

INTERVIEW WITH CY BRINSON - NOVEMBER, 1994

Singer/pianist Cy Brinson was born in Dallas, Texas in January 1948. She moved to Houston in the late '60's and has been making her living as a musician-singer-entertainer since the early '70s. During the mid-'80s Cy and Dave gigged together as fellow members of the Tim Harris band, regularly playing to packed houses at the popular Houston nightclub, Cody's. Cy's sunny personality and distinctive musical presence have now been documented on the 1994 CD release, Cy by Night. In addition to performing in her native Texas, Cy recently completed a musical tour of the Soviet Union.

I came to Houston in 1969 when Astroworld opened. Eventually I got involved in the jazz world here in town, at which I still feel like a real beginner in a way. But I've been working the clubs and things since about '74, singing and playing piano. People say that I'm a jazz singer, although I don't feel like I am. I'm a jazz piano player kind of, but after hanging around Dave for as long as I have it was real hard for me to think of myself as jazz anything, because he was so incredible. My style is just real different.

I used to be married to an actor years ago and I met Barry Dean about 1970. He had this theater and he directed my then-husband, and I met him and was just real amazed with what he did. Barry's still directing in town with this theater group that really supports the kids and he puts on these shows with the kids that are almost Broadway material. They're great. But anyway he's been a good friend of mine for a long time and he called me one day. I was putting a band together with a guy named Tim Harris. Now even though I play keyboards we needed a keyboard player because I just wanted to be the token chick singer up front! So Barry called and said, "Hey, you've got to hear this guy... He just came off a cruise." He was talking about Dave. I believe Barry was just leaving on a cruise then but he'd given David his apartment to stay in. He said, "You just have to use him!" We were getting ready to audition for bass players and drummers, and Dave said he would come over and play the piano for the auditions. We met him that day and we decided, "Wow, he's incredible! We want him." He decided at that time that he wanted to do the band too.

That seems like a long time ago, but he really became a very good friend of mine. Dave was an entertainer as well as being a musician, and that's what I've always felt I was. At that time he wasn't singing at all, although he ended up singing some really nice things eventually. I thought, "God, people just love to hear him." Even people who might normally say they didn't like jazz thought he was just great. His personality came out so strong through his fingers, through his music, and it was real contagious. It didn't matter if you were in the audience or were one of the band members, it was just contagious!

Cody's is one of the larger clubs in town. Sometimes on gigs I would be a little down and would try to get psyched up, because it would be a good audience. Dave always knew that if I got a little down I needed to come back up for the whole band's sake, as far as keeping the people happy. He'd start playing these quotes in his solos that would make me laugh. It was just like somebody standing up and telling a joke; he'd just bowl me over and keep me laughing. Or he would play his face. Dave would play the *William Tell Overture* on his face by filling up his cheeks with varying amounts of air and hitting on his cheeks with his fingers to produce all the different tones. He could literally play the *William Tell Overture* that way. So he would do things like that, and I know that he would do them when he felt me getting down at all. He just really

helped me out a lot. We were together for about two years on that job, and then we didn't work together after that for a long time.

If I would get a phone call in the middle of the night, it was usually Dave. I would talk and listen. I don't think he had any kind of "time sense" like some people do. It was always some new idea; there were always ideas coming from Dave. Always! Some of them you wouldn't think could really happen, but everything he wanted to have happen happened.

I've just finished recording a CD that's coming out in December, my very first. Linda's producing it. She was with Dave, helping him on some of his Justice recordings too and she's done an incredible job on this CD. I'm dedicating it to Dave: "In memory of the most inspirational friend a gal could have." That kind of sums a lot of things up.

Dave was gay, though he didn't "come across" as gay, and he didn't especially feel like he was part of the gay community. He felt like he was part of a music community, and as it ended up he was the center of our music community, truly. And I think that when you have the genius that Dave had--he taught himself piano basically--he learned to just trust his vision and just go for it. He turned Cezanne into a really fine, respected club--the most jazz that's happening in town--and this is like the fourth largest city in the country. But after teaching himself piano, I just think he felt like anything was possible. And what was really neat about Dave is that he would plan things; he'd plan the future and he'd do it, but he didn't walk over one person in the process. In fact, to the contrary, he would somehow help all these people along the way! He helped us all so much in different ways. Dave's pretty amazing. He's hard to explain.

Dave's so much in my life now, even now. I think the reason people would talk to him in the middle of the night and early in the morning is that he was just so much sunshine, whether he was bummed or up or anything. He had the most positive attitude that you can imagine, and I think that for a lot of people, Dave was one of the sweetest people they'd ever run into. You'd see all these macho straight guys, and they just wanted to be his friend. They wanted to jam with him, and that's not a normal thing in the jazz community. But he was just so special to everybody.

When they had the Houston Press Awards this summer, a bunch of us were going to go and support Dave, even though he couldn't be there. He was scheduled to play there and he was up for about three or four awards. I was going to go with Linda, and Dave called me from the hospital and said, "I was wondering if you'd come stay with me during the awards "

To me that was a

lot neater than the awards so I went over there. CNN was on TV, and we were talking and all of a sudden out of nowhere comes Fred Hersch on the screen, and they were talking about his AIDS benefit album and they showed the list of all the people who were on it, and there was DAVE CATNEY big as life and I said, "Look Dave, can you believe this?!!" I said, "They're going to be running this all night. We'll see this again and again." Dave said, "Oh, we have to record it!" So I called a friend to have him record it and I said to Dave, "Not one of the nominees over at the awards is on CNN tonight. This is great!" I think we saw it two more times before people came in. Barry Dean came in and he'd recorded all of Rick Mitchell's talk at the Awards and got the standing ovation in there and everything and then he'd left and come right over. So in walks Barry with this tape and he puts the earphones on Dave and lets Dave hear it, and Dave started crying; He

just thought it was great. He said, "This is better than any award!" And it truly was like someone doing one's eulogy and being able to hear it. That was a real special night for me, being over there.

Dave and I used to do all kinds of things. He came by about two years ago one morning as I was getting ready to leave town for something. He said, "No, I want to take you to lunch and just spend some time." He took me to the Omni Hotel and we looked out over their little pond and had lunch, and he had just bought these incredible binoculars through which you could practically see life on Mars. They were just amazing. We stopped by Memorial Park on the way back to my place and he said, "C'mon." The park has all these little pathways that go way back into the woods, and so we went back there and walked around and talked and looked at the birds through these incredible binoculars. It was just great. Dave always knew how to have fun and how to get a lot out of life, but when he found out he was HIV+ he probably got even more creative. He was lots of fun and always checking out after everybody.

I'd known for years that Dave was gay. I knew that Barry was, and Barry had probably told me about Dave which to me was no big deal. So I knew and in fact I would give Dave trouble about it. When we were playing at Cody's, all the girls were just going crazy over him. He was a handsome guy, and I said, "PLEASE don't tell these women you're gay! We want all the audience we can get." He would just laugh. It was real funny, because he wasn't ever trying to hide anything. But he had a big female following.

Dave was gay and he lived as a musician and that was his dream and his whole life. So what he was really didn't matter. The fact that he got AIDS; he could have been anybody. But Dave was a remarkable person who touched a lot of people's lives and he'll continue doing so for a long time. Right now I just feel like he's kicking me in the ass with this CD and everything, and he's been pushing Linda to achieve the things she's doing too.

I recall the day when Dave told me he was HIV+. Linda already knew and Barry knew and Scott also knew. Dave and Scott had an amazing relationship, and Scott is another very special person. But anyway one day Dave wanted me to meet him over at the Black Labrador Pub for lunch, and that was the reason he wanted to meet me. He wasn't ready to tell everyone. He'd been HIV+ then for some time, and it was finally kicking in and he knew it was happening so he invited me to lunch and told me. I remember that he told me and I just wasn't ready for it. I started crying. I wasn't ready to hear that from him. I worry about all those kinds of things for everybody. He was like, "Now don't you worry. There's still a chance for a cure. They're trying these things with me and..." He would do that all the time.

He thought that he was a whiner because he'd tell you every once in a while if he was having this pain or that pain and then he'd apologize for it and say, "Hey, but don't worry because dat da dah..." And he'd do that until he died. He never wanted anyone to worry about him or anything. It was incredible. Just incredible.

I lost my mom a year before Dave died, and Dave was at that time still fighting everything pretty hard and on a lot of medications and all that and he was so helpful to me. That was the first thing in my life that had happened which was bad, except for finding out that Dave was HIV+. And he was great. I mean here he is basically dying and he supported me like no one could during that time. It was amazing. Lots of phone calls and lots of love coming

through every time we spoke. He just really cared about people.

Dave brought me a lot of happiness and a lot of "You can do this. If you want to do this there's no problem. Just go for it." I was raised in a very Christian, very Methodist family, and I see my dad living--as far as a Christian life--living it better than any minister in just every day, day-by-day decisions. I've seen that all my life. And David's been the first person that I've seen like that--and he would not say he was religious, until maybe the very end; he was very spiritual and he knew that there was a God and knew that he had a lot of support behind him and that kind of thing--but he truly led a Christian life in my eyes. And to do that and to get to where he got and to do the things he wanted to do and to still be that way in every decision he made... Now if he could, if he was sitting here he'd say, "Don't say Christian...", because he was just real open to so many different things and he had a very good head on his shoulders about his spirituality. He truly believed in God and there at the end he said that he truly felt like God was bringing him into his arms and that he didn't have any worries.

On the Thursday that he died I was supposed to go and wake him up that morning, because Scott was going to sleep in or something. So I was supposed to go over there early in the morning, and all of this took place before they even had a chance to call me to tell me to come over there. Linda told me that Dave had said the previous night, "And what are we doing tomorrow?" Just this very cheerful person! And I didn't get to see him then.

I'd worked with the hospice program here in town previously and I've sat with a lot of people, but when it's your own best friend... I lost all my training and everything. And also because Dave is not your normal person. He never gave up on trying to live and he never gave up on trying to die in the right way, in a way that he felt comfortable in his spirituality.

Dave and I had gone to John Davenport's funeral together. Dave dedicated his last album to John, who was a journalist who'd won four Emmy Awards for his work on PBS. John loved jazz. He'd also done a documentary on Dave. Dave was the last artist he profiled before he died from diabetes

complications. John had become close to Dave and to Linda and the thing he did on Dave was so fine. It's filmed up at Cezanne and then it's filming with him talking over some music in the background. It's just really nice. But anyway Dave and I went to the funeral in my car and we met Scott and Linda there. Of course there were lots of musicians and a whole lot of media people there. It was an Episcopal funeral; evidently he belonged to that church. But the priest who got up there did not even know him. We heard his name mentioned maybe twice in the whole funeral service. There were a lot of scripture readings and a lot of things, but the guy didn't know John. We were all there mourning John the person.

We walked out, and Linda and Scott said they would meet us over at a place to eat lunch. So Dave and I started walking to the car and went by the Episcopal school, and all the kids were out on the playground. There was a real nice bench under some trees, and Dave said, "Can we sit down?" I said, "Sure." So we sat under the trees, and he was very upset. Here he was, knowing he was going to die within the year and having just left a funeral where nothing happened, and it was the funeral of this man that he'd thought all the world of. He said, "I can't believe this!" I said, "Dave, I've been to many Episcopal funerals, and some of them are great because they do know the person and at other ones you just hear the person's name once or twice and then it's scripture readings." Dave said, "I would never want that!" I said, "But you're not Episcopal. You can't even have a funeral here unless you're Episcopal, so you don't have to fear that at all." And he said,

"Well it's not so much me. This is horrible that it happened to John." So I said, "Well, what you need to do and I need to do and we all need to do is sit back and write down the music that we would like to have happen at our funerals and the people that we'd like to get involved. We all need to do that, and John didn't do that; we know that. If he'd done it, it would have been a heavy-duty jazz kind of funeral and it would have been a real up-thing." I remember Dave just being very upset over that, because he cared about John and because he was coming up on something like that himself.

Dave was a genius. Any national name musicians who came to town to play with him at Cezanne would end up with their mouths wide open and their eyes would get real big. No one could believe how good he was. Any fine jazz players who would be around and who would have a chance to play with him were just floored by his ability.

Dave could be really caring and sensitive of everyone's feelings. His audience would be real impressed with his playing and they'd applaud but they were also really proud of him. It wasn't just an audience being entertained and then giving polite applause. Dave was such a people-person that everything came out toward the people. It's real hard many times for a musician who doesn't sing to reach the people like Dave did. He just was magic. His personality. His piano. He was magic.

Dave was always turning me on to different books. I felt like I was one of Dave's students sometimes. I almost felt like he was a father figure in a way sometimes too, just because he was so much like my father. I think he felt like he had to treat me as being fragile for some reason. He didn't want me to worry. He was a great friend. Dave turned me on to a lot of books in the New Age category but basically he was just so open and he knew that miracles could happen .

A couple of weeks ago at the eulogy for Dave at Cezanne I got up and spoke. One of the things that really came to mind was the fact that so many of the staff members at the hospital loved Dave, and they would an end up being in his room. Then he'd be so tired and would want everyone out of his room and he couldn't tell them that! He'd just look at Linda and Scott like, "Help me!" They were trying to keep people out of the room, and David would bring them in and then not have the energy to get them out and he'd get very frustrated with it all. He had so many friends that everybody thought they could just come in and walk into his room. Linda had made a sign saying "NO VISITORS ALLOWED. PLEASE LEAVE YOUR NAME AT THE NURSES STATION SO DAVE CAN KNOW THAT YOU CAME BY TO SEE HIM." And if Linda or Scott would leave for just a few minutes there'd be all these people in his room, and then they'd have to ask them to leave. I told Dave one day when he was getting really frustrated and was saying, "Please don't let anyone come in..." I said, "Dave, you make everybody feel like they're your very best friend. And so all these people are looking at that NO VISITORS ALLOWED and going, "Well that doesn't apply to me. I'm his very best friend!" That was one of the things I said at the eulogy, because it was so true. And he wasn't putting anybody on either. They were all true feelings from him. How he had that much love to go around to that many people was pretty incredible.

He made it really hard for Scott and Linda to protect him. One night they were leaving to eat and they thought he was going to sleep and they had everything all ready. We discovered when we compared notes the next day that he called me the minute they walked out the door. He had called me and wanted me to come over there and visit. I said, "Dave, you sound real sleepy. Why don't you try sleeping a while and then call me, and I'll come over a little later when you wake up."

He was kind of in and out and going, "Well you're probably right..." So he ended up sleeping, and I didn't see him that night. He loved people, and there at the end I know he wanted people around him.

Scott and Linda, to me, are both gifts from David. I knew Linda a while back and I knew she played piano and she was a pretty girl, a sweet girl, and then all of a sudden I heard from David that she was going to manage him and I thought, "Well this is crazy! Sure, she may be this pretty little girl playing the piano over here.... " I just never saw that in her--that part of her--and the more I was around her looking at her through Dave's eyes I was just amazed. And now that I've seen her grow through Dave, she's Miss Jazz and has so many opportunities right now, and people are pulling her from every direction. It's amazing. She feels like he gave her this life she has now. And I feel like he gave her to me; she's a wonderful friend and a fine business person and she's really helped me a lot. That's been real special.

There was one morning after the first day I'd been in the recording studio, and it had been so hard for me the first day. But this next morning I woke up and I wanted to start warming my voice up real early and I wanted to calm down. Those were my two main objectives. So I put on *Little Prayer* that Dave and Sandra had recorded, and the sun was coming up and I was listening to the music and I felt just all of a sudden not only Dave but my mom who's also passed on, sitting there, kind of saying, "Calm down. It's going to be a beautiful day. You're going to do fine in the studio. Everything will be alright." It was like waking up to the two of them sitting there saying, "Hey, don't worry about it!"

Two birthdays ago in January I was playing at a place here called the Post Oak Grill. I was working with saxophone and drums because I cover a lot of the bass on piano when I play. We had a great gig going there and we'd had my birthday there the year before that too. This was a Monday night and I wanted to see how many musicians we could bring out. Well Liza Minelli's boyfriend, Billy Stritch, who's a musical conductor, is a good friend of mine and was a good friend of Dave's, and he and Liza were in town to see her sister Lorna Luft do a musical here. They'd sent a couple people ahead of them to say that they were coming over to hear me, and I looked at them and said, "Does she want to sing or does he want to play?" And they said, "Oh no, they just want to sit back and listen." So they got a table all lined up for them, and in the meantime David and Linda and Scott had come in, and it was great to see them, and the place was getting packed. We started the last set, and in walks Liza Minnelli, which was really neat for me. It was my birthday and I was really feeling relaxed because I didn't have to introduce them; they just sat down.

So I started playing and it dawned on me that I was kind of nervous. And I'm thinking, "I'm not nervous. She's not ranking me nervous. She can't do this. We're different styles, and I play the piano!" And then I realize it's because Dave was like front and center and somewhat elevated where he was sitting. I'm thinking, "It's Dave Catney who's making me nervous!" It wasn't that he was trying to, but he makes me think about my playing a lot. All he has to do is enter the room, and I think, "Oh, what will he think of this..." He never was real judgmental of anyone as far as their playing or their abilities as a musician or anything. But I just thought that was so funny, wondering why I was so nervous, and Liza Minnelli was sitting right there, and it wasn't her. It was Dave.