

INTERVIEW WITH HARRY SHEPPARD -- JANUARY 1995

Vibraphonist Harry Sheppard was born in April, 1928 in Worcester, Massachusetts. He began his musical career as a drummer before discovering his talent on vibes in college. Harry played in New York for many years, where he received critical acclaim and found steady work as a jazz instrumentalist. A fellow Justice Records recording artist, Harry knew and worked with Dave on a variety of occasions around the Houston area.

Randall Jamail of Justice Records is a dear friend. We were both volunteers at the Macrobiotic Center--cutting vegetables--at one time many years ago. He was standing next to me, and I didn't know he was a lawyer, and he didn't know I was a musician.

I moved to Houston from New York in 1985 because my daughter was here dying of cancer. She was twenty eight, and I came here and spent the last year of her life with her, taking care of her. It was terminal from the beginning, so nothing much could be done. I really didn't get to know anybody the first year I was here and then I didn't want to leave because, number one, my other daughter lives here with her family and kids, and besides being close to her, I fell in love with Houston. Period. That was it! >From day one I had no desire to go back to New York. I went back to get my stuff and close out my place. That was it. I never looked back.

I work almost every night of the week. I do one solo gig a week, a couple of duo gigs, a trio gig, a quartet gig and then I have a fusion band--that's a six piece group--that's about once a week too. It's jazz, you know. We do it because we have to do it. It's a must. It's not just a desire. It's an absolute need. It's our life's work, and that's it.

I had heard of Dave Catney and seen him here and there. Kellye Gray actually introduced me to him, although I'd seen him play and I liked his work. You know, the whole Justice thing was my idea. Randall was into law and this and that and he said he was fooling around doing some recording--digital stuff--for himself. He was singing and playing guitar, and doing law in the daytime. And he wanted to know if I would just punch in a couple of notes here and there, different effects on the vibes, and I said, "Sure, of course." So we set up a time and I went in the studio and did it. He wanted to know what I thought. These were just his own songs--storytelling kinds of things--and although the artistry was no big deal, the production was marvelous; like a Hollywood production. I asked him, "Who did it?" He said, "I did it." I said, "No, who helped you with it?" He said, "No, I did it myself." I said, "You do this *yourself*?" He said, "Yeah", and he showed me how he did this and that, and he's got like two full albums of stuff. And magnificent! So I said, "Wow, you're just a natural producer. I've worked with producers; I know what it's like. You're a natural." He looked at me and said, "You mean it, don't you?" And I said, "Yeah." Thirty days later he opened the first Justice Records office. Just like that.

Then he said, "Well, what're you doing?" I said, "Well, I had an idea to do a thing with Kellye, kind of a Kellye Gray/Sade version of an old standard--a Lena Horne tune-- *Love Me or Leave Me*. He said, "Really? How are you going to do it?" I told him, "We'll go in the studio, do a demo ... " He said, "Let me produce it for you." I said, "OK", so that covered the expenses right there. And he was very good. We went in and did the thing, and he just made a couple comments of advice from the control room and that was about it. The tune never worked out, mostly because something went against the grain with Kellye. Much as I love her--she's a great artist, a great talent--something was bugging her about it. I don't know what, but it didn't materialize. It was just a demo-concept of mine anyway. But in the interim she was talking to Randall and she mentioned that she'd always wanted to do her own record of standards. So Randall said, "Well what will it take to get

together?", and she said, "Oh, it's all together. I've got the band and everything here." So Randall said, "Let's set up a date, go in and do it. I'll produce it." So that's how Kellye Gray *Standards in Gray* came about. No more discussion than that, just a handshake.

In the interim she brought in Catney and Sebastian Whittaker, and all these guys had their own records and stuff after that. So the whole thing was all because I helped Randall play a couple of notes on one of his records and told him he should be a producer! It never, never entered my mind when I told him that he should be a jazz producer, but he got a jazz label started. I couldn't believe it. To me that's crazy because I know there's no money in jazz!

So that's the story of Justice and how I really got tight with David. Then we had a lot of different sessions jamming around because now I was in the in-crowd with Kellye and the whole gang. Oh we had some magnificent moments together! One night we did a "Justice All-Star" session at one of the clubs here where we had all the leaders without their groups: I was there, Catney was there, Kellye, Sebastian Whittaker. ... In other words we all played but without the usual groups. It was just a jamming thing, but something happened. It was magic. Magic really happened. Even the columnists here, everybody flipped. Total standing ovation. It was something very, very exciting that happened and none of us could explain it. Just a chemistry thing or the time... Who knows? But it happened and it was so exciting. The energy and excitement were spectacular, and all of us, we all knew it. We just finished the thing, and people--wall to wall people--were standing up applauding, and we just went around hugging each other. Totally ignoring the audience! It was really something very special.

And that's something about Catney; he's always been very special. A never-to-be-forgotten human being. I never really knew that much about him except that he was just loveable. Everybody loved him. Everybody loved this guy. Number one, he was talented. But he was very sincere, he was very warm, he was just receptive to everyone. He just played so well for everyone and never got in anybody's way. He was just something very, very special. He had the knack of knowing just how to play for each individual. He just had it. Just had it.

To play well, that's one thing. I've had all kinds of instrumentalists, bass players, piano players, guitar players who play well. Good players. But there's a difference in letting you be your total self, without influencing you, just complementing you and inspiring you. That's hard to come by. Doc Cheatham played in town with Dave. I have it on videotape. Doc was playing these tunes from the year one. At that time the club called the Blue Moon would bring in an out of town artist at least once a month. So they brought him in for two nights I guess. He certainly drew. He packed the place. It was a good rhythm section, actually kind of thrown together, but it worked. Doc Cheatham had just some lead sheets and keys I guess, but no rehearsal, not even a talk-over. They just went through the tunes and these guys played 'em and made it swing. Catney played the piano and he just *knew* how to play for different people. I don't think it was something that he learned anywhere; it just happened each time he played. Each time he played, and Doc Cheatham said--he came up to me after one set because he knew me from New York--"This boy on piano, how does he know how to play for me?!!" And I thought to myself, "He does that for everybody!" And it's always different. He knew how to comp; he knew how to change his harmonic structure. He knew just what to do.

If I play with a piano player in the group I have to play differently. I don't like to play with piano or guitar anymore. I just like bass and drums and vibes. Like a piano trio thing, you know? I love that. In fact when I do a quartet thing now it's vibes, bass, drums and flute. That's my favorite. So if I work with a piano player I'm playing four-mallet stuff but I can't play the

same way. You just don't do it. You're doing a creative thing and you use different voicings and alterations that are not written down. You don't play the same altered chord each time around. You change it. And I'm used to that kind of freedom, and if I play with a piano player I have to conform a little bit. I can't just be absolutely my own creative self. You can still play well, but there are limitations. Not with Catney. Not with Catney! I never had to think about changing anything. I just went ahead and played and it was wonderful. And he'd back you up. I hope I've explained it. He was a phenomenon. No question about it.

I never met him that I didn't hug him for a full minute. And everybody else was the same way. People just loved this man so much. He had a twinkle in his eyes when he'd look at you. A warm smile, a twinkle in his eye; it was just a loving thing. You'd think Jesus Christ was standing in front of you! He had some kind of charisma that was just wonderful. He was a very special human being.

When you sat down and watched Dave--not that he was anything like an Erroll Garner--but it was the same thing; it was always a happy thing. It was just a different energy. He was like a Garner type of person but he didn't play that way! It was a light; there was a light on when he was in the room. This city really misses him. The musicians talk about it a lot. He was THE piano player here. Other guys had more technique or this or that, but he had just something very, very special.

I used to go hear him at Cezanne a lot. Cezanne is a very small room, very comfortable, and everyone in the room can see. It's really cute. It was more of a piano bar kind of thing, and Dave changed it around so that it was a jazz thing, so a group could be seen better at different angles, and everyone in the room could see. Everyone's pretty much at the same distance from the piano. It's a very intimate kind of situation, and everybody that plays there just loves it. Just loves it. But I used to go over there to hear him. A lot of my gigs ... I do a lot of restaurant gigs that end up at 11 or 11 :30, so I'd shoot over there to catch him. And of course he'd always make an announcement over the mike, "You have your vibes with you?" Guys sit in, they bring a horn under their arm ... Do you know what it's like to carry vibes around? You just don't go sitting in! And he knew I wouldn't. It was just a joke from the stage, and he'd always say it. What a guy.

He was an excellent M.C. Wonderful. He was never short of words, and his continuity, his fluidness in speaking was just great. When he'd come to introduce people he always presented people nicely when he was hosting a session. He always presented you and made you feel good, really appreciated for what you were doing. He was quite an individual, he really was. A young guy; I don't know how he learned all of it. I think it's just a natural thing.

Dave told me he was ill back in the early stages. He wanted to know more about the macrobiotic thing and about strengthening the immune system, so I said, "Why? Do you have something serious?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Do you have cancer?", because I was so into it at that time, having gone through it with my daughter, and he said, "No. No, AIDS." And boy, it just knocked me for a loop. In fact I recommended a guy to cook for him who was a specialist in macrobiotic cooking and who did that for a lot of people, who would cook several meals a week for him. The macrobiotic diet is a good cleansing diet. No question that it strengthens the immune system because you're limiting the toxins that you put into your system, so your system gets stronger. But you can't mess around with AIDS. It won't buy you much more time. I just told him it was probably the best thing he could do. There's no guarantee that it would do anything or change his prognosis, but it's certainly a good cleansing path to get yourself a little bit healthier. He did it for quite some time, maybe a year, closer to two years maybe. Then of course he was losing weight, and the macrobiotic thing is no animal fats and no

sugars--it is a cleansing diet and it's almost a fast because you're really not getting enough calories--so he had to do other things, but it still didn't put any more weight on him.

He would go into the hospital, and this would be wrong or that would be wrong and they'd beat it out with antibiotics and stuff. Then he'd come out cured of that particular thing but he was a little bit weaker. Each time he came out he was much stronger than when he went in, but he was weaker than when he came out the last time. So it was progressive each time. He had pneumonia a couple of times I believe and he still beat it, still came out when his doctors told him he wasn't going to get out. And he'd be playing three days later, and with such *energy* He was a dynamo. God, if it wasn't for AIDS, I don't know what would have happened to him. He was so talented. His career wasn't even started yet. He was just at the very beginning.

When Dave started playing it was a story. It was never a bunch of cliches or runs or a chorus. It was a *story*. One thing led to another, and it was a whole journey when he played. It was wonderful. And eventually he couldn't keep that energy up. He would shorten his playing time, maybe just a couple of choruses, and let some of the other guys in the group play. It was difficult for him. He just didn't have the strength anymore.

He was like a skeleton the last few months and he'd still get up and play, God bless him. It was tough. He didn't look like his pictures. In fact towards the end I called him in the hospital and talked to him but I couldn't go to see him. I just couldn't handle it anymore. He was always so vital; there was so much life in his face and eyes, and in the last six months or so his eyes were just sunken in. It just wasn't the same.

When I'd call him in the hospital, no matter what he was doing he would get up and talk to you. "Oh yeah, man. Another week or so I'll be out of here and play. We're going to do this..." And then I'm sure as soon as I hung up, he'd be flat on his back speechless. I know how weak he was; that's why I never held long conversations with him. I'd cut it off myself and say, "Hey, I just wanted to call and say hi..." He just didn't have the strength anymore. Then he planned his funeral. He planned everything, that I was going to play and what I was going to play and how long! Quite a guy.

Musically I don't even think he came close to his potential. I really don't. He had so much going without really having a mentor, influences around him. This guy should have been in New York playing with that kind of talent, with world class players, and developing, listening ... He would have grown into an incredible talent. It would have been just a matter of time, and he didn't have enough time in his life to do it. Because I saw changes in him in just the few short years that I really knew him. Leaps and bounds, boy!

When you went to hear Dave play in person you knew that you were not going to hear something that every other piano player was playing. And you knew it wasn't going to be the same that Dave played the night before. Even if it's the same song it's going to be so different! That's the way he was, very creative. His playing had more textures than other piano players would use.

Like I said, the thing that amazed me is when he comped for somebody. Just so complementary. Amazing. Behind singers, oh, oh, oh boy! It's just a knack. It's hard to explain, but he had it.