

## INTERVIEW WITH BARRY MORGAN – JANUARY 1995

*Barry Morgan was born in London, England in November, 1944. He played drums on the British merchant fleet cruise ships in the early 1960's, and later for singer Tom Jones for a period of ten years. Barry and his wife own and operate the Arena Theater in Houston. He arranged to have Dave open for Tony Bennett at Jones Hall on April 21st, 1992.*

The original owner of the Arena Theater was Bob Hope. He opened it in 1964. It had gone through several different owners and closings. The owner before myself put in a lot of money in renovations and a new sound system and really did a lot of stuff to it. My wife and I were fairly new concert promoters in Houston at the time but we had a good reputation, so he hired us to book the venue. About a year later he said, "Look, I'm too old to mess with this and I'm too rich to worry about it, so I'm moving on." So we struck a sweetheart deal with him and bought the venue from him, with all its assets and liabilities, and that's what we've been doing ever since. We have everyone from Tom Jones, Wayne Newton, Englebert and Steve and Edie to the O'Jays, the Isleys, the Temptations and the Tops; a lot of Motown stuff. We do a lot of the black comedy shows. We don't do much in the way of rock 'n roll or country. And we do jazz.

I probably met Dave for the first time around 1990. I'd heard a lot about him and eventually I think I made it to Cezanne. I wandered in one night with another fine piano player named Joe LoCascio. I remember immediately thinking what a great personality Dave had. He was very open, full of life, wanted to know about people, wanted to meet people, liked to talk to people. But the one thing that struck me--he had the trio that night--he had a great way of dealing with an audience. He wasn't one of those jazz musicians who just played and kept his head down and obligingly nodded at the audience as they gave a little applause. He really was a master of ceremonies. Dave ran the club well. On show nights he'd have raffles and give away prizes. There was a guy who owned a jazz record shop who'd bring CD's, and I would bring in concert tickets, and at the end of a couple of tunes he'd have a raffle, a door prize. It made going to a jazz club a much more pleasant experience for people, and he built himself a real following. Even if somebody didn't like jazz they liked Dave and they always felt welcome in the club. He was one of those guys it was just good to be around. Dave was a very, very warm human being; never bad mouthed anyone. Just a good guy.

I'd heard that he had signed with Justice. I'm very good friends with the president of Justice, Randall Jamail, and sometime later he and I had gotten into a conversation about trying to get Dave's second album, *Jade Visions* promoted. They wanted to kind of get that going. Anyway, I had a Tony Bennett concert at the Music Hall in Houston, and normally Ralph Sharon's trio opens, then there's an intermission, and then Tony comes on with the trio. But I persuaded them to let me put Dave on solo for about a half an hour. They agreed. Ralph was happy about it because that meant he didn't have to work the first set. So Dave was booked on to go.

The day of the show I went down to the Four Seasons to pick up the sound man, Ralph, and the bass player and the drummer. Tony was following along later in a limousine that we'd hired. So I was there in the lobby, and Tony Bennett came in from a shopping center across the street. I was standing with Ralph and the drummer, and Tony came over, and they said, "This is the promoter for the night", and we shook hands. Just at that particular moment, around the corner from the elevators walks Phil Collins. I didn't know this, but apparently he was in town rehearsing with Genesis at the Goodyear Blimp warehouse out by the airport. They'd hired it for like a month. Well, Phil was speechless. We found this out on the spot, that Phil is completely enamored and a hardcore fan of Tony Bennett. So they chatted for a bit and Tony said, "I'd like you to come to the show." Phil said, "Yeah, I'm just rehearsing. I'm not working tonight so I'll come to the show." So we arranged all that.

The funny thing was that he got to the show about a minute or so after Dave had walked on. He stood back, and we were all talking. "Phil Collins, this is Randall Jamail." "Pleased to meet you...." "This is Ralph Sharon, Tony's piano player ..." We talked for about five minutes, and Phil's attention started to wander and he went over to the curtain at the side of the stage and sat and watched Dave for about fifteen minutes. Then he came by and he said, "Boy, he's really good! I like the way he plays." Which I thought was real nice. Dave was pretty tickled about it too. Not that Phil Collins is any jazz icon, but it was nice. He did play very well that night.

It seemed that the sicker Dave got the better he played. He just never let anything distract musically from what he knew was his final weeks or days with it, up to the point where he couldn't play. When he did he just put his heart and soul into it--which he always did anyway--but he just seemed to really push for it at the very end there.

I used to live around the corner from Cezanne and I went quite a bit. Like a lot of people I would go when Dave was there, but actually he was the only one really trying to do anything adventurous in town. I'd done a few club dates as a promoter with people like Mark Whitfield and Larry Coryell and Christopher Hollyday. I didn't make any money on those shows. I don't know whether I actually lost any money, but it was a lot of work for very little return. But Dave seemed to be able to get people to come down, sideman from favorite bands and the like. One time Ernie Watts was in town I believe, doing a commercial for someone, and Dave got him to come over one night. He'd have guest bass players and drummers drop by and come in, some really top notch players.

Dave really supported local guys a lot too. The good tenor players and the good drummers and stuff would come in and play with him, so I used to go there quite a bit. I sat in with him a couple times and scraped away a bit. No up-tempos and no trading fours; just let me play *Satin Doll*. Once every two years I have to play *Satin Doll*. Then I know I'm done with it again for another two years!

The only time we ever spent any sort of time together was once when I took him to Phoenix. I had an industrial date with IBM that required a good, swift thinking piano player who could kick about six or eight musicians into some kind of shape for faking tunes real quickly; a guy who can sit at the keyboard and say, "C *Jam Blues*", in

whatever key and start it off, and the guys would fall into place. Someone who could really do that one date and do it great, and be able to get up at six in the morning and do that too. He was really good at that. They loved him. But I never really socialized that much with Dave.

As far as his having AIDS, he never mentioned a word. A couple of times when he was obviously struggling with it, I'd said to him, "How are you feeling? How's your health?" And he'd say, "Oh I'm doing fine. My T-count's so and so..." Actually in Phoenix he was buying a lot of groceries, because everything is paid for. You just get what you want off room service. He said, "No, I've got special foods and special stuff," and he'd go out and fill up the fridge with all kinds of stuff. We were there about four days or so. His friend was with him, and they'd cook in the room. That was about the only time it was really obvious that he was really fighting. But he never really talked about it.

Dave really grew a lot musically. It was like he was going to take more chances and I guess and not worry so much. He was not what you would call a nervous person at the best of times anyway. He was a very calm individual. But I think that towards the end he decided that whatever he had bundled up and whatever he wanted to say musically, jazz-wise, that he was going to do it anyway. There was almost a relaxed swan song type of a thing that took over, and he played wonderfully. He always played well, but at the end there were some really nice moments. The last time I saw him play--probably three months before he died--it was a pretty energized set for someone who'd lost a ton of weight and had that whole aura of an out and out AIDS patient. He was putting everything into it. He didn't play very long, probably a couple of tunes, and then someone else would have to play for a while.

Now it's easy to say those things about someone when they're gone--you always say great things--but it just absolutely was true. He really had some energy going at the end there. But I'd phone him up when he was real bad and we talked a bit. He said that what he was doing was ... He'd have one complete day off and wouldn't do a darn thing other than just rest; wouldn't answer the phone, wouldn't think about anything. Then the next day if he felt well enough, he'd try and do what it was he had to do. If it was work, he could try and work, try and walk a bit, make a couple calls, eat, whatever, get out of bed. And then the next day he'd go back to complete motionless resting up. That got him through the few musical things he wanted to take care of.

Dave had wanted to hold the CD release party for *Reality Road* at the Arena Theater. Linda phoned up and said that he wanted to do that, and I said, "Dave can have the Arena anytime he wants it." I remember advising Linda--since the Arena has almost three thousand seats--that I didn't want the event to be dwarfed. I offered to cut it down to half a house, which is about thirteen hundred seats, and put a backdrop up for him. But still, even at that, you've got to be real careful. So they kind of agreed with me. I thought that Cezanne was too small for it. I'm not sure if they ended up having the release party even, but I'd rather see something like that be jammed at Cezanne or Ovations than everyone rattling around in a big, empty theater.

Dave also put a quartet together and opened for a Ray Charles date at the Arena a few years ago. It was Dave and Kellye Gray and Sebastian Whittaker on drums and David Craig on bass. It was a nice set, a real nice set. It was pretty much a sold out show for Ray Charles, and they did the first forty five minutes. But it got a nice reception. Actually we had a bad night with Ray that night which is another story. He was real late coming in and he didn't feel well, and there were some major hassles. I'll never hire Ray Charles again in my life! Dave was certainly the high point of the evening.

I had a fairly short relationship with Dave. From the period where I got to meet him to the point where he left us it was only about three years. Dave was very real, extremely warm, obviously capable and talented and all those things. He was a loving human being, with those qualities that made you want to be around him. I don't think he had a mean bone in his body. He didn't even seem particularly bitter about his predicament, that I ever saw anyway.

Dave and I had not a close but a brief, mutually likeable, warm relationship. He always seemed genuinely glad to see me, and I certainly always was really happy to see him. He had a way of cheering you up if you didn't feel like much of anything. His personality could certainly win you over and make you feel more cheerful.