

## INTERVIEW WITH DWIGHT SILLS - NOVEMBER, 1995

*Dwight Sills was born in December 1955 in Raleigh, North Carolina. Before discovering his talent on guitar he played drums, cello, and bass. Dwight and Dave met in the mid 1980's and the two worked together for an extended time at Cody's. Both musicians can be heard backing singer Kellye Gray on the 1990 Justice release Standards in Gray. (J.R. #OIOI-2) A citizen of Los Angeles, Dwight works with Anita Baker and does a variety of session work in the area.*

After moving to Texas I starved for a while in an original fusion band. Finally I got a gig with pianist Paul English which was pretty cool. I learned quite a bit there. This was in the early to mid '80's. I met Dave when I was playing with Paul. I don't know exactly when the first time was that we met but I do know that I heard him and I was blown away. Dave and I liked each other's playing, and I remember him saying, "We need to get together and do some playing." I was like, "Yeah," but actually I was scared because he was like *the* cat as far as I was concerned.

Then we both went on this cruise ship, the Royal Viking Sea. I was with Paul's band. Dave was with Steve Allison and Jack Mattingly. This was all through Barry Dean. While we were on the ship we would get together and jam at that point. That was so much fun. There was something about Dave's playing that really appealed to me. There was a lot of heart in what he was doing, and harmonically I could see where he was coming from and I really dug that. We played more and more together on the ship and we used to hang out together and just talk. We got to be pretty good friends.

At the time I was getting somewhat burned out with Paul's thing, and we were having a little friction there, so I had decided to leave the band once the cruise was over with. I talked to Dave about it, and we were saying, "Well why don't we get something together when we go back and go to Cody's and see if we can get a gig there?" So once the cruise was over we got together and rehearsed some stuff and did an audition for the scumbags that ran Codys and got a gig up there. And that's when a lot of the fun started.

It was great playing. At that time the band was Dave, Jack Mattingly, Herman Matthews and myself, and we had a singer, Holly, who had good stage presence. The band was called Signature. Holly left after a period of time, and we were a quartet which was wonderful because it gave us a chance to stretch a little more musically. I know Dave wanted to do that too. Dave was playing Fender Rhodes at the time and then he had a little synth that he would play. He could get more out of those two instruments than another keyboard player could out of a Rick Wakeman/Keith Emerson setup. That was one of my happier musical moments, that quartet around that time. We played six nights a week, and I learned an awful lot from Dave.

Dave was always up; real positive attitude. A lot of practical jokes, a lot of corny jokes that were so corny they were funny. He had problems and things going on like anyone else but he wouldn't let things really screw with him to the point of getting into a funk around people or lashing out. That kind of thing. I liked him a lot and I felt we were good friends.

Dave was really aware of the way that he treated people. I was just under the impression that he was aware of certain "universal laws." He didn't skim the surface of life, whereas a lot of people are maybe aimless wanderers who have no idea what life is about. They don't get into themselves and ask questions and wonder why this is and that is; it's just about going out every day and making money. Dave just had that awareness. He thought about these things.

After a while things started getting pretty strange up at Cody's. Management was not too pleased with our stretching more musically. They were looking at it from an "entertainment" perspective. I mean we were too, but perhaps without Holly we weren't as visibly attractive or whatever for those people out there. After talking with management we made some changes. We added a couple of people. We changed bass players and got an additional female keyboard player to add a fuller sound and to bring in more of a visual thing. At the time Codys was like the best gig in town, and we ended up working there for like a year and a half.

As it turns out, Dave was really unhappy about the girl playing keys. I don't know if it was a personality thing or what, but anyway it didn't work out and so Dave decided to leave. I think too he also wanted to continue in some quartet format somewhere where he felt he had more musical freedom that way. It was basically a clash with the tastes of the owners of the club that caused all the hassles. I was pretty upset when Dave left although I knew that he was going to be happier doing what he wanted to do. I wanted to continue to make money up there as long as I could.

Dave and I continued to communicate and we still played when we had a chance. A few years later Sony--or CBS at the time--was looking for a guitarist for their label, so I went into the studio and did some demos, and Dave worked on those. In fact, Dave MADE the demos. He really did. I gave him freedom to do whatever because I trusted what he'd do. I'd just write a tune and I'd say, "Look, this is the basic blueprint of it. You can voice the chords however you feel and whatever suggestions you have are cool." So that's what we did, and it sounded great, and I ended up getting a deal with them. This was around '88 or '89, and I ended up getting the deal around the latter part of '89. I did the first record in '90.

I wanted to use Dave on the record, but what the record company did was hook me up with a record producer out here in L.A. He had the cats that he was going to hook me up with to do the record. I was busy flying back and forth from Texas. It ended up that there was one tune that I was able to put on there as a bonus tune that Dave and I had done, and also there were a few things that Dave was able to do as overdubs, so actually he did get a chance to play on it but not to the extent that I would have liked. The producer later screwed up the credits, so Dave isn't credited. On the second album he is credited. There's a tune on there that we demo'd, and I just redid some things and added some things because I had the masters. He does some acoustic piano and some synth stuff on it.

As a new artist promotional thing, we ended up going to New York to do a gig. Dave went and Steve Allison and this bassist named Don Patterson and a sax player came along too. Unfortunately record companies really don't like to pay the money that they should be paying for people to do these kinds of things. But it was cool. It was an experience. I did a few other dates here and there, but Dave was committed to some other things.

In New York Dave played his butt off basically. He played better than I did, and I was supposed to be the one they were coming to see! It was at a club in Manhattan called Indigo Blue, over in the theater district. I kind of felt too that Dave was a little frustrated. I felt that he was wanting to do the same thing; he had music that he wanted to get out there. This was before Justice and Kellye. But he still played his ass off. The trip also gave him an opportunity to go hang out and take care of some things himself, because I think that while we were up there he was maybe trying to talk to some people about doing some things.

At that time I was married, and my then-wife was really fond of Dave too. We didn't know at the time that he was HIV+. Looking back on it, he knew, but he didn't let anyone else know or let us know. He was in such good spirits.

Even though I had the record deal in L.A. I still had to stay in Houston and work. I was working with a band called Franchise at the time that was like a dance band. I wasn't playing anything that resembled jazz in that group. I could feel that too, especially when we did Kellye's record. I had done a gig with Kellye and Dave at the Blue Moon when Franchise was off for an off-night. I kind of skated through it. Then she did a record and asked me to do it. I was thrilled to do it but not prepared in the least. It was cool because I was in the midst of all these guys who were playing their asses off. Dave sounded really good on that record.

In those little pockets of time there we were just doing our own thing. I remember we were out at the studio once, and he had just done his first record. He was real excited about getting Ed Soph and Marc Johnson on it. Finally he got a copy of his first record, and myself, the engineer at the time, and Dave all went out in the car and listened to it. It was really cool. He was real pleased, and we were happy for him. At the time I recalled the New York thing and the vibe that I was getting there and I was just happy that he was able to do what he really wanted to do, and that's definitely what he really wanted to do.

Dave told me about having AIDS. I remember that we talked also and he wanted me to let him know when I was going to be back in Houston. My wife still lived there for almost a year while I was living in L.A. before she moved out. So I used to go back and visit whenever I could, and he wanted me to let him know when I was going to come in so that he could set something up at Cezanne for us. That never happened. I had to work out here so I never really had the chance to go back there and do that.

I was hearing that Dave was in and out of the hospital. I had gone back to Houston for something and I had talked to Dave, and he said he was playing up at Cezanne and to come by. I went up there to see him and I had a hard time holding back tears because he had lost so much weight. I mean I really had a hard time that night. But he was playing his ass off still and he had just grown so much musically, The stuff that he was playing just sounded so settled, with a lot of seasoning to it. The music just came to him. It wasn't like he was searching for stuff to play for the sake of playing it. It was just *there*.

We didn't get much time to hang out that night. He had a bunch of other people who were grabbing at his time. We had a little chance to go over to the bar and talk for a little bit. I also knew the sidemen Dave was playing with that night and hadn't seen any of them in a long time. I remember I was talking to those guys, and Dave was over on the other side of the bar. I just said, "Look, I'm sorry. I'll talk to you later. I've got to go over and see this cat." So we chatted for a little bit. He seemed more serious and matured. Definitely that. I gave him a hug at the end of the night. I don't know how long after that it was that someone called and told me that he had passed.

I think about him a lot. A few months ago I picked up one of his CD's. I was on the road with Anita and I don't know where we were but I found one. It was his solo CD.

Dave was my favorite keyboard player to play with. I felt when I was playing with him that "It doesn't get any better than this." Dave was plugged into music the way I want to be plugged into it. Outside of his personal life there was nothing else other than music.

The most remarkable thing about his playing was that he played things that I felt. You can look at someone's harmonic sense in the theoretical, technical sense and as something that's felt. Like when I listen to John Scofield play guitar it does something for me. It's like walking that tightrope, and Dave's playing was that way. I really loved his playing.

Dave's death really made me think about what's important and what's not. Musically he really helped me to get where I wanted to go. I'm still not there but at least I know where it is. He was very serious about what he was doing and he just went for it, and that--to me-- just really says a lot.

I'm no longer with the record company I did the two records with because I've tried to do what I really wanted to do. And that's a good thing because how else are you going to get heard if you don't go for it? Dave always had a musical integrity, and I really respect that. In that way he's always been a big influence. His life has taught me about not taking any of this crap out here in L.A. too seriously. We can sometimes concern ourselves with a whole bunch of bullshit that's not about anything but taking up your time worrying about this, that, and the other. Some things are just not important. So I definitely learned that.

I remember once when we playing up at Cody's; this is when we had Holly in the band. This wasn't intentional but it certainly was funny... We were playing a ballad. I forget what tune it was but the tune was just nice and subtle. Dave was only playing Rhodes at that point in the song and he was getting ready to add strings. So he goes up on his synth. Everything was just totally quiet; everybody's got their attention on this tune. So Dave changes patches on his synth for strings but he ends up getting this loud helicopter-like sound instead. It was hilarious. We just busted out laughing. Suddenly here was this VOOP! VOOP! VOOP! VOOP! VOOP! over this ballad, and everyone just kind of broke up. Even Holly laughed.