oh gee, what I'm playing is so boring, so vanilla. I'd better spice it up a little bit and throw in some hip stuff ... " And then you hear the playback and everything was going so smoothly up to that point, and then it sounds so contrived all of a sudden!

And with Dave there was never any of that. Everything was so seamless from beginning to end, and he never faltered. It was really amazing to me because I hear a lot of players and play with a lot of players, and everybody goofs. But with Dave it just never seemed to happen. That, on top of his condition, makes you wonder. .. How it could be possible; how he could be so full of energy and so free with it. Because AIDS is a very debilitating disease, and to play jazz requires so much energy just to keep he *feeling* going. It really left me wondering about a lot of things that I'll probably never know the answers to. He's about the only person with AIDS whom I've ever had much to do with, and I wondered, "What was the source of all that energy?" Apparently he just had that much natural energy that could come to play in spite of his condition. When you see a person this energetic--whether they're sick or not--it's amazing. I mean when he would walk into the club it would be like a light had come on. He'd come in and all of a sudden he'd just take over. He'd start realigning the tables and the chairs and talking to the waitresses and the bartender and getting everything going ... It was like he just had boundless energy.

Dave did everything he could to make me feel comfortable, both musically and personally. I felt instant kinship with him. Unfortunately we didn't get to hang at all. The only free time I had when I was in Houston was the time I spent on the bandstand there. All the rest of the time was pretty much spoken for with the business that we came there for, which was just all family business and then the thing I did at the school.

The second time, in '94, there was a different rhythm section. We had two nights and we really got settled into a good thing with the rhythm section, with them understanding where I was coming from and all that. Cezanne was jammed. We half filled it just with our friends. My wife Dee is from Houston, and we still have a lot of friends there so we must have had thirty people there just from our own circle. We had some really good nights. The place was doing good business, and that's always good because you want them to make it too. Especially since that's Dave's project too.

He had a kind of piano style that someone has who's absorbed everything. I'm sure he would have sounded a lot different playing with a different player who played in a different style because he would have just adapted to that. But he had such great technique, both hands. I play a little piano and I really appreciate what goes on with piano players, especially since I play mostly "arrangers piano"; I play great chords and voicings and all that but I have no technique at all as far as finger technique. And when a guy can do two-handed runs through a solo... that knocks me out. It was amazing. I can still hear some of the stuff he did!

You just hear some people and there's a sparkle to it, just something completely above and beyond just being competent. There are some players that as soon as you hear them play a couple bars you hear that expertise that just comes from habituation: here's a guy who's spent a good part of his life at that piano. As soon as you hear him play you know that. His instrument is just an extension of himself.

I think Dave could have been a really big player. Judging by what I heard, he was as good a player as *anyone*, and for a person with that kind of energy and business acumen and everything ... You need some of that, unless you're very lucky in this business. For jazz players, if you want to make a living in jazz, pretty much the work you get is the work you make. You can't just sit around and wait for the phone to ring. He knew all about that, so I can't imagine that given another ten or fifteen years that he wouldn't have been an international figure. He was well on his way as it was.

To me he was just a sparkling phenomenon. There was a sparkle about him that you just don't see very often. It's that touch of genius that you recognize when you see it. Playing with Dave was one of the musical highlights of my life. I can't think of any piano player I've ever played with that I felt any better with, or that I liked any better. He was just right up there with the absolute best.