

INTERVIEW WITH BRUCE DUDLEY -- NOVEMBER, 1994

Bruce was born in September , 1957 in Rochester, New York , where he began piano studies at the age of seven. He later studied with Jaki Byard at New England Conservatory and recieved his masters in jazz studies at Eastman School of Music. The husband of singer Sandra, Bruce, at the time of this interview, was teaching several jazz ensembles, small group improv, theory, and piano at San Jacinto Community College in Houston. Dave and Bruce were real fans of each other's piano playing.

My first gig here in September of '91 was with a drummer named Keith Karnaky, and we did this trio thing at a club called The Paradox. It had previously been called the Blue Moon, which was one of the big jazz clubs in Houston. During the gig Keith was telling me about the scene in town and who's around, and that there was a pianist named Craig Smith, who'd passed away from AIDS sometime before I'd moved here. And my predecessor at my new job, Shelley Berg--another pianist--had left for LA., so there was k.ind of a vacuum of piano players when I moved here, which was to my benefit as far as working. But Keith said, "There's this one guy though, Dave Catney. He's hot!" "He's really, really hot!", he kept saying. I said, "OK, I guess I've got to hear this guy."

The opportunity presented itself soon after. I'd done a gig one Thursday night with Steve Allison, the drummer, not far from Cezanne, and Steve said, "C'mon. Dave's over at Cezanne with Ed Soph and John Adams." I said, "OK, let's go." I walked in and it was like 12:15, 12:30 or so, and there was barely a soul in the joint. I thought, "This is such a nice-looking room, a great place to have music. Why isn't anybody here?" They were charging ten dollars at the door. and we'd just come from a place where they were charging like four, so I thought. "Maybe they're charging too much " But man, they were playing this tune, this up tempo tune, and I just heard probably like half a chorus of piano, but I mean he was hot! Keith was right. He was really playing some music.

I met Dave very briefly. I was introduced to him, but he was coming off the gig and he was always really hyper then. Very energetic: "Hi, how ya doin', yeah. yeah," and then on to the next person... There was always something next to do on his mind. He was swarmed by a pile of his friends talking, which was interesting because I never really remember him having that many--it looked like--non musician friends; well dressed young men around. I never saw that again, because once he got the club kind of in his domain with Tuesday Open House Jazz and stuff it seemed like it was a real musicians hangout. I think maybe before that Cezanne was a little different thing for him, but I don't really know much more than that.

I think the next time I saw him was a few months later and I went up there on a Tuesday and rekindled our acquaintance, and he asked me to sit in. I think we both dug each other's playing a lot.

In March of '92 Linda first called me to start substituting for him at the club which I ended up doing--unfortunately--an awful lot of. I found out later that he was in the hospital for the first time. Thursdays were his solo piano night, and Friday and Saturday he was doing duos with Warren Sneed. There were a few occasions that spring of '92 where I had to fill in for him. It happened again the following spring, and then it got to be a little more frequent where he was not being able to really predict his health, and he'd call me. "Well you know, I want to see your availability because so-and-so is going to be

coming in and playing, and I want to do it, but if for some reason I'm not up to it, can you do it?" I generally would just earmark those dates and not take other stuff, hoping that he would be able to do it and I'd get to go down and see him, but as it happened more than half the time he'd call and say, "Yeah. Can you go play it?"

I'm grateful for him having asked me to play under those circumstances but not too happy about the circumstances. It was really hard. He was always optimistic on the phone about getting better and persevering. but you could tell what he was going through. He'd tell us about these bags of drugs he'd have to take every day. It was all new to me, just like knowing Fred Hersch, who was openly gay in the '70's, was new to me then; talking to somebody who had AIDS was new to me now because I didn't know anybody else.

I was always impressed by Dave's character. He was hyperactive but controlled. Just really on top of things, very outgoing, and he played like that; he played rather aggressively but with finesse at the same time.

I've listened to all three of his Justice recordings in the last few months, probably in ways that I hadn't listened to them before, and I sense a lot of restraint in his playing. There's a lot of delicate, romantic restraint to it, and his compositions--even though they're in the harmonic idiom of fairly contemporary jazz--there's a lot of restraint to it at the same time, and I really admire that quality about his playing. There's a lot of finesse to it.

On those Tuesday Night Open House sessions he would just get up there and get the trio playing. He'd just plunge in there and get Carl and David energized, and they'd really stretch out on some good tunes, tunes that you don't hear all the time. It wasn't just 'standard' standards. But he'd get things cranking just to get people into it and he'd kind of have a plan of who he was going to have sit in when, so it was a very controlled thing, and not controlled in terms of putting limits on people, but so that it worked nicely, and every Tuesday night was a different thing. He was very conscious about that. He had the door prizes and he wanted to make it fun for people and he wanted to make it fun for the musicians.

I think those Tuesday nights are what got Cezanne on the map as far as a jazz club and are why it's still open, because when he eventually got away from just he and Warren doing the duos on Friday and Saturday and he tried to bring in some headliners like Chris Bacas or Fred's trio and even some people in town, he had already generated such a word with the Tuesday night thing that it made it work. So there was definitely a plan in his mind to make that thing work. and he devoted an incredible amount of energy to it. And I'm so happy to see that it's still going that way with Ken Ward running it, and Ken is just trying to branch out even more as far as bringing new people, new groups into the club on the weekends while not forgetting about the old groups too. People who were regularly working under Dave's leadership are still in there, but Ken's stretching out further. Ken's really putting in almost as much ambition and energy as Dave had, which is great to see. Houston really needs such a fine jazz club.

It seemed like every time I went to see Dave, from the first time in the winter of '92 until sometime in June of '94, when he was visibly weak at the keyboard and he only played a couple of tunes, every time I went to see him he just blew me away. It sounded better every time, stronger; he was more sure of what he was doing, experimenting with the harmonies and the melodies over those harmonies. A lot of chordal substitutions that he'd put over any tune; it didn't matter what he

was doing, but it worked. It worked great. I wasn't always sure where he was coming up with the stuff, but he was definitely searching in the right direction because he just sounded better every time.

I thought his best playing was in a solo format. As an accompanist he was really, really sensitive and really complimentary to the soloist. He didn't lead so much as just fill and follow. When he would solo he'd bring it up to where his trio performances were and then he'd just hand it back to the group. Just a real sensitive guy in every respect. And very intelligent too.

I remember several times hearing him after a couple weeks or a month had gone by, and it would blow me away how much better he would sound. I think by the summer of '93 he was having weaker periods, where he wasn't at his peak. When he made the solo record he maybe wasn't at his peak that day. The day to day battle of living was so exhausting that the spark wasn't there as brightly all the time.

As early as September or October of '92 he was bringing in new people and guest artists on the weekends at Cezanne. At that point he was still doing the Jazz Open House, so they had music at one point for several months from Tuesday to Saturday. I always thought that's what a real jazz club should do.

He'd always pop in on the weekends when he wasn't playing; when I was playing with another group or whoever was there, he'd always make a point to drop in, just to check and make sure that everything was OK. Was the PA OK? He'd just send a note up on a napkin sometimes through the waitress. He'd say, "The piano could be a little louder." Real unobtrusively, he'd kind of hang out in the corner. He had a little escape route too. There's a little back door that goes down through the kitchen, and he'd come in and out that way. Sometimes you wouldn't even know he was in the place, and he'd call you the next day and say, "Man, you sounded great. Did everything go OK? I hope it was good." He'd be aware if there was anything that was going on. Dave was really concerned about everything.

There were times when he would be there at the end of the night and we'd just start talking away in the parking lot about plans. He was always thinking about how to do things better and how to get more people to come out to the club and how to expand the mailing list... His mind was always going about it.

Dave would generally speak what was on his mind. He'd look at things from all points of view as best he could. I admired that about him. He had a great sense of humor and he'd just look at a situation in a little different light and shed a different light on it. He was kind of a renaissance man, well-read. He enjoyed eating at good restaurants and going to good movies and talking about them. He loved to talk. That was his thing, talking and doing. It must have been just bitterly painful for him all those times when he was in the hospital and he couldn't get out and do what he was thinking and talking about doing. But he'd get out and get right back to it. Most of us were more concerned that he get more rest than he allowed himself, rather than running himself thin. But apparently he knew what he could handle.

Dave's way of relaxing was unwinding on the phone or being with people or playing. Scott was good at calming Dave down. There were times when Dave would just be going nonstop for days and at the end of a Saturday night gig he'd go

home, and Scott would have a zillion candles lit by the bathtub and he'd tell Dave, "In you go. Just chill out.... " He'd just try to really get him to unwind, and it probably took all night to do that, but it really helped.

I learned a way of friendly entrepreneurialship from Dave, as far as what he did with the club and how he dealt with the musicians. He had a way of trying to pair people so that things would work well and maybe in a way that you couldn't predict. Dave's phonemanship was terrific, talking to people on the phone and making them feel good about things; even if the money wasn't great, it was still going to be a good situation.

When he played the piano you could tell that he was really prepared and focused on what he was doing. Every tune sounded like it was really, really rehearsed even if it wasn't, because his focus on the music was extreme. Dave's presentation of music was always just a little bit different. I liked his choice of tunes and the way he did them. I try to do that too. When Dave played, everything really sounded really fresh. A lot of it was his voicings and his harmonies. He used a lot of Bill Evans harmonies, but also McCoy Tyner and Chick Corea's type of voicings. You don't hear it too much on his own albums. On some of the standards that he recorded you can hear it. But he was really experimenting a lot. His live performances at the club were really upbeat.

Even though *Jade Visions* is a great album and there's some great playing on it, I don't think it's really Dave Catney's group. It's a good group. I believe Dave would have liked to have ultimately recorded another album with a group that he was regularly working with. He might not have found it here in Houston, bass player and drummer-wise. He had some really fine players here, but they're not Peter Erskine and Marc Johnson. They're certainly very competent players, they just haven't had the same experiences as the so-called heavyweights.

Dave was such a personable guy. He wasn't just all business: "Let's go up and play.... " He really cared about the people he was playing with, which isn't always the case with all musicians.

In the last week I was listening to Dave's first two albums and his compositions in particular and I was thinking, "Man, these tunes sound like they really should have been scored for a studio orchestra because they're such rich compositions. It's almost like the piano can't do them full justice. He played them orchestrally like good classical musicians are trained to do. But I think that might have been a further direction for Dave, arranging and writing other than for a trio. He wrote lyrics and he wrote tunes, and I wonder if he might have taken that direction and worked on his craft as a composer. I sure would have liked to have seen what he would have done. I can only imagine it would have been amazing music, because the tunes that he wrote were just so beautiful. And if he could have been in charge of orchestrating them, boy it would have been great.

Ha was definitely searching in harmonic directions all the time, and God knows where it would have gone. It sure would have been interesting. As far as Houston musicians he was a real beacon as far as a composer and a player, and I dare say on an international level too. He just had a really unique sound, a really unique place.

Dave could take a really rotten situation, including his own health, and just extract anything that could possibly be funny about it--out of it--and amplify that. Not so much to diminish any inequalities or bad shit that might happen, but just to put it on balance and say, "Well...•• He could find the absurdity and then laugh about it. He was so good at that, and that's so important. Dave was one of the hippest preachers I could ever listen to.