

Byron Morris

Interview by Winthrop Bedford

Byron Morris is a saxophonist and flutist from Roanoke, VA. He graduated from Tuskegee University in 1964 with a degree in electrical engineering and has worked as an engineer since, while devoting his free time to music. In 1972, he co-founded the band *Unity* with trumpeter Vincent McEwan and composer Gerald Wise, often featuring the vocals of Jay Clayton. Morris is a very exciting performer who is known to create a great show. His music has always had a spiritual dimension and a definite message which can be surmised by the name of his band and the title of their albums. Some classic recordings of *Unity* include *Blow Thru Your Mind* and *Vibrations, Themes, and Serenades*. Their latest album is entitled *Y2K*, which was released in 2003. Morris has also hosted radio shows throughout the years as well as presenting a music lecture series at University of Maryland from 1980-1988.

JJ: Who inspired you to pursue this creative path in jazz and why? Could you talk about the players and music that have shaped your artistry and direction?

JBM: My initial inspiration came from my Father; James W. "Jim Billy" Morris, tenor & alto saxophonist, band leader of The Aristocrats Orchestra, 1946 to 1960's, he was also the arranger & composer. Also, my paternal grandmother; Mrs. Mattie V. Morris, a business woman/owner, cosmetologist and she also played the piano & violin and sang; religious & secular music. I became aware of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie from the record "Salt Peanuts" at an early age. My father played his records around the house. That's how I came in contact with many of the musicians. Also, many of my Dad's musician friends would visit to listen to the records, or play on the big 'ole upright piano in my grandmother's living room, where Don Pullen would play when we would practice at my house. I took private music lessons with Mr. Bernard "Bernie" Whitman, he owned a wood and brasswind repair shop and gave lessons, played Bb clarinet in the Roanoke Symphony, and played jazz on the tenor sax in a jazz group also. By the way, I played Bb clarinet then, not the saxophone. That would come later... When I went to high school (1955-59), I met some like minded students—Marvin Poindexter, Gordon Moore—who had jazz record collections. We started a listening club. I was in the high school marching & concert bands, playing Bb bass clarinet, and the jazz band. In high school is when I heard Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Julian "Cannonball" Adderley, Art Blakey, Thelonious

Monk, Jackie McLean, Lee Morgan. I was really into their music. My Mother lived in Philadelphia and I would visit her in the summertime. My step-father grew up with Jimmy & Tootie Heath in South Philly. Around 1956 or 57 is when I first saw Lee Morgan at the Cotton Club on Illinois Avenue in Atlantic City, playing "the intermission show" in between the headliners, i.e., Dizzy Gillespie, Ahmad Jamal, Dakota Statton—so the music never stopped. Back in Roanoke after the summer, I secured a job at the local popular record store; Kaiser's Record Shoppe. The record Shoppe was across from the Dumas Hotel, run by the Barlow family, and was where many of the famous musicians of that time (Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton, Count Basie, Antoine "Fats" Domino, Lloyd Price, B. B. King, Buddy Johnson & Orch., etc.) would stay when performing in and around Roanoke. I purchased a few records of my own during that time. My Dad said that I needed to save my money for school. While working at the record Shoppe, I first heard albums of Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry, also Eric Dolphy, and Charles Mingus. In the spring and continuing through the summer of 1959 our band; the Chevy's teamed with a vocal group called the Premiers and played dances around and in Roanoke. Our main Gigs were at the Legendary Club Morocco. The culminations of all these early experiences help to shape my artistry and give me a direction I like to believe.

JJ: Talk about how your activities in the Washington DC area, and how those have evolved with the changing nature of the business and the local scene over the years.

JBM: I came to Washington, DC, after college, Tuskegee Institute University, in 1964. While at Tuskegee, as an engineering major, after my first semester, I had applied for admis-

sion to Berklee, and received a letter of acceptance. I asked my Dad if I could change my major to music and attend Berklee. His answer was no, absolutely not!! So I stayed and received by BS in Electrical Construction Engineering in 1964. At Tuskegee, Dr. Lucius R. Wyatt was the director of bands, and quite an influence on me musically. He had just received his Masters Degree from Eastman School of Music, and is a very accomplished trumpet player in classical and jazz music, He has a style which was modeled after Clifford Brown. I heard Mr. Wyatt perform in the Tuskegee Student Center in 1960 in a concert that included Joe Henderson from the Army Band from Fort Benning, GA. The Jazz Music Scene in Washington, DC, when I arrived in the late spring of 1964, was very rich from the stand point of the venues that existed then: Bohemian Caverns, Abart's, The Show Boat, the Howard Theater. I met and played with some outstanding musicians during that time. One of those was trumpeter Gerald Wise, who had just gotten out of



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Army, he and I became good friends, another was tenor saxophonist Vins Johnson who was in the Army Band. Local musicians included John Malachi, Steve Novosel, Andrew White, Buck Hill, Nathan Page, Eric Gravatt. In Baltimore, the Left Bank Jazz Society presented every Sunday afternoon from 5:00 PM until 9:00 PM some of the cream of the crop of National jazz talents. In 1967 Gerald Wise and I started a group with Vins Johnson and we brought in drummer Jimmy Lewis and bassist Lenny Martin from Roanoke to round-out the group. One of our first jobs was for the Jazz Impresario & Poet Gaston Neal, at his "New School" on 14th Street NW in Washington, DC. We were hot; really burning with a lot of youthful energy and excitement, the young jazz fans dug us right away. The fact that we were a piano-less band made us really different. The way I met Eric Gravatt, who is from Philadelphia, PA, and was attending Howard University in DC, was this. In fall of 1968 the Left Bank Jazz Society of Washington was presenting the Jackie McLean group at one of their Sunday afternoon concerts being held at The Show Boat at 18th & Columbia Road, NW. We were all there waiting to hear and see Jackie, when the president of the jazz society came on stage and said that Jackie was not going to be coming because of car trouble somewhere on the NJ turnpike. However, Woody Shaw, Jackie's trumpet player was here and willing to carry-on if they could put together a band. I made a mad dash for my horn which was at home about a twenty minute drive each way from the club. When I returned to the club; Buck Hill, Fred Williams, Eric Gravatt and Woody were about to begin to play, I joined them on stage after the first tune... My playing was under the sway of John Coltrane, Eric Dolphy and Ornette, so Woody, Eric and Fred heard me and we had a

with the music, and confined my performing to mostly on weekends in the local Baltimore/Washington areas. I was young and had a lot of desire and energy, which made up for whatever restrictions I had imposed on myself. In early 1969 I accepted an engineering position with IBM, which meant having to relocate the family to Poughkeepsie, NY. Gerald Wise was also relocating to New York City, so we could hang-out and jam on the weekends in NYC. The Loft Jazz scene was going real strong at that time, so there were many opportunities to sit-in and play with a wide variety of musicians. I had a different style of playing from most during that time so during one of the jam sessions I became aware that a couple of guys were standing right in front of me on the floor below the stage seemingly trying to hear and see what my style was. After the session multi-instrumentalist, Joe McPhee came up to me and said he liked the way I sounded. He had been teaching a class on jazz at Vassar College located in Poughkeepsie, and was planning a concert at Vassar soon, and wanted to know if I would be available to perform with him. I asked, when he wanted to rehearse. He explained to me that his musical concept was more free and intuitive, so most of the music was just frames of references, then go with your musical muses, a meta-physical approach he said. We got together to talk over the music. The concert at Vassar College was a smashing success. The students loved Joe McPhee and really dug the presentation. I was now a member of Joe McPhee's band. Joe and I preformed at the WBAL's Free Music Store in New York City in 1971, Joe McPhee & Survival Unit II, along with Clifford Thornton on baritone horn, Mike Kull on piano and Harold E. Smith on percussions/drums. The CD from this concert was not released on Hat Hut Records until 1996

always stayed in touch and spoke positively concerning our progress as a band (Unity).

JJ: Could you talk about your more recent recordings, *Vibrations In Time*, and *Live At The East Coast Jazz Festival*? Personnel? Repertoire? What kinds of dynamic or themes are the building blocks with which you select musicians and how you view your groups?

JBM: *Vibrations In Time* is a compilation CD, released in 1994, which included material from our first two LP's: *Blow Thru Your Mind* and *Vibrations, Themes & Serenades*, that were released in 1974 and 1979 respectively. The overall concept was to create a superior musical environment where members of the organization could be musically and economically productive. We wanted to create a family style musical aggregation where our collective and individual musical knowledge and talent could be honed, to provide a stable musical climate where our unique musical offerings could be performed, to create original musical compositions where the human voice could be incorporated with various combinations of brass, reeds, strings and percussion instruments, to provide a recorded legacy for wide public dissemination, and to provide a base for economic empowerment along with philosophical and spiritual enrichment. The name Unity was chosen to represent our collective concept for the musical family organization. Unity was formed with similar values, aims and objectives to many other spiritually conscious groups at the time. It managed to match the musical and spiritual searching of John Coltrane, Pharaoh Sanders and Ornette Coleman alongside an equally experimental New York art-music dimension that was brought into the group by vocalist Jay Clayton, who had performed with, amongst many others, Steve Reich. With bassist Milton Suggs having played in Sun Ra's Arkestra, and me having studied with Ornette Coleman and Rahsaan Roland Kirk, it is possible to see the musical path that makes up "Kitty Bey," twelve minutes of musical intensity, which sounds like nothing else ever recorded. (Celeste Records: 2004). In the spring of 1981 the family of Unity returned to the recording studio to provide the musical sustenance for collaboration with the Author and Poet Eloise Greenfield. This collaboration produced the album *Honey, I Love*, and featured the compositions of Byron Morris, Eloise Greenfield, Vincent McEwan, Cedric Lawson, Don Pate and Kenny Barron. I have learned many things from all of the musicians that have passed through Unity over the past 36 years. One of the main things has to do with mutual respect for each other. If you treat the musicians like you want to be treated with respect, then you will have their respect, and they will help to create great music with you.

JJ: One of the ways artists in jazz have in large part, developed their own styles and or reputations, has been to apprentice—to play in the groups lead by high-profile, established jazz artists for extended periods of time. Could you comment on how your own independent path has helped or hindered your music and opportunity

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very interesting and exciting time and the people were getting into the "New Thing" so the excitement really captured them. After the urban riots of 1968, when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in Memphis, TN, everything changed for the worse when most of the jazz venues closed, or changed their musical taste from jazz. It seemed to all of us musicians, that the whole situation that had existed for the music and the musicians had been polarized by these very damaging riots. It is very important for me to say at this point, that while I was quite active musically during this entire time, I also had a "day job" as an electrical engineer, and was newly married to my wife Betty, and we were just starting a family. My family has grown to two sons and seven grandchildren over the years. This limited my ability to do extensive traveling

and then again in 2006. I spent a couple of years playing Funk Soul music with Mack Williams from Joe Tex's band. My group Unity began in earnest in 1972 with Gerald Wise, Vince McEwan and I. It was also during my many trips to NYC, I met Ornette Coleman; who invited Unity to play a concert at "Artist House" on Prince Street in Soho where Ornette had his studio and a performance space. I also met Jimmy Owens, Jimmy Heath, Clifford Jordan, Frank Foster, Stanley Cowell, the Bridgewater Brothers; Cecil & Ron, Frank & Jay Clayton, Kenny Barron around this same time. Unity use to practice at Frank and Jay's Loft in the Soho district of NYC. Don Pullen made the first rehearsal and afterward told me that he had recently been hired to start performing with Charles Mingus, so we had better look around for another pianist. Don

in light of the aforementioned realities?

JBM: I believe that the jazz apprenticeship model is the tried and true way. The history of our music bears that out: Louis Armstrong apprenticed with Joe “King” Oliver; Coleman Hawkins with Fletcher Henderson; Dizzy Gillespie with Cab Calloway; Earl Fatha Hines and Billy Eckstine; Charlie Parker with Jay McShann, and Billy Eckstine; Miles Davis with Charlie Parker; John Coltrane with Miles Davis and so forth. My music career took a different path out of necessity because of the decisions I made about college, engineering and my family. These are the facts not an apology. Yes, I believe that had my career taken a more typical apprenticeship path maybe I would be better known, or maybe not. I’m at peace with the direction that I took. I had the opportunity to meet and hear many of the Jazz Icons of the 20th Century, and became good friends with, and learned from more than a few. I also had the opportunity to record some of the music we thought was important and significant. In the process I got involved with the record business, and as adjunct I also became a radio programmer on WPFW-FM (1977-83) in Washington, DC. Those are my realities, and I can live with all of that. I believe my apprenticeship did take place, but not in the conventional manner as I described above. Since I came out of a background of a University (Tuskegee Institute), and was use to having one on one conference’s with some of my professors as I traversed various academic courses of study, in my major area. I was use to transferring knowledge gleaned from these conferences, and applying that knowledge learned to the practical applications, in my various Lab Classes in engineering and in physics. I applied this same basic formula when I had one on one session’s with many of the jazz icons that I met and spent time with. When Jackie McLean visited my family and I as a guest in our home for a couple of days in the mid 1970’s, we talked about the music we call Jazz and more. Jackie was a natural teacher and I soaked up as much knowledge as I possibly could muster from him and others. I was and am an apprentice, just not in the traditional way, but in what one of my friends Reginald Shareef, PhD., would call; “In a unique way, given your familial and career realities.”

JJ: What kinds of understandings have you gleaned or lessons have you learned from some key players that you have performed or associated with during your career?

JBM: In 1998 Hilton Ruiz came into the family of Unity and stayed until his death in 2006. Hilton was a musical joy on the bandstand, a true professional, and we had a close and respectful friendship. Actually we were more like brothers. Hilton was a very positive force in our musical life and we miss him very much “gracias mi hermano, perder muy mucho” Hilton!!! Hilton had a lot of passion for the music, and when you were on the bandstand with him you felt imbued with that same passion, and it tended to pick me right up with him. I consider all of the musicians that I have

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had contact with or performed with over the years, and with Unity for thirty some years, to be family, and I have learned much from my associations with each one... I met and conversed with; Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Cannonball Adderley, Sonny Rollins, Joe Henderson, Billy Eckstine, Ahmad Jamal, George Duvivier, Count Basie, Earl Fatha Hines, Sun Ra, Freddie Hubbard, Art Farmer, Elvin Jones, Jimmy Garrison, Charles Mingus. They all shared ideas and information with me. The central theme from most of my musical associations is that music is a business. Learn the business just like you learn the basics of the music. But, know each area well!!!

JJ: It is said that many people who achieve success in their business, career, personal, and creative lives can attribute that to following conscientiously and continuously a plan for self-development and growth. If this is relevant for you, could you talk about how that might have been instrumental in your own life?

JBM: My career path in music, is I believe very different from most who have pursued music on a more direct and conventional path. I came along during a very rich period in music history when most of the great Jazz & Popular Music Icons still walked the Earth. They could be heard and seen Live and in person. The America of the 1950’s, 60’s & 70’s was a far different place than what as come along since. This earlier period in American history had a profound affect

on how one viewed a music career verses an engineering career, I have been blessed to have an opportunity to explore both. I am on a continuing path of self-development. It is just a dual one, and that has been “my song” so to speak, it is a composition, a life’s symphony that is still being written...

JJ: Talk about one or more mentors you have had, and something that you abide by or words of wisdom you might have picked up.

JBM: I have had many mentors. In 1972 my friend Mr. Jimmy Owens, the outstanding musician /trumpeter/educator, made me aware of the NEA Fellowship Grant Program, and recommended that I apply for a Jazz Travel-Study Grant; to study with the renowned saxophonist Frank Foster. Between 1973 and 1983 I received three grants from the National Endowment for the Arts to study, to compose to perform. These fellowship grants helped me to accomplish much in my musical career that otherwise would have been very, very difficult, since I was at the same time following dual careers as a musician and as an engineer.

JJ: What are the pitfalls in life and business about which an artist must be cognizant to achieve and maintain success?

JBM: In life, just as in business you have to
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thinking they're in love with me because they see that this one little single is getting this incredible buzz on Black radio, not even jazz radio. I'm assuming they're going to give me a five album deal, and build a career. Not only did they not want to give me five, but they didn't even want to give me three. All they were offering was one. I told them all to take it and shove it, and I walked out. Career-wise, probably the biggest mistake in those days that I made in my life. I used to tell the story to all my students. Ego got in the way. My feelings were hurt. I felt that nobody cared, nobody understood me. When that happened in 1981, that's when I said to my wife, I'm out of here. I'm going to get a job in the theatre in the pit in Atlantic City.

JJ: Talk about how your interest in psychology developed and led to your ongoing education and eventually a private practice.

MP: When I was teaching music, I got inspired to go back to school to try to learn more about what we do. I felt I could get an advanced degree in psychology and understand the dynamics of being an artist. I think all of us that do this, we're hoping to try to figure ourselves out, and keep our own emotions in a stable condition while we continue to pursue our art form. I never resorted to any chemicals in my life. The way I kept my head above water was when I went back and got that degree I felt credible, validated myself, because I wasn't doing much musically. I felt that no one really wanted me. Could I really play anymore? I wasn't getting called by anyone. I wasn't getting any gigs on the road. If I wasn't putting myself in the position of being a leader, I wasn't being called anymore. That's when I went back to Villanova and got my Master's first in the 1990s. I liked it so much, and thought not only was it helping me figure out who I am, but I am also learning about human emotion and the dynamics of human beings. I would like strictly with creative people, of course. I continued and got a Doctorate. My degree is Doctor of Philoso-

phy in Cognitive and Creative Arts Psychology. I actually presented part of my dissertation, which they call a capstone, at one of the IAJE conventions in California. My dissertation, which I had to wrangle in a very difficult way was about neurological and physiological changes that occur during the creative process. Now there is much more of that going. Some guys are doing some MRI stuff, while someone is improvising. That was really my desire. What is it that makes you and me and all these other people that we all love, idolize and love to be

to do and the spiritual connection.

MP: From about 1998, I realized that requests from other people to do projects that did not correspond with my direction, musically speaking, and the kinds of things I wanted to be involved with, I would not do. From that point, I got back into who I am, who I was. I felt more like the saxophonist I grew up feeling like. The other thing that enabled me to do that, is that I have some root in making some part of a living in the people that I see — so I wasn't scrambling

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with, able to do what we do – whether it is a good or bad solo. What allows us to spontaneously compose like that? Neurologically, physiologically, emotionally, psychologically. I started a website called CounselingForTheArts.com, when I did my dissertation. I try to help young people what to do, how to do it, how to get some help while you're in the process - not about how to make a living necessarily, but how to keep yourself emotionally stable during the process. Of course, it becomes harder and harder all the time, because it's more difficult to make a living doing it.. It helped me figure out who I am. I limit the amount of days to three during the week in the practice that I have now. It is probably 80% creative individuals from the tri-state area – primarily musicians, but referrals come in and I'll see a painter and so on. There's about 20% of my practice that is not creatively oriented, that just come as referrals.

anymore and having to do jobs I didn't want to do. So I could devote myself to my saxophone and my music again. Then of course Pat [Martino] came along and asked me to do that during that period of time. The other thing is my spiritual self, the love for my family, my wife. I think I developed more of a spiritual connection that I loved earlier. But I developed a better spiritual connection with them and all of my friends. I have no time or tolerance within myself for anger anymore. I don't want to be mad at anyone. I don't want to have any anger in my life. I love people. When I see the way we react to each other, the way we do as musicians—we hug, we kiss, we hold... that connection to me is priceless. I don't watch a whole lot of sports. But if I do watch a game, and I see somebody pat somebody on the butt, I love that connection. But, as musicians, we do that all the time—on stage and off stage.

JJ: Talk about your return to the music you love

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learn the rules and the basics first, and then try to follow them to the best of your ability. If you are to have a chance at success in life, and in the music business, or whatever business endeavor that you are pursuing, learn the basics and the rules that govern that endeavor or business...

JJ: Could you talk about your perspectives about ethics and integrity and how embracing those make an impact on one's creative pursuits and artistry?

JBM: Ethics and Integrity are two of the core values of a purposeful life. Without ethics & integrity there is not much to talk about, end of discussion.

JJ: What have you discovered about human nature in your journey as an improvising artist?

JBM: As an improvising artist, your ears are open to all sounds, and you can use all of these

sounds to create music of many different varied tones, colors and rhythms. Your audience is affected by the improvisational skills of the musician. Eric Dolphy heard the Bird calls, practiced his flute near them and use their melodies in his solos & music, Paul Horn was interested in the sounds of the whales of the sea, and used their sounds in his music, Coltrane, the Ragas & scales of the music of India. All these sounds elicit responses from those who share your music while you improvise.

JJ: What kinds of activities outside of music do you in engage in for personal fulfillment or development?

JBM: I am captivated by history. I'm interested in music of all kinds, but jazz in particular, African-American, American, Military, and World histories also. I read a lot, I have two to three books or magazine articles going at anyone time. I volunteer my time to work with the East Coast Chapter, Tuskegee Airmen, Inc., I work with

their Speaker's Bureau where their story and history is told. I lead a contingent of original Tuskegee Airmen to the National Air & Space Museum each year to give presentations. One more thing. I believe that not having music programs in our public schools over the last twenty-five years has done tremendous harm to the basic musical and tonal knowledge of the general public, in the USA, as oppose to the overall level of musical knowledge that existed before these programs were discontinued. This discontinuance affected how most could hear music, or not hear music; the basics of music were gone. I mean music and not rhythm & rhyme. Also, I would be very remiss if I did not give a lot of well deserved kudos to my family for believing in me through this journey, all of them; Betty, Eric, Aaron. And to my extended family, which have made-up the backbone of my support from day one, I love all of you.

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