

INTERVIEW WITH STEVE ALLISON - OCTOBER, 1995

Born in Aldine, Texas in July, 1963, Steve Allison began taking drum lessons at the age of six. He first worked with Dave in a trio on the Royal Viking Sea, later on the mainland in Colorado and on innumerable gigs in Houston. When he's not doing studio work, Steve teaches these days at Klein Oak High School. His jazz group, Resolution, can be heard at festivals and other venues throughout both Dallas and Houston.

When I met Dave it was probably the first time I really got to apply any of the serious jazz things I had studied. This was in 1984. I had auditioned for the first cruise that he did, which was like a world cruise, in 1982 or so. I remember going to Barry Dean's house. There was this little bitty house, and there were probably about thirty musicians in and outside the place, and there were like two drumsets set up and gear everywhere; everybody just playing with everybody and trying different combinations. I was pretty young then, pretty much just out of high school. I didn't make it and subsequently just blew it off, thinking, "Well, that's something I'll never get to do....."

Then I was playing in a supper club, which was a very laid back, boring, boring gig--I was like 21 or 22--and I was just bored to death. Barry Dean called me at the gig on one of the breaks; just happened to catch me on a break. I can remember he said, "Steve, do you remember me? I'm Barry Dean." I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well I've got another cruise coming up. Would you be interested in doing it?" I didn't even ask when or where or anything. I just said, "Yes!"

That was a Saturday, and the cruise left the next Saturday. But I ended up going to meet Barry and Dave later that night. I didn't even know who I was playing with or what the circumstances were or anything. But that's when I met Dave. I still hadn't heard of him before and didn't know how he played, although Barry probably at the time told me that he was a monster pianist or something. I recall that I really liked Dave a lot. He talked a lot and kept conversation going. I was real shy and these were two people I really hadn't met much; I'd seen Barry for like thirty minutes two years earlier. But I remember Dave just talking a mile a minute, going on and on. I can't recall much of what was said but I remember feeling real secure thinking that he must be a good player.

We started rehearsing the next day, and that's when I found out I was playing with a trio, with Jack Mattingly and Dave. We were going to be doing everything from straight-ahead bebop to cover tunes, like Sting tunes; whatever was current at the time. Nothing too pop-ish, but more easy listening jazz, Stevie Wonder tunes and stuff. Jack sang quite a bit, and I think that's the main reason they got Jack, because he's a really good singer. And Dave was just beginning to sing a little bit.

This was a Caribbean cruise. That Friday we flew to Fort Lauderdale and got up the next morning and got on the ship, the Royal Viking Sea. As soon as we got on the ship it was like, "OK, you guys be ready to play in an hour!" So we played for the very start of the cruise. I just remember it started then and it ended at the end of the cruise, and it seemed like we played constantly. We played for deck lunches from eleven to one and then later at night from ten to one or so. We very seldom did shows. If it was a show it would be maybe backing a comedian; we'd play him on and play him off. A couple of times we'd rehearse with a singer during the afternoon for a show. Most of the time we were off when we were in port so we could go leave the ship and actually go scout around wherever we were. There was also a big band on board. They'd usually be rehearsing when we'd be in dock in Puerto Vallarta or something, and we'd be getting off the ship and going wherever.

I remember getting together with my family for Thanksgiving and then leaving the next morning on the cruise. The cruise went from late November '84, and we got back the beginning of March '85. Just about three months, and we ended up getting one night off during the whole trip!

It was a fairly easy gig. They had us in a little bitty stage area. Dave was on one side with his back against the wall, looking over this pretty tall upright piano. He had his synthesizer up on top of that, and I could barely see his eyes on up because I was facing him from the opposite side of the stage. And then the bass player was in the middle. It was pretty close quarters. The club was pretty small, and people would be sitting under the highhat; the edge of the table was right there. People were practically right on us.

Dave was just the neatest guy, totally open and super outgoing. I remember most of all hanging out with him real late at night and partying a little bit. Just kind of sitting around drinking wine or Corvoisier and talking about music and playing. He was always really into talking about life too. Dave was always reading these rather deep, psychologically challenging books and was always talking about something he was reading.

Being the first time I was away from home I was getting a little bit homesick, and he seemed to be real attentive to that. Dave always made feel real good, always would get me off the subject of talking about home and talking more about music. We'd play a lot too. We do a lot of jam sessions late at night. One time it was just he and I. We couldn't find a bass player to play with us and we just ended up getting together by ourselves in this big showroom, the main room of the ship. For some reason the piano was already down on the stage of the dance floor, and we moved the drumset down there. I remember that it was a real weird thing for me at first--jamming without a bass player--because I'd never done that before. But he kind of talked me through it and gave me the concept. It was just opening up and playing as though you'd never played with a bass player before even. Making music with what you had. I don't recall exactly what time we started but I remember the sun coming up over the water in the morning, and we were still

going for a while. He actually taped some of it too, which I haven't heard since. I remember feeling like, "This is great!" It was like something opened up in my head, to play that free. It was pretty cool.

Dave was like a teacher in a way the whole time we played together. He was always making suggestions and comments, and I never felt threatened. If somebody says, "You're playing too much," you might tend to take it in a bad way. But he always came across in a really nice way. Dave really had a lot to do with my development back then. More than anyone else, probably to this day even. He broadened my ideas on what my function as a drummer is in a group and in different situations. How to be supportive behind a soloist. How to listen and play with even just one other person; how to make music out of that. He could always come up with something to do.

At first I sometimes felt out of my league playing with Dave, like a beginner. Hearing him play I was like, "God, this guy's incredible!" It definitely made me practice more, in trying to live up to what he might expect too. Everyone who heard him, the passengers--a lot of wealthy doctors, attorneys-- they all just fell in love with Dave. They thought he was the greatest thing there was.

As emcee, Dave was still kind of serious at the time, like, "This is a jazz tune by Hoagy Carmichael..." But I remember him really getting into it later in Colorado, because he was singing a lot more and interacting a lot more with the audience at that point.

Dave and part of Paul English's band on that cruise formed a group called Signature. They'd started rehearsing the last couple of weeks on the cruise and they ended up going into Cody's in Houston for a while. Dave actually found me a gig with Cy Brinson at the Hyatt downtown. He took care of me; he knew I was going to be out of a gig when we got home. I think I was off a week and then started working with Cy. I did that for about a year until Dave called me to do a showcase at Rockefellers with Eric Avenger on guitar. They invited all these agents, and I remember two agents came in, and one of them was Dave Vandenburg, who eventually got us the gig in Colorado. So that was the main thing that came out of that showcase.

That happened in March or April of '86. Eric Nitzburg, Dave and myself drove up to Colorado Springs. It was a fairly new resort. It seems like we were maybe like the second group to play in the club there, it was a beautiful club with a gigantic oversize fireplace on one end. There was room for probably about two hundred people in there. It was mainly a jazz, gig, and we played every standard you can think of. And with Dave we played every standard every way you could possibly play it. He was singing a lot then. On probably about fifty percent of the tunes he would sing. And then on slower nights we'd get into more of the non-standards like Ritchie Bierach and Pat Methany tunes.

Our stay kept getting extended. We went for six weeks and we ended up staying for eighteen or twenty. It seemed like every time it would come close to time to leave, they'd ask us to stay. The bass player, Eric Nitzburg, went back about halfway through, and then Dave Morgan came up and replaced him.

My now-wife used to come up on weekends to stay. We would go to Denver and to Breckenridge and make these little excursions on Sundays. Dave and I used to get up early sometimes and we'd hit these old stagecoach roads that they used to use from Colorado Springs to Cripple Creek. They were pretty rough roads oftentimes but we'd take them through the mountains and woods and go to Cripple Creek and all these other little towns back in there. One time the three of us went up to Coghill,, which is like this big streetcar that goes up to the top of Pike's Peak.. We took that up to the top and we were all kind of lightheaded from the lack of oxygen and the altitude. It was like eighty degrees down at the bottom and maybe like twenty degrees up at the top. We were freezing and didn't really dress for the trip, going up that far. We went inside and we were eating chili and this guy walked in with his family. He was like a big grandfather-figure but he was this huge, big guy with this long face and this silver hair. Dave looked at him and said, "God, look at that guy. He looks like he just walked out of a Norman Rockwell painting!" We all started laughing, and I guess because of the lack of oxygen it was like being drunk; you couldn't control yourself. We all started laughing so hard Dave fell off his barstool and was rolling on the ground. We actually had to get out of there because we were making such a scene. We had to leave. So we walked outside and hit the ice and we were sliding all over the place...

Anytime we were up on these mountains, Dave would always go off by himself. Like at Pike's Peak he would get off the main trail and walk way down the side of the mountain to where he could get out like on a little rock and stand out there by himself. He would do that for a while just to be by himself out in the middle of nowhere. I remember him doing that at Pike's Peak and then at another place called Royal Gorge. It would freak us out because sometimes he would jump a fence to go down, just to get out on a ledge somewhere. Dave was always just bouncing around, so full of energy, and maybe he felt like nothing could harm him. He'd always be seeing if he could get out a little further, just to get a better view. I guess he had good balance.

I was pretty naive. Dave never "came off" as gay, and it was really hard for me to believe it when I learned that he was, on the cruise ship. It really didn't bother me that much and I didn't look at him any differently than anyone else. Dave was pretty outgoing in that sense. AIDS was just really hitting the news at that time, and all these young men were dying from it. This was while we were on the cruise ship that everybody started hearing about it.

In Colorado I met a few guys that he would kind of latch on to. Some of them would be from the Army; he'd meet them at the club where the Army guys hung out. They were real nice guys. In fact a number of times we'd go out to the different places on our days off, and they'd go too. It was me and Angie and Dave

and his soldier-date. Dave was a really good looking guy and his personality was so great. I think the only people who didn't like him or didn't get along with him were probably intimidated by him, because he pretty much said what he felt and was real straightforward. I think that scares some people.

When certain people found out he was gay they just totally shut him down. There was a whole group of people in Colorado from the Pike's Peak Jazz Society who used to come out and hear us. It was a really large organization for a town that size, but there were probably about six people that we got to know real well. I still keep in touch with some of them and I called them to let them know right after Dave passed away. They were like "How did he die?" I said, "Well, he had AIDS." They were just totally blown away, and I hadn't even thought that they didn't know he was gay.

In fact one of the couples had a really attractive daughter. Alice was always trying to set Dave up with her daughter. We'd go to their house and eat dinner, and her daughter was always there. "Here Dave, sit next to..." Dave always handled it smoothly. So all these older women were trying to set him up with their daughters. Dave was the perfect gentleman--well mannered--didn't burp at the table. Only with us he would.

There was some friction between Dave and one of the bass players we worked with, who was a pretty strong Christian. Maybe he made some kind of comment to Dave. In fact when I would talk with the guy, his view was, "That's just not right. God did not intend for men to be gay or women to be gay and blah, blah, blah" I think Dave was real sensitive about all that so any hint of that--I'm sure--would just be like another sword. He talked a little bit with me about all that, but not much.

Dave and I were real close for a while, and he seemed to get me on as many gigs as he could. I guess our friendship probably warranted me going back to Colorado for the second gig. Plus I jumped at any chance to get out of town. Almost my whole life I have, until the last few years when I had the kids.

But the last time in Colorado was probably the closest we were. And the year before that--right before I got married--I was freaking out because I only had a few more months before I was getting married. Dave and I would talk a lot and he was really supportive. I think he wanted me to make the right decision too. He didn't want me to get into something that wasn't going to work. He ran me through a lot of questions and made me think in depth about marriage and about that kind of commitment.

Dave was best man at my wedding, which occurred two months after returning from Colorado the first time. Dave and I had come back from Colorado and gone straight to Austin and played at the Hyatt on Town Lake for two months. Then I believe we had a week off. I got married, and we started at the Hyatt West for about nine months or so.

There's kind of a weird story at the end of that. In fact for a while Dave and I were somewhat on ends about it, and it was probably my fault more than anything. We'd been playing the Hyatt West gig and playing the same tunes over and over, and I was getting kind of itchy on the gig. I was starting to get a bit bored, and it was mainly because we went from playing in front of people who were listening to us to "background" music. We were still playing some cool tunes. but I guess my playing had started suffering a little bit too. Maybe I was playing uninterestedly. One night I remember getting so frustrated and I could tell that Dave was too. The whole situation was pretty frustrating. We stood up and we walked to the back of the club, and I said, "Look. Dave, I'll save you the trouble. Let me just give notice now." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well this is going to save you the trouble of firing me. I'll go ahead and just give notice, and you can find somebody else." He goes, "Who told you?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Who told you that I was going to let you go?" I said, "Nobody did. What do you mean?" He had already talked to another drummer about doing the gig and he was going to give me notice. But he figured that the other drummer had started talking, and it had gotten back to me. It was just a weird choice of time to give notice, and being the stinker that I was I kind of led him to believe that I did already hear about it. I think later I did tell him that I really didn't know, that it was just my way of getting out of there. That was the end of about four years of playing a lot together, and I think Dave was getting to the point too where he wanted to do something a lot more serious playing-wise which we couldn't do there. It just got monotonous playing the same tunes, the same order of solos Every tune would be like sax solo, piano solo, , bass solo, then trade fours, and it started to get on my nerves after-awhile like, "Man, let's do something. Let's change the arrangements or do whatever." I think Dave was frustrated. I was frustrated. Boom. Because it wasn't long after that that he really started pursuing doing more serious gigs and the recording thing. I think he really wanted to record something serious, and that all started coming about after that.

We still worked together in a lot of different situations. About that time I really started working with Kellye and going back and forth to Austin with her. Dave was on a lot of those gigs and then also doing his own thing. It was cool. Everything worked out fine. We started drifting apart at that point because we weren't working together all the time. We'd still have lunch together occasionally, but basically I guess the job scene held our friendship together more than anything, which was sad.

We played together in New York, with Dwight Sills, in early October of '90.

Then I did another gig with Dave at Cezanne one night. He would still call me for gigs, but I was doing so many other things that there were conflicts and I couldn't always play with him. But I remember I was teaching at a private studio, and he had called me and asked me about a gig and I said no. I said, "Well how are you doing? How's everything going?" He said, "You probably know." I said, "No. What do you mean?" He said, "I'm sure you've heard. I'm sure everybody's talking about it." I said, "What do you mean?", and then he told me. I actually hadn't heard it. He told me he'd been tested and that it had been confirmed and everything. He had been real sick and had been in the hospital, I think for the first time. I

asked him some more details and things, but it really hit me hard. I think I was real upset because I'd lost so much contact with Dave and the friendship that we'd had. My dad was real sick about that time too and later died of cancer in June of '92. In '93 Dave had a long conversation with my wife over the phone one night. I was still getting over the death of my dad and I knew Dave was sick, and every time I heard he went in the hospital I would kind of freak out.

It was always this thing where you just knew you were going to see him; that twenty years from now he was just going to be one of the mainstays of jazz piano. There are a lot of new artists who come out, but Dave without a doubt would have been--I think--one of the mainstays. One of the main guys, the old mentors that everybody kind of looks up to.

The whole time we were in Colorado Dave was just totally immersed in Bill Evans. In fact we listened to a lot of Evans together and went for some of those grooves in our playing. We'd play a lot of the arrangements that he did. I remember *The Paris Concert*; we'd listen to that. It's incredible, very touching music. Dave told me about Bill being sick at the time, that he knew he was dying, and arthritis was affecting his fingers, and every note was painful for him to play So Dave set up this whole picture for me and then played it, and it was like, "Oh, God!" There's some stuff on their that's so sensitive it's just hard to believe somebody can relay that on an instrument, especially a piano. It really takes that extra "thing" to get that across.

The last Cezanne gig I did with Dave was with David Craig on bass and Bob Chadwick on flute. The tunes we played were kind of weird, and I just felt odd about the whole thing. I remember wishing it was just a trio date. Bob Chadwick's a great player; I just wanted something else to happen I guess.

Back when we were doing the Hyatt West gig a drummer by the name of Joel Fulgham was subbing for me one night. There's a little creek that runs through that room, and there's a railing on one side of the walkway but not the other, and I guess at one point Joel was talking to Dave and went to lean back on what he thought was a railing and just fell backwards into the creek in the middle of the gig! He got soaked from head to toe and dried off as best he could and finished the gig. I got there the next night and sat on my stool and it went *squoosh!* It was still wet around the floor.

In May of '94 I did the whole month with Harry Sheppard's big band at Biraporetti's. This was kind of an experimental all-star band; the only thing we didn't have was a piano. Dave came out to that one night to listen, and that's when it hit me like a stone on the head. He was wearing a jacket I remember but his face was so thin. I mean he was just like almost down to nothing and his eyes were sunken. When I first saw him I put my hand out and then hugged him when he put his hand out. I saw a huge carcinoma on his wrist, and then when I hugged him it was like hugging some bones with a suit over them. It just felt like something hit me upside the head. He seemed up that night. He was real complimentary about the way I

was playing, which made me feel good. He asked how the kids were doing. He didn't seem low in spirits or anything, but that was the first time I saw him really look sick. That was the last time I saw him. It seems like it wasn't long after that that he passed away.

I never saw Dave sad. I saw him mad a few times--he'd definitely stand his ground and everything--but he never seemed down. In fact I remember seeing him at Craig Smith's benefit at the Blue Moon. Some guy had gotten up and sung a song, and everybody was real quiet and trying not to cry. And I remember Dave was standing over by the stairs and I looked over at him, and he kind of gave this little quirky look and I chuckled a little bit. It took me out of that about-to-burst area.

He'd kid around a lot. We'd be driving around Colorado or at the mall or something and he'd say, "Man, check out that blond over there!" I'd say, "Where?," looking for this chick with blond hair. He'd go, "No, the guy!'", and I was like, "Oh..."

Especially after playing with him in Colorado I started feeling like I'd known Dave all my life, that I'd gone to school with him. If I was gay I probably would have definitely been attracted to him. He was just the coolest guy, and I'm sure I'll never meet anybody even close to that. He definitely had a lot of confidence and a great sense of humor. I really admired him, and seeing how he was made me come out of my shell a little bit more. I was like, "God, I'd sure like to be able to talk to people like he does and speak up and meet people." Because anywhere we were he always met the most interesting people and would sit down and talk to them. I'd be sitting at the bar with Jack or somebody, sitting there on our own, and Dave would always be out having real cool conversations with real cool people. He just wasn't afraid to meet anybody or talk to anybody. Gay or straight or black or white, I never saw him putting boundaries on anybody or being racial or prejudicial towards anybody. He was pretty open.

I met Linda some time back. and I remember when she started handling Dave's affairs and doing the bookings and stuff. Dave was really excited about it. He was really happy and really liked her a lot and always talked really well of her and was excited about that part of his life taking place.

Everybody enjoyed working with Dave. I don't know anybody who said, "Man, I did this gig with Dave Catney last night and it sure sucked!" You'd never hear that. It was always just the opposite, mainly, "I got to play with Dave." I sure took it for granted for a long time. I enjoyed it for a long time and now I really see that I took it for granted. I wish I'd recorded every night that I sat down behind the drums with him. I do have a lot of good memories and I feel like my whole growth as a musician come from working with him. I probably wouldn't be playing as accomplished now as a player without that part of my life, that growth that he helped make possible.

Dave was overly nice, overly talented, and he had big goals and direction. That's always been an inspiration for me, and I wish I had a quarter of his energy. I think Dave could have played with anybody on Earth, and they would have gone, "Wow!" He could have played with Miles Davis, and Miles would have actually been nice to him.