

INTERVIEW WITH DICK OATTS -- SEPTEMBER, 1995

Born in Des Moines, Iowa in April, 1953, Dick Oatts began playing saxophone at the age of eight. After moving to New York in 1977 he joined Thad Jones and Mel Lewis, an association which continues to this day. Dick also works with the Carnegie Hall Jazz Orchestra and does a variety of guest appearances with several bands. He played at Cezanne with Dave in early February of 1994.

I have a friend in Austin who's a great guy and who got me a bunch of gigs around there. He said, "You know, there's this guy, Dave Catney..." I had first heard about Dave when I did this record for Justice Records with pianist Stefan Karlson, so I said, "Yeah, I'd love to play with him." So I ended up getting a night or two at the club there. I also did a thing at Bob Morgan's school and then went back to Austin to do another thing there.

That was a time, and Dave and I hung out after the gig and got to know one another a little bit. I believe I had a little dinner downstairs before the gig with Bob Morgan, and that's when I met Dave. It's funny because I really try to look right in the eyes of somebody that I'm meeting, and he just looked so clear and so accepting. That's what I noticed first. When I saw him I just said, "Wow, I think it's going to be OK." Because you don't know sometimes when you go out and play, how it's going to be, with who. And then just from the way somebody greets you and looks at you ... He did that, and it was just so warm. I felt at ease and peace. He gave it up; he was really nice. Through the whole evening he couldn't do enough for me. He played great on my tunes that I'd pass out. I really enjoyed the gig. It was really fun.

Dave showed no signs of weakening physically at all. He was always in there hitting hard. He could have played three more sets that night, and I was tired! But he had a lot of energy and had a real zest for playing and giving musically, which I really appreciated. The way he gave musically coincided with the way he gave to people. It was really one, a nice combination.

Dave and I had come from different places musically, but what I really appreciated was that we could immediately sit down and try to hear one another and play off of each other. It wasn't like, "You're into this kind of music and I'm into this kind of music ..." It was just like, "We're in music together," and we tried to give a very new association some meaning.

I think Dave had more confidence in my own music than I did, and he just said, "No, let's play it. Let's play it!" It was really very nice. Sometimes I just say, "Oh, let's just do standards and keep it easy and simple." But I think he was always wanting to go ahead, to go forward.

Dave was a great player, not only just from a musician standpoint, but from a very creative standpoint. He had a lot of very different ways of expressing himself, and they all came from a lot of depth, a lot of understanding. The place was packed. That night we had Clark Terry come in. Kirk Whalum came by and sat in. Clark didn't; he came just to sit down and listen. So all that was an added plus I didn't know that Dave was ill. I was shocked when he told me. I was really taken aback, saying, "God, this is just so unfair..." We were sitting at the diner talking after the gig and I was thinking about maybe trying to do this again, coming down to Cezanne another time. You know how that goes, sometimes you talk about wanting to do that but then you get so tied up when you go back home, so sometimes things don't happen as immediately as you wish. But we had talked a lot about ourselves and a lot about our directions, and when he told me he had AIDS I was speechless for a minute. It was hard to know what to say. He looked fine, but thin. He said that his T-cell count was

pretty down but he had brought it up and it seemed to be remaining stable at that time. We talked about our vision of music and life and where we wanted to go.

He drove that big old car. I remember that. He drove me around and then took me back to the hotel. He explained some details about AIDS and the sickness that he was going through and how positive he was trying to keep through this whole thing and how busy he'd been organizing things. Actually I talked to Fred Hersch later, and Fred was really nervous that he was that busy. He wanted him to take it easy, but.

Dave and I talked in great detail about how he was coping with it. He seemed very stoic. He wasn't giving up at all and he seemed to want to grab as much as he could, musically and in life. He didn't seem to break down and crumble; he just became stronger mentally even though physically he might have gotten weaker. You wouldn't have known it on the gig. He just played so incredibly well and with such energy.

Dave really impressed me, being so strong in the face of one of life's biggest drags. In my position in this world at this particular time, of all the injustices that one sees through history and one's lifetime, this is the one that to me is the biggest injustice. I've had other acquaintances pass on from this, and my wife is a violinist and she's seen it too. It takes us into understanding life in really a different way, and how temporary some great people really are, but the impact they make is forever.

Dave made that impact. He's part of the music family. I didn't get to know him on an ongoing basis, but just the chance to play with him and listen to his CD's that he gave me made me a true believer in him. I was a true believer before I knew he had AIDS, and when he told me I really was in awe. Because I think of my dealings in life and sometimes of how weak I can be in a situation, and when I see someone like him, it's a true inspiration. I grew from the experience. I grew musically and I grew emotionally and spiritually.

When I heard the news of Dave's death my heart sank. He was really a beautiful guy. I regretted not having more time to get to know him and more chances to play with him. When I was with Dave I said, "Man, here's a guy I'd really like to hang with and get to know and play with." And it's funny, my job just pulls me right back out of that scene into another scene. It generally gets in the way of getting very close to situations or people, and I regret that. But I guess that's the downside of trying to exist in a capitalist society.

I've played with some great piano players and Dave was every bit their equal. And in a way he had an advantage because I think he had a little bit more of his own style. It seemed like when I listened to his music on CD I got more of a grasp of who he was. What got me first was that he had a definite connection between his writing or his arranging and his playing. Sometimes the two don't match up. Sometimes a guy can write great and when he tries to play it, to me it doesn't sound that great. But I think that Dave had both.

He was into playing not just to prove that he could make it through something difficult; he'd always make it musical. I found his music just very musical and I can count on one hand how many piano players give me that out here, in New York. So he was really like a gem, in any city, any location, as far as talent, in my estimation. Dave was a great musician, very well rounded. You could tell that he'd paid a lot of dues and had worked through a lot of things in his life. That came

out, his depth. Fred Hersch has that. A lot of times players just don't have that, and when I heard Dave and he was young--my wife's age -- I went "Wow." He had it.

I loved his comping when I played with him. He took me in other directions that were new to me. I'll always remember him. I can tell you that.