

## INTERVIEW WITH CHUCK NOLAN -- OCTOBER 1994

*Chuck Nolan was born in October, 1934 in Dothan, Alabama. A trumpeter, he worked as a traveling musician with different name bands before he began teaching at Westbury High School in Houston. Throughout Dave's high school years, Chuck was a major influence, guide, and mentor in helping shape Dave's musical talents. Since retiring from teaching, Chuck continues to play a couple of gigs a week in the Houston area.*

I had a massive heart attack years ago, before I even met Dave. I was only forty-eight years old when I took my retirement; this was after I'd had triple bypass surgery. I'd gotten to feeling real bad, and it seemed like a little bit of stress would bother it, so the doctor said, "You've got a lot of damage there. It might be best that you go ahead and retire if you can." So I did, about seven years ago. But I've been doing great. Since then I can go play and do things and be active in whatever I do, and it doesn't bother me.

The way Dave started out, he was in what they call the Singing Boys of Houston, a vocal group of young kids. When he was in about sixth or seventh grade, some neighbor moved who'd had an old upright piano, and they left it with the Catneys. They put it out on a kind of porch or breezeway type thing. So he never had any lessons but he fooled around with the piano. That was his first piano, the only piano the family ever had. It was just an old piano, an old upright, painted white I think.

Then his folks bought him an old clarinet, and he took band in junior high school. When the school got a bass clarinet because they needed one in the concert band, he volunteered and played bass clarinet. In junior high school they had this band director who knew nothing about jazz, but he wanted to start this stage band, because it was kind of the going thing at the time. So he started a stage band with the kids and didn't have a bass player, but the school did have a bass. And Dave said, "Well I can learn to play that!" So the guy gave him a book and a bass, and the next day he could play some of the notes and all, real quick. I'm just telling you this because this is how quick he learned.

When he came to me in the ninth or tenth grade we had two stage bands, an advanced and a beginning. He hadn't started playing on piano yet as far as jazz but he was playing bass. I told him, "Well I've got a pretty good bass player," and I did; I had a twelfth grader who played well. But I could see that Dave was a good, interested musician so I put him in the advanced band, where he was kind of a substitute bass player. We had a synthesizer too, and he started fooling around with that. I had a good piano player at the time who was older, and he'd been playing longer. So then Dave just took over the bass players spot because he became better as an electric bass player. He started adding the Moog synthesizer to the electric piano we already had, so we were adding that in too. We were playing big band jazz. He came along real fast and by the following year he had started coming along real good on piano, so we switched off from bass to piano, and he was taking over the piano parts and playing.

We would sit in the afternoons--he and I--after school, and I would play trumpet and we'd go over tunes like *A Foggy Day*; just jazz tunes or up tunes, you know, standards. He started learning tunes that way. Every afternoon school would get out about 3, 3:30, and he'd stay 'til like 5:00. He had advanced on bass too to the point that he played pretty nice bass, and I was playing around town with commercial bands so I would get him work when I'd play. He'd go with us on different things as a bass player and he started picking up money there. He used the school amp and the school bass.

One day we were going to Galveston to play and we were sitting in front of this music store waiting for everybody to get there. We were going in a couple of vans, like nine-passenger vans. And these guys pulled up with an old delivery van and they walked over and said, "Anybody want to buy any musical instruments?" I said, "What you got?" And they said, "We've got some amplifiers and we've got guitars and a bass." So I went back there and looked--I knew they were probably hot--but Dave needed a bass, and they had a pretty good bass. So I went back to the guys in the band and said, "Can we take up a collection and get this bass?" We paid like eighty or ninety dollars for the bass, and when I took up the collection I said, "I'll pay you back after the job tonight when we all get paid." I told Dave that he could pay me back in about three or four payments, and that's the way he got his first bass.

He continued playing around town with different bands on bass, mainly commercial bands. Then he didn't have anything fancy to play on at home for piano, just that old piano that was there. And so one afternoon he came to me and said, "They have a storage warehouse where they're selling off a bunch of stuff and they've got a Fender Rhodes over there with the built-in amplifier..." So I said, "Well sure, I'll be glad to go take a look at it with you, so we went over there, and it was seventy five dollars. I said, "Well that's a great price on it." Even though it was pretty raggedy looking it was still in good shape. Somebody had just not paid their storage bill and all, and so they were selling stuff off. Dave said, "Well, maybe I should sell my bass ..." I said, "No man, you're not going to do that. You're making money on the bass," and I said, "If you can't afford to buy it, I'll buy it and you can pay me back." So we went ahead and paid them seventy five dollars for the piano and we got the piano, and he paid me back for it. That's where he first got his piano and how he started out kind of professionally on his instruments, and then he started getting some jobs around town playing piano too.

We went to a lot of jazz contests when he was in high school, with a big band. He also performed in a combo, just like piano, bass, drum and one horn or so, in which he entered the contests also. One outstanding time was when we went to New Orleans, to Loyola University, to their festival. We went every year, but this particular time he took a combo and right quick he won first place in the combo division. That same year he was playing piano in the big jazz band and he won the outstanding musician of the festival--and this included bands from like Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas--and he won the outstanding musician for the entire festival there. They always had real good judges and people like that at these festivals.

He continued playing, and one thing that stands out in my mind is that every day like clockwork he would sit in the band room every afternoon after everybody had gone--I was always there a couple of hours later--and he'd sit there and practice, learning to play tunes and chords and just progressions and all. When I had the time I went out and sat with him, and we went over standards and things like that. He did all of this on his own. Nobody taught him the piano. I didn't teach him. I didn't know enough about piano to teach him anything on it. He picked all of this up. I was his band director and maybe had a little influence there, but he picked everything up on his own.

We had a pretty good jazz program at the school because that was what I had learned more than anything else. Out of the entire day Dave would come down at least two or three periods out of a six or seven period day. He'd be in the jazz band and then he'd be in the concert band. We had a theory and improvisation class that he was in, and these guys worked out a lot of things in that. The only thing bad about the situation at my school was that I had the whole band program: the jazz program, the concert band, the marching band, and just one person teaching it. Out of almost a three thousand student

high school, they only hired one person, and so I had to do the whole thing. If Dave had been in a school where they'd had more private instruction and more opportunity--like the performing arts school here--he'd have probably developed faster. We needed some tuba players in the concert band, and so Dave said, "I can learn that!" He was that way and so sure enough he learned it, and then within a couple of months there they had what they call solo and ensemble contest, where you play a little solo at the city festival here in Houston. And so he won a little medal for first class playing on tuba!

I had gone to North Texas State in Denton, and he thought that was probably a good school to go to. That's where he met some of these people he ended up playing and recording with, like Ed Soph and people like that. He went to North Texas because I had talked it up, I guess. I'd had several students go up there over the years. So Dave gets up there and he's a real good piano player, but in the music department they wouldn't accept him because he hadn't had the background and classical training and all. This is amusing because they wouldn't accept him as a piano student. Isn't that something? So he had to major on tuba, which he had just picked up that year in high school. He had very little training on it. I helped him a little bit, and he picked up most of it himself. And so that's what he was studying as a major, tuba.

They didn't give him much of a chance--it was a little political up there--so he wasn't really given much of a chance to play in the top bands. They had a lot of bands--jazz bands--eight or ten or so. He played in one of the lower bands but he also played a lot of sessions around there and got to meet a lot of the guys who helped him later on in his playing and all. He stayed up there a couple of years and then he came back down here and played around here and he was picking up whatever he could. He went out on a cruise with some other students that I had taught or that I had started in bands around, and they stayed out on a cruise for a while.

At the time I was working in this hotel every week on Sunday nights with a big band, and when they came back to town--I didn't even know they'd gone out and I hadn't seen Dave in a while--but all three of them came in to see me; Dave and a bass player and drummer who were just a little bit older I think.. All three of these guys had been former students and they'd been out maybe six, eight months on different cruises together, and they came in to this hotel where I was working. Naturally I had them sit in with the band. They were great players by then!

A little later on he called me, and we were sitting around talking and he was telling me that this place--Cezanne--that he was going to try to put entertainment in there. He said that they had given him permission to go ahead and purchase a real fine grand piano. So we talked a little bit, and the next thing I knew he was playing by himself there. He called me a couple of times to come over to his little garage apartment and we played some tunes and all. On different occasions he would call me and say, "Why don't you drop by Cezanne?" Well usually I was working, especially on weekends when they were doing live music. He started adding a bass, and then a drummer and a bass, and it started developing into a jazz club that he was really promoting on his own. He was doing the promotion and getting name players out of New York and places like that, like Fred Hersch and Marvin Stamm, well known people who could come down for a couple of days and play. And that seemed to be what his real love was there, because before that he had been playing in hotel restaurants, just to sit there by himself and play commercial music to make a living. He had told me that he'd much rather do this and just barely get by so that he could play this type of music that he wanted to play. So he promoted that, and that's what he did up until he passed away.

I had some funny times with him. One time we were looking for a bass, and I told him to go look in the yellow pages under pawn shops. Well he looked up one and it said Granny's Pawn Shop. Being a smart kid, when the guy answered the phone he said, "Let me speak to Granny!" You know, real smart. And the guy said, "Granny's in the shithouse!" Well that kind of stunned Dave. So he comes back, and I said, "Well, what happened?" He said, "Well I called Granny's, and the guy said Granny was in the shithouse!" It was kind of amusing. At the time he was a fifteen or sixteen year old kid.

In high school he got to experimenting a little bit with pot, and I had to get on his case a bit. He never did it to any extent that bothered him or hurt him. Every kid was trying it. We used to go down to Corpus Christi, to a festival down there, and I would take the entire band, which was the marching band and the jazz band, and we participated in a marching deal and also a jazz festival. Well I told them before we left, I said, "Look, if you guys take anything down there and get caught with anything, you're going home and you're out of the band." So sure enough, he got caught with some pot in his room. That was probably about 7:00 that night. So I took him out and said, "Look, I don't have time to go into town and take you to the bus station to take you home but I'm going to put you out here on this empty bus and I want you to stay here all night. And as soon as it's daylight, I'm going to take you downtown, put you on a bus, send you home and call your parents." I knew that would put a little scare into him.

The next morning I get up about 8:00 and go out there. He's been pacing all night, up and down, inside the bus. All night long; no sleep. He didn't lay down or anything. I said, "Well did you learn anything?" He said, "Oh man, I paced all night long!" I said, "Well I'm not going to send you back. Maybe you learned your lesson." He said, "I didn't sleep a wink. Man, I paced this bus all night long wondering what I was going to tell my folks when I got home, for you sending me back like this!" He said, "I don't want to be out of the band." So it was kind of a funny thing.

The last thing that I recall... He had told somebody that he had asked about me, and I hadn't seen him for about three months. He told them, "I guess I'll have to get a real great trumpet player in at Cezanne for him to come see me." I really didn't know how bad a shape he was in, but a friend of mine told me that. I guess that was a couple of weeks before he died.

I really admire him. I didn't really teach him. Dave was self taught and he had the determination. I hope I was an influence. It seems like in articles or on his records and all he always gave me a little recognition there, and I appreciate that, because a lot of guys who teach others who end up going on never hear any mention from them.

Dave was a good person too. I really liked him as a friend. I didn't know how bad it was because every time I'd go see him, he'd say, "I'm feeling great and I'm doing great," and all of this. I always tried to go see him every three or four months. Maybe not often enough, but when he passed away I didn't even know he was in the hospital. They would send me the itinerary for Cezanne every month, and I'd see where he'd be playing with so and so one time. Then I didn't see him for a little while and I just figured they had other people playing at that time.

We were going to do a little demo tape together. We were going in a little studio, with three rhythms and a horn, and we never did. We talked about it a couple of times and we set up a schedule one time, and I guess he got to feeling bad. It was his idea; he wanted to do this. It wasn't going to be on any name label or anything like that. It was just going to be for our own benefit.

Dave was a nice looking guy. He got where he worked out with weights and he looked physically good. That's the reason after he got sick and got so thin that it bothered me. He really had a good personality. He kind of was on fire all the time, busy doing things. He had to be doing something all the time. He was always creating something, doing something, getting something together. He was very active all the time. This guy was an intelligent guy.

I also taught one sister of his. She seemed to be very fond of him. He was very fond of his mother. One day we were coming back from a contest and he and I were playing together that night, and he was bringing her something that he had bought at a bakery--like eclairs or something--because he said she loved eclairs. When he went and made a commercial in Japan he told me that he took his mother. So he loved his mother. I never did know anything about his dad.

His music was strictly on his own really. He had to really want to do it and he had the talent and worked on it very hard. I know that in the last few years he would probably practice eight, ten hours a day. It was constant all day. And he was on the phone all the time to different people, promoting things and trying to do what he liked best: jazz.

Dave was a self-taught person and maybe he didn't study the fundamentals as he should have, but I think--just in the last few years--that if he'd had a little longer life he'd have been great, notable among jazz players. Because this guy loved it so much and he had the talent. Every time I heard him he'd play even better, even when he was sick. I think he'd have been one of the greats, and not just because I knew him or anything like that. When he'd play with certain people it would just knock you out. It was really great. It seemed that when he had an audience he just played that much better.

My son was in a little combo that Dave had; he was the trombone player. They were best of friends. In fact when my son, who's an attorney here, got married four or five years ago, Dave made a point that night to be off and he came to the wedding and played at the reception. My son thought very highly of Dave.

He was very gentle in a lot of ways. He could get excited pretty quick--pissed off and things if he needed to--but most of the time he was very nice, very easygoing. He was a very hyper kind of guy too. He had to be doing something. I can't say anything bad about him because I don't know anything bad about him.

My wife and I used to go hear him, even before he played at Cezanne.

Maybe he'd be playing just a single at a hotel restaurant or something. I usually worked weekend nights, and then they got to doing only weekends there at Cezanne so I didn't get there very often. Probably every three months or so we'd go in. The last time I went it was two musicians and myself. We went in there and we stayed for a couple hours. He was just playing great. It was a guy from Los Angeles with him at that time. But that was the very last time I saw him.

At the memorial service they were talking about that he didn't have anything to leave other than his playing, his music, because he died broke. The place that he lived--the last one I went to anyway--was just a garage apartment in back of a house. It wasn't very fancy, and he didn't drive a very nice automobile. But he didn't care about those things. He just loved to play and that's what he did. He didn't leave anything in terms of money or things but he sure left an impression on a lot of people in music. And that's what it was all about. That's what he loved. Other things didn't matter.

I'll tell you what. He kind of looked like Leonard Nimoy in high school, so they called him Dr. Spock. He liked that. He said he was Dr. Spock.