

INTERVIEW WITH DARREL TIDABACK - JUNE, 1997

Darrel Tidaback was born in Valparaiso, Indiana in February, 1953. He began playing trombone at age twelve and electric bass at sixteen. Darrel took up the string bass and jazz in his mid twenties and worked steadily in the South Bend/Chicago area throughout the mid 1980's. After settling in San Antonio, he played bass on a number of gigs with Dave and with drummer Joe Ferreira at Cezanne. On January 4 and 5, 1994 the three did a recording session in San Antonio, recording mostly a variety of Darrel's original composition. This superb session contains some of Dave's most pure and graceful playing and has already elicited high praise from such Catney colleagues as drummer Peter Erskine.

****Editors Note--Darrel will soon be making this eleven track CD, titled **Timelines**, available through CD Baby and perhaps Amazon.com. (Track #7, *Midwestern Winter*, can be heard by clicking on "Listen to Dave" on the home page.) In addition to being a most important addition to Dave's issued works and legacy, the release of this CD is great news for us all. Thank you Darrel--and Joe and Dave--for this truly outstanding music.*

I moved to Texas originally in 1986 to play with Joe Ferreira, whom I'd known in northern Indiana and Chicago. He ended up picking up a job with this really good Japanese pianist in San Antonio named Noboko. The South Bend scene was pretty well drying up by then, and when Noboko's old bass player wanted to split, Joe called me up and asked me if I'd be interested in coming down for a six night a week gig. I said, "Sure." I wasn't attached, was footloose and fancy free, so I moved down to San Antonio the first time in early '86 and started playing with her. Noboko was a good piano player.

So I came down here and actually fell into doing a lot of work here in '86 and '87--just very, very busy--working with Joe and Noboko and then several other really good players down here. In '88 I went back to Chicago for some time and then moved back to San Antonio early in '89. I think the first gig I played back here was with Marshall Royal, who was lead alto player in the Basie band. He was a lot of fun to work with. I met my wife shortly after moving here and we got married and had kids and all that stuff and I've been in San Antonio since.

Joe moved to Houston late in '92--I believe--and he met Dave. In probably May of '93 Joe called me up and asked if I'd be interested in working with he and Dave, and I called Dave for the first of our lengthy phone calls. You couldn't call Dave and have a short phone call! So I talked with him and I think the first job we played was in June of '93 at Cezanne. At that point I think Dave's second CD had come out on Justice, but I wasn't really familiar with his piano playing, so in preparation Dave sent me a tape with *First Flight* on it and said, "If there's anything on here you want to learn or want to pick up and do, we'll do some of that." So I learned a couple of tunes off of that and then I went and played with him for a couple of nights at Cezanne.

To me, it was great. I think Dave was pleased with it. Joe was pleased. The audience response was good. On one of the nights it was pouring down rain; we all got absolutely drenched moving stuff. I think on that first gig one night was a trio, and one night was a quartet with Warren Sneed. The trio night in particular just floored me. My own playing has been affected a lot by Scott LeFaro (of Bill Evans trio fame) and those type guys, and piano trio is like the classic ensemble to me. I really enjoy that just about the most.

There were actually any number of amazing things about David's playing, but to enumerate them... He listened so well. One of the best things about playing in a trio is that because it's so intimate and you can hear everything going on so well you have the opportunity to respond to what the other players are doing, far more so than even in a quartet setting. In a trio setting I feel like I have much more room to be a quasi-horn sometimes, to not just be relegated to an entirely rhythmic-harmonic role.

My goal is to try and make what other people are doing sound the best that it possibly can, and I know from long experience of playing with Joe that that's certainly his interest. It was just a matter of clicking with David, because it was so obvious that that was his interest too. His interest was the overall action--what was going on with the overall ensemble--and everything he played just seemed to be the absolute right thing. He listened so much so that if I was playing along and went a particular direction and that added to something, he would hear whatever it was I was doing and then add to that, which added to the overall thing... Playing on that level, that level of interaction, has rarely ever occurred in my life on such a sustained basis, where each tune seemed to have a real life of it's own through interaction. I mean it was like what jazz oftentimes is not and what it ideally ought to be all the time. And it just seemed to happen. It just seemed that everybody was really geared towards listening and towards enhancing what the other people were doing.

To enumerate what Dave's talents were--to me--when I would take a solo, his ability as an accompanist to enhance, to make whatever I was doing sound just 1000 times better than it actually was floored me. That was a tremendous gift. It was Dave's gift in his playing, and a tremendous gift in terms of the interaction and what the audience was getting out of it. You're there playing for a paying audience and you're giving them the most value for their admission. But the other thing is his gift to me as the soloist at the moment was for me to be playing a line--whatever the line would be or whatever the harmonic direction, he would do... he knew exactly what I was doing, he was listening so carefully and his chops were so strong and were so musical. Dave's abilities far exceeded mine, so it wasn't like I was going to play anything that was going to snow him or anything like that. But whatever it was that I would do, he would be right there with a chord voicing or whatever he would add so that it would just be the perfect thing. It was almost as if at that point I was his right hand, so he knew so well what I was going to do that he could play exactly the right thing to support that in the exactly appropriate manner. That's one of the other great skills David had, and of course it relates to the first one: he's listening and he's listening intently.

The other skill that David had was just an almost seemingly endless wealth of melodic ideas. He was a very melodic player to me. He would start an idea, pick it up, expand it, expand on it further, which gave me the opportunity to listen to that and go with that direction. But it just never seemed to end; he could just play and play and play, and I can't ever recall feeling like it ever fell into any kind of clichéd thing at all. He had a tremendous wealth of things to draw on. And then I guess that on top of that, whatever he had to draw on in terms of that well of ideas, not only did it not sound clichéd, but it always had an emotional thrust to it. It was never mechanical. It was never "Well it's time for this lick or that lick..." It always had an emotional intent to me.

I'm not a sentimental person and I don't care much for sentimentality and I'm not much for romanticism--in say the musical or artistic sense--and yet you can't deny that there's a powerful thing to romantic music or to a romantic element in music.

There was a romance about David's playing that was not sentimental, if that makes any sense. There's an emotional intent there that is the essence of romantic playing or of romantic art or poetry or music, and yet it was immediate. It spoke to you right now; it was of the moment. I never got a sense of sentimentality about it.

My initial impressions of Dave as a person were really mixed because when you talked to Dave it was like this flurry of nonstop stuff that came out. I mean he talked a mile a minute, so you're sort of bombarded by all this stuff. I can remember playing the first set with him the first night and then him sitting down with me--he'd been around talking to the audience members, and I was on one of the little couches--he came over and sat down and we chitchatted a little bit. I liked David immediately. He was just such a real person.

He brought up his illness. He said, "Did Joe mention to you about my state of health?" or something like this, and I said, "Yeah." I remember asking him quite matter of factly how he was doing and how he was dealing with it, and his answers were--Dave was such a positive person--he says, "Oh, I'm doing fine. I'm taking all my meds,"--he always used the term "meds"--but he was just very matter of fact about it. And I wish I could remember now just a little better just exactly how, but he conveyed to me that not only did he have AIDS but that he was gay. Both points were made, although I didn't make the assumption about him being gay. It was all in the course of discussing any number of things, and he was not uncomfortable with me as a non-HIV, non-gay person discussing that with him. He seemed perfectly at ease with me asking, "How are you doing?" and "What sort of manifestations has the disease made so far?" He talked about the skin cancers and the various other symptoms and such, and so we had a fairly frank conversation about a subject for him and then we moved on to "What tunes do you want to do?" I told him how much I enjoyed his playing and working with him, and he conveyed the same to me, and we went on discussing a few other things. Along with Dave's honesty and forthrightness he seemed to be somebody who was genuinely interested in getting on with life.

Altogether it seems like I did about half a dozen weekends at Cezanne, maybe five through that summer and fall. I might play with David for one or two of the nights but I might play for three. I recall playing with Todd Vullo, the guitarist, like on a Thursday and then with Dave on Friday and Saturday. The nights I enjoyed the most were when we would do trio stuff. I really valued the intense and intimate level of interaction that we--Dave and Joe and I--could achieve in a trio. The more people you add the less you're interacting with any one of them, and a trio affords me the opportunity to interact the most with the pianist and drummer. So maybe my perception of playing in a trio--I'd never thought about it this way--is somewhat selfish then. The trio gave me the opportunity to directly relate harmonically and melodically--just one on one--with Dave.

It was approaching one o'clock on one of the jobs and someone came in and asked, "Can you play *Cherokee*?" We'd played pretty hard and I'm thinking, "Oh God, I don't really want to walk the bass at break-neck tempo for the next twenty minutes..." It was to the point where it would have been nice to play a couple of Bill Evans style ballads and call it a night. So Dave says, "Sure," and he counts it off at a break-neck tempo and just burns my ass all over the place and he plays his brains out. And then for my solo--it's hard enough for me just to walk through that thing at the tempo that people do that, and Dave called it quick--he and Joe just stopped playing--and abandoned me there! And I'm sitting there trying to maintain this tempo all on my own while I'm taking a solo. It was funny thinking back on it and it was even funny then, like, "Oh God, now what am I going to do?" It was also a compliment that both of them would put enough trust in me, that I

wouldn't just throw my bass down and leave or just fall apart entirely or just embarrass the heck out of all three of us. But Dave just burned it. It didn't matter how late it was, he tore it up. There's another thing. If what was called for in the tune was just to give it 110%, just burn it until you've got nothing left to say at all, then Dave would do that for himself and--since this is his group--he would expect you to do the same. He didn't cut me any slack at all, particularly on that tune!

We also played--this was one of my father's favorite tunes, and I'd never played the tune before in my life- -*Wouldn't it be Lovely*. Dave started playing the tune, and it was absolutely gorgeous. He did an absolutely beautiful version of the tune. And I didn't know the tune, but he took a little bit and then we all came in and played it, and looked at me and said, "Take a solo." So I took a solo that was an OK solo, but what David played behind me in that tune made what I was playing just sound like I'd been playing the tune for fifty years. It made me sound so much better than I actually was it was incredible. That tune stands out in my mind because it was something I'd never played before; I never even would have thought about playing that tune in a jazz context or an improvisational context.

My overall experience was that that's as close as I'll ever get to playing in the Bill Evans trio. And I don't mean that negatively in terms of Dave's style being derivative. I don't mean that at all. I think the Bill Evans trio is one of the high points of jazz music, for me. It's one of the paradigms of modern jazz. And since I can't play with Bill Evans, that was--and I wouldn't even put it in terms of the next best thing--that was a comparable experience for me in terms of it being artistically expressive.

Sometimes you go and play a job, and someone comes up and puts two dollars in the tip jar and they want to hear *Memories from Cats*. And so you play the tune and there you go. But to play in a setting where people are sitting there listening to you and they've come there specifically to listen to you--they've come there specifically to listen to Dave--and Dave turns over a third of the power, a third of the program, a third of the intention to me, sight unseen, and he has enough confidence in me and enough joy in the music and enough belief in jazz or improvisational music that he feels comfortable enough to hand that over to me and say, "Alright. Take it. Do something with this and I'll be right here with you to enhance whatever you do." That's pretty rare.

Saturday night after the first gig--I played with him two nights--we sat out talking about nothing in particular because it was pouring down rain. It was raining so hard you couldn't even get to your car, buckets pouring down with drops the size of fifty cent pieces, and we hadn't finished playing until way after one and it must have been three by the time we left. We sat there shooting the shit about nothing in particular; movies, books... He was just a regular guy.

I would stay at Joe's house when I came to visit Houston. I remember going out to get dim-sum in the afternoon with Scott and Dave and Kellye Gray and two or three other people and just sitting around the table and having a great time and thinking what a wonderful bunch of people these were that I had just met. This was a Saturday afternoon lunch that went on for about three hours, one of those things where you go out to lunch and everybody's telling stories and this or that... It was a rather artistic, rather musical bunch of people. I really enjoyed the intellectual level, the personal level.

That was a lot of fun.

Dave's health challenges didn't interfere with any of our gigs in '93. I think early in '94 we were supposed to get together and do a couple of jobs and I can't recall now if I played one more job with him after our recording session or not. I don't think I did. I think we were supposed to get together like two more times and do some playing, and at that point in the spring Dave must have had somewhat of a relapse. Then it seems to me he did better by early summer and then he took a nosedive. I was on vacation in California when he died. I talked to him just before I left and we had talked about doing some more playing when I came back. Joe told me that Dave had passed. That was really sad.

Maybe I'm way off base on this but I don't think so--I think it was a shared attitude by Joe and by David too--like, "This is a really good trio. This is a really good group. The chemistry is right here." You kind of know when you've got a group of people where the chemistry is right. Maybe that's my misperception but I don't think so. I think all three of us recognized that: "This has the marks of being a good trio." Of course Dave's problem was that his health restricted his ability to tour to support his own material and of course it would restrict his ability to tour and support anything else too. I think that frustrated him.

I had been working on two or three, maybe four original tunes in the summer of '93. One of my closest, dearest friends, Kathy Thompson, had passed away from breast cancer, and I had been working on a tune and several other things that popped in my head and I mentioned that on one of those jobs with Dave. He'd already had two CD's to his credit, and I asked him point blank; I said, "I'd like to do some recording. Would it be possible for me to induce you into that?" He just immediately said, "Sure, that would be great. Of course I'd be into doing that. The only problem is I'm working on this solo material for this third CD..." He said that he had that to do, and once that was out of the way, whatever I wanted to do, just let him know and he'd be into doing it. From the word go he was very receptive to it. I said, "Maybe it would be a couple of standards and maybe one or two of your tunes but mostly it's a way of getting a decent version of some of my own stuff down on tape." He said, "Sure. That would be fine."

We talked about it further that fall when he was done with that solo project, and I think he really wanted to see it through and make sure it went well. We talked about doing it that fall and I think we did a couple of other gigs there. I remember getting enough tunes together that I thought would work and calling Dave up and we discussed a couple of standards and things. Sometime in December then it seems to me I had a day free and I drove to Houston just for a rehearsal, and Dave came out. He was really enthused too because he'd gotten a new car. I remember him pulling up in front of Cezanne in some monstrous white Chrysler or something like that he'd gotten a good deal on. He was saying, "Wow! What a dedicated guy. You drive all this way just for a rehearsal..." I drove like three hours, had a two and a half hour rehearsal and then drove back home, and he seemed impressed that I would take the time to do that. But I did want to have him and Joe there so it was easier for me to do the drive.

We went through all the material and did one rehearsal for that recording at Cezanne that afternoon. I recall him making some suggestions about *It Was Just One of Those Things*. He wanted to change a couple of chords--just minimal things and suggestions--and we went with those suggestions. For a couple of things that I didn't have intros for, we came up with introductions, and that was all quite a collaborative effort. Just kind of... Who would solo, let's get the form of the tune down--that sort of stuff--how it would go down on tape. So we played through all the tunes and then we sat around and

talked again for a little bit and I took off. That was maybe sometime between Christmas and New Years.

My family and I were all going out of town to New York City on the sixth of January to visit my wife's brother after Christmas.

So we got together; I think it was the fourth and fifth of January that Joe and Dave came over. I had gotten some hotel rooms for them because we don't really have enough room to put people up at our house. I met them at the hotel and then the next day we went to St. Mary's University where they'd just gotten a half decent piano and I had access to the room there, a large room where they do recitals and whatnot. I had hired a guy who engineered a local recording studio and who had a bunch of recording equipment and an ADAT and a mixer and a good selection of mikes that he could bring along. So we spent part of the first day just flopping mikes up, and I had been out there before with him to try and judge mike positions before so we wouldn't have to take up too much time with that. We set up in a while and got several things down on tape, but the majority of it was recorded the second day. There were eleven tunes altogether, and it was about--I guess--maybe two four-hour sessions. Dave was pretty tired by the end of the second session. I do remember that. I think the second to last thing we recorded was his tune, *First Flight*, and then we did that Duke Ellington tune, *The Star Crossea Lovers* last. We did three takes of that, and Dave said, "Uh, that's it." I think his energy level had sunk down to the point where he felt it, so we said, "Fine. It's done." That's pretty much it. We were all visibly pooping out at that point. Everybody was tired, and there wasn't going to be anything too creative coming out of it after that.

All the things that I would have had to--maybe with a lesser pianist--say: "Try this here," or "This voicing is kind of how I would like this to go here," or "This needs to be a little quieter" or whatever There was like almost none of that by way of suggestions that needed to be made. He played those tunes just exactly the way that I would hear them in my head, right from the word go. I had sent him the charts a few weeks beforehand so he had the stuff, and it was real straightforward. I don't think we ever did more than three takes of anything.

Dave brought his ton of medicine with him, and there was a little refrigerator over in the music department, and we stuck it in over there and he'd periodically go over and get himself some.

When we were done I did a real, real rough mix, like right off the back of the ADAT to a little mixer and then slapped it on a tape and gave it to Joe and gave it to Dave; gave them all the takes of everything to get their feedback on it. When I talked to Dave he said he thought all of it was quite good. Joe and Dave each made suggestions. I called and asked them, "What do you think is the better take here?" and they each offered me feedback as to what they thought was a better performance; this take or that take or this solo from this take and this part from that take. That sort of thing. I don't ever recall any big discussion about what we would do with it, but of course there's been very little that I've been able to do with it so far in any case. Those kinds of things are so hard to get any interest on, and my life in the meantime has been very, very busy with kids and jobs and everything else. My decision to go back to school at that point has taken up a lot of my time too over the last several years.

The fact remains too that there's nothing that I can really do by way of being able to promote the material with Dave having passed away. Ideally in my heart of hearts--if I had to make a confession--I would love to have been able to produce that CD immediately and feel that it was good enough to put onto a CD and do some jobs with Dave. Maybe Linda would have

been into promoting that trio as something that Dave could use, something that we all could use, as a vehicle for promoting his music in a wider fashion and as a vehicle for promoting mine in a wider fashion too. We would have a vehicle with that trio on tape. I can't say that I didn't have that desire. And then of course when Dave passed away I basically shelved it and didn't even listen to it for almost another year or so. Then a year later I pulled it out with somewhat of a more objective ear and thought, "You know, this is not too bad..." Some of this stuff is worthy of pursuing in some direction. But it's been really hard too, and I don't know if part of that is due to the fact that Dave is dead. I think some of it is.

It is what it is and it makes a nice historical document. But in a way it's kind of a time-capsule too. I can't do that stuff again because Dave's not around. Not that I couldn't play that stuff with another pianist. But it's not that stuff. It's just not THAT. So maybe some of that inhibits me from pursuing it. I don't know what my problem is regarding that. It's been a really hard thing. And yet I would like to, too. I'd like people to hear it.

Though it's manifested itself in a somewhat different direction than music maybe, one of the things that Dave taught me--and of course we all know this, and the older we get the more we know this--we're all mortal and we have a limited amount of time and we shouldn't fuck it up. We shouldn't waste it. And so Dave has affected me in a couple of ways. Several ways. He's not the only person I've known who's passed away of AIDS, but as far as any colleague that I've worked with and enjoyed working with and would give my eye teeth to have the opportunity to have continued working with, he's the only person I've known to have passed away from AIDS who's affected me in that manner directly. That's one way Dave has affected me. I considered him a friend. I was disappointed because I didn't get to know him better and I didn't know him longer than the time I did get to spend with him.

For me, my family is so important; my kids, my relationship with Laurel. My friends are important to me, but my emphasis is on doing what's right for my family. I guess in a way Dave's death really hammered it home to me: you can step off at any time, so we shouldn't waste our time on terms of how we interact with others, particularly those people who are the closest to us. I have the luxury of being able to interact daily with my family and I cherish that. I cherish the people that I care about and I don't want to waste my time.

Regarding my going back to school I felt like I needed to do something to make myself a better musician, a better person, and it was something that I could do. And part of this is having met David and having performed with somebody whose skills and musicality were just of the highest caliber. So why would I want to do anything less than that from this point on? Why should I not pursue whatever vision I have as a person and as a musician? That would be wasting my life, and if I waste my life then what is it that I'm offering to those people around me that I care about; my children, my friends? If I offer them less than one hundred percent not only am I wasting my life but I'm diminishing theirs too. And all of that came about in part due to just my brief encounter with Dave. Not one hundred percent; I like to think of myself as a person who's trying to continue to grow in ways, but coming in contact with Dave certainly--if not accelerated it--at least made all of that more visible to me.

When it comes time for a person to make changes in their life, you pick your head up and you look around and you make

yourself more receptive to those people and those affects around you that you may not have noticed before. So as I wanted to make changes in my own life I picked my eyes up and looked around me and then I notice a person like Dave, and circumstance, history, fate--however you want to think about it--puts you in a position to interact with such a person. Maybe if I had met Dave two or three years earlier I wouldn't have gotten as much out of it, or it wouldn't have been the same sort of interaction. But I was ready to meet a Dave, and Dave came along and it affected me tremendously, along with the other forces that were accruing to shape my life. He was one of those. So it was not just Dave, but Dave was an integral part of changes that I've made in my life.

The third thing is that having played with a musician of that caliber, I don't want to do anything less than that with my own life. That should be my minimum now. Playing in a group that had that much interaction, that much empathy, that much of a listening ability, that caliber of musicianship... Ultimately all of that conspires to make that caliber of art. Then anything less than that is not worthwhile. So Dave gave me a taste of that too. It's not just getting up there and haranguing away on a tune or trying to play as many notes as you can in a bebop number. I really felt when I played with Dave that it was about playing everything that served the music, everything that served the mutual expression of the music and the musicians. To me it was one of the pinnacles of my playing career so far, in that I think that that trio had that sort of focus. So David and that trio experience has affected me a lot.

It's so internal and so personal and so much feeling-based. Music is a nonverbal language, and so to describe an essentially musical experience is really very hard for me. You had to be there. My experience with Dave was one of those "you had to be there" sorts of things, and luckily for me I was.