

## Remembering Mulgrew Miller (1955-2013)

Isabelle Leymarie

(written the day after Mulgrew's death)

Mulgrew Miller, a friend for over thirty years and one of my all-time favorite pianists, died at the age of fifty-seven in Allentown, Pennsylvania, near his home. I am still in a state of shock. So young, so talented and so human! His loss leaves a huge gap in the music world and the lives of the many people he touched, mine included, in the many countries he visited. He was a giant of nearly unmatched stature, in the tradition of an Art Tatum or an Oscar Peterson, and a kind and eloquent man.

In the late 1970's, I happened to be in Memphis. There, I had meditated in front of the motel where the Reverend Martin Luther King had been shot and watched the majestic Mississippi, which still carried the blues and remembrances of Mark Twain in its mighty waters. Someone invited me to a jam session, where I was stunned by a young pianist. From where did all those incredible notes come? I could not believe my ears. The phrases flowed, endlessly logical and beautiful. The chords were lush and every single note swung. He told me his name was Mulgrew. This rather unusual moniker stuck in my mind, as did his music.

Not long after, on the West Coast, I attended a concert of the Duke Ellington orchestra led by Duke's son Mercer Ellington. The young pianist captivated me. Suddenly, I realized it was Mulgrew! One day, the Duke Ellington orchestra had happened to be in Memphis, where Mulgrew was living and studying. Saxophonist Bill Easley, who worked with Isaac Hayes and recorded for the Stax label, sat in with the band. As Mercer's pianist was reluctant to travel, Easley recommended Mulgrew, who subbed for him. At the age of twenty-one, Mulgrew then became a full-fledged member of the Duke Ellington band. In 1980, I heard Mulgrew with Betty Carter (and Curtis Lundy on bass). Betty could be exacting with her music: the dame was not always tame, but Mulgrew was his usual brilliant self.

The following year, bassist Nat Reeves, who later worked with Jackie McLean, took me to the small Brooklyn apartment where I think Mulgrew lived. If I remember correctly, he shared it with the late Tony Reedus, who later played drums on Mulgrew's CD *Time and Again*. Kenny Garrett, a friend from the Ellington Orchestra, was also there. The piano occupied almost the whole room. Mulgrew delighted Nat, Kenny, Tony and me

with a memorable “Lush Life” and other numbers, and Kenny jammed with Mulgrew. Whenever Mulgrew played a prodigious, impossible to duplicate phrase, the type of dazzling phrase only he could pull off with such dexterity, he would modestly exclaim: “Something like that!” I then timidly tried to play a two-handed line. “You’re not supposed to do that!,” Mulgrew joked with his usually good-natured sense of humor.

Over the years, I heard him countless times with many artists, including Art Blakey, Woody Shaw, Tony Williams, and Rufus Reid, and with his own trios or solo. He was a master at playing solo. I took a few lessons with him. I remember him sitting at the piano and piling one inventive chorus upon the other with “rhythm changes” and the blues, some of which I still know by heart. There was no stopping him! In 1982, I wrote a profile on him for *Jazz Spotlight News*, along with profiles of two other greatly admired pianists, Kenny Kirkland and Dom Salvador, and in 1985, I interviewed him for *Jazz Magazine*, a French publication. The editor-in-chief, who did not know who Mulgrew was at the time, was reluctant at first to publish the interview. At that time, Mulgrew had not yet recorded under his own name and hardly anybody knew him in Europe. I insisted, telling him Mulgrew was a shining star. Years later, he wrote the entry on Mulgrew for *Le Nouveau Dictionnaire du Jazz!* At the New Morning, a club in Geneva, Switzerland, Mulgrew, who was then playing with Woody Shaw, launched into dizzying improvisations on “Green Dolphin Street.” Not a single note was lost on me.

One day, Mulgrew told me he had fallen in love with a young woman named Tanya. “She’s very spirited,” he added. Tanya became his wife and is the mother of his children. She comes, I think, from a prestigious dynasty of musicians, among them Ray Bryant and Kevin and Robin Eubanks. I had the pleasure of meeting her in Interlaken, Switzerland, in the 1990’s, where Mulgrew, along with Jimmy Heath, Terrell Stafford, Rufus Reid, Lewis Nash, and Deborah Brown had been invited to give master classes. Mulgrew shone again during the opening concert, backing Brown with utmost finesse and sensitivity. Mulgrew’s repertoire was staggering: he could play any tune on request without for a second having to think of the chord changes.<sup>1</sup> The next day, someone photographed him next to a cow. He said, laughing, that he would put the photograph on his Internet site. Nothing came out of it. Maybe the photograph got lost.

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<sup>1</sup> Another musician with this talent was the great Hank Jones. I once heard him in a New York restaurant where he was performing. He complied with all requests, including from patrons totally ignorant of jazz, with competence and grace.

Mulgrew taught by playing rather than preaching. To a German student who asked him what he should do in order to swing, Mulgrew answered, "Just do it!" "You have to eat chittlins," I said kiddingly. "That's it!" exclaimed Mulgrew. Another student asked him if he could play like Erroll Garner. Immediately, Mulgrew offered a perfect imitation. After classes were over, the students would leave the room, but he would stay at the piano and continue to play for himself. I would sit there transfixed, ears and eyes glued to the keyboard. He confided that when he was learning music, he never made transcriptions—his fine ear could indeed catch everything at once—and he added: "When I was young, I wasn't as disciplined as I would have liked to be." What would it have been had he been more disciplined? His playing was faultless! He had a marvelous crystalline touch. This touch, he told me, he had studied for a whole year with Serge Chaloff's mother. He modestly admitted, "I'm a rather good compere. That's why people hire me." More than "rather good," he was a consummate accompanist, with vocalists, in particular, and like other great "compers" such as Horace Silver, Wynton Kelly, Oscar Peterson, and Herbie Hancock, his comping always "told a story." I have transcribed some examples of his comping, for the sheer joy of penetrating deeper into his music and savoring it further. His accompaniment always forms a song in itself, which provides counterpoint to and perfectly complements whatever is being sung or played, never being obtrusive or overshadowing the soloist. Three of his recordings with singers particularly delight me: *Blue Skies*, with Cassandra Wilson, *My Marilyn*, where he backs Miriam Klein on songs by Marilyn Monroe (his solos on this recording are little gems), and *That Day*, with Dianne Reeves. His piano sang as much as the vocalists he so well supported and highlighted. "When you play a song, you have to know the lyrics," he explained. "It makes the melody more meaningful." The jazz he played was nearly almost lyrical, except when he throttled at fearsome tempos.

In the early 1990's, I invited him (along with Christian McBride, Anthony Cox, Jay Hoggard, Terri Lyne Carrington, Danilo Pérez, Mike Cain, Daniel Ponce and others) to the jazz festival I was asked to organize at Le Marin in southern Martinique. The piano, left day and night near the sea with no cover on it, was in rather bad shape, but Mulgrew managed to coax extraordinary sounds from it. And I still remember the hilarious conversations between Mulgrew and Christian McBride at the hotel, full of African-American wit. Around the same time, I invited Mulgrew to perform at the Forum des Halles in Paris (managed by the prestigious Théâtre du Châtelet) for which I was in

charge of the jazz, Latin, and African music program. After the concert, I asked Mulgrew to play me some gospel. I love gospel and it was not the first time I had made such a request to him. With his customary kindness, he immediately granted me this favor. Here, too, his repertoire was infinite. He had lost nothing of his past as a church organist and was a sublime gospel pianist, as can be glimpsed, for example, by listening to his introduction to “He Knows How Much You Can Bear,” a tune recorded with Terrell Stafford. (There is a beautiful live version of this on YouTube.<sup>2</sup>) Mulgrew also made a rather confidential record of spirituals, *Count It All Joy*, with singer Lance Bryant. Indeed, his ballads often had a spiritual quality. “I try to play them like hymns,” he told me.

At the Munster Jazz Festival in Alsace, France, Mulgrew dazzled the audience with Danish bassist Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen, with whom he later recorded Duke Ellington compositions as well as two blues, one by Ørsted Pedersen and the other his own. We walked along fields full of storks (Alsace is famous for these birds, who fly to Africa during the winter and come back in the spring). Mulgrew suddenly became concerned, and, dedicated family man as he was, told me with upmost delicacy of some problems his son Darnell was then going through.

One evening, I invited the French pianist Bernard Maury, another outstanding artist, to listen to Mulgrew at the New Morning in Paris. (Mulgrew jokingly called the club, run by a certain Madame Fahri, “the Madam’s joint.”) That evening, among other tunes, Mulgrew played “Body and Soul.” Maury, who heard everything, immediately caught every single note of every single voicing that Mulgrew had played. He proposed ingenious alternate voicings, which Mulgrew, open to all suggestions, immediately “dug.” I had transcribed Mulgrew’s and Maury’s voicings for the sake of comparison, and lent them to one of my students, who lost them, unfortunately. I once played one of Mulgrew’s recordings for Maury, who was a fantastic harmony teacher with an uncanny understanding and command of modes. “He stole all my licks!” Maury said laughingly about Mulgrew. Of course, at that time, Mulgrew had never met Maury. Once the gig at the New Morning was over, Maury sat down at the piano, and Mulgrew’s bassist (I forgot if it was Derrick Hodge or Ivan Taylor) spontaneously grabbed his instrument to accompany him. Mulgrew often began “Body and Soul,” of which he cut several versions, by playing the bridge, and in his solos he used sophisticated altered modes. In one of his several versions of “Here Is that Rainy Day,” for example, he displayed his rich palette in

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<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, other jazz pianists who play great gospel include Eric Reed and Johnny O’Neal.

the course of his solo, using Dorian, Aeolian and Locrian modes, and minor harmonic, minor natural, altered and other scales, as well as modulating lines, altered chords and chord substitutions. Sometimes he changed the chords to fit the line he was playing, yet this always sounded justified and right. It was never for the mere sake of reharmonization, as I have heard some pianists do, but because it enhanced his solo and created beautiful changing colors, a tapestry of sound. Mulgrew never tried to be outlandish, never being one for facile effects. His left hand was varied: sometimes rolled chords, sometimes just one note to punctuate a phrase. On *Footprints*, a CD recorded with Toots Thielemans, he played an exquisite rendition of Eric Satie's "Gymnopédie N° 1." It is nectar for the ears. In 2007 and 2008, Mulgrew worked with Dave Holland's sextet. In 2008 also, with his last trio (Ivan Taylor and Rodney Green) at the Duc des Lombards in Paris, he dazzled once again with his virtuosity and gave a moving rendition of "It Never Entered My Mind," a song famously recorded, in particular, by Miles Davis with Red Garland on piano. Mulgrew was equally at ease with breakneck tempos, ballads, or Latin tunes, where he would sometimes skillfully resort to *montunos*.<sup>3</sup> During the summer of 2011, Mulgrew gave a series of concerts with Rufus Reid and Lewis Nash. He swung mightily in "Come Rain or Come Shine," "Have You Met Miss Jones" and "The Song Is you," with an admirable art of accents, which give music its character. In "Embraceable You," introduced by a marvelous piano solo, he performed equally marvelous filigrees under Reid's bow and ended with a gorgeous coda.

Mulgrew's biography is now too well known, as are his musical influences (Oscar Peterson, Phineas Newborn, McCoy Tyner among others) for me to repeat all this here. He was born in Greenwood, a town on the Mississippi Delta where important civil rights action took place in the early 1960's. A child prodigy, he was already a seasoned musician by his teens, but he left for Memphis to further his musical studies. Although socially conscious—and he probably witnessed quite a lot of racial incidents as he grew up—he had no bitterness and not a single ounce of prejudice. The whole of mankind was his family, and I have never met anyone who didn't like Mulgrew, whether as a musician or a man. He was no fool either, well aware of the injustices of the music business and the promotion of some artists at the expense of more deserving ones.

One day, at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, famous for the ducks that crossed its lounge every day and took the elevator to go to the roof, I was looking at a pianola

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<sup>3</sup> Latin patterns of Cuban origin, essentially consisting of quarter notes played on offbeats.

playing a jazz tune. Seeing the broad voicings of the depressed keys, it dawned on me that pianists born or living near the Mississippi, in Memphis in particular—Mulgrew, Phineas Newborn, James Williams, Harold Mabern, Donald Brown—all had a very orchestral style, somewhat reminiscent of what that pianola was playing.

Mulgrew had the genius of music, the gift of friendship, deep generosity, evident in his constant praising of predecessors and fellow musicians, an acute sense of humor, as I already mentioned, and he had retained the earthiness and soulfulness of his native Mississippi. His presence as an artist and a human being is irreplaceable.

I add to this text my transcription of his interpretation of Cole Porter's "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye" on his album *Keys to the City*, and the few first bars of his solo on that tune. I heard it for the first time nearly thirty years ago and it still thrills me to this day.

### **Selective discography (from my own record collection)**

#### **As a leader:**

*Keys to the City*, 1985  
*Wingspan*, 1987  
*From Day to Day*, 1990  
*Time and Again*, 1992  
*Hand in Hand*, 1993  
*With Our Own Eyes*, 1994  
*The Countdown*, 1994  
*Getting to Know You*, 1995  
*Chapters 1 and 2- Keys to the City/Work*, 1998  
*The Duets* (with Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen), 1999  
*The Sequel*, 2002  
*Live at Yoshi's Vol. 1*, 2004  
*Live at Yoshi's Vol. 2*, 2005  
*Live at the Kennedy Center, Vol. 1*, 2006  
*Live at the Kennedy Center, Vol. 2*, 2007  
*Solo*, 2010 (recorded in 2000)  
*Grew's Tune* (with The Kluver Big Band), 2012

#### **As a sideman:**

1982  
*Night Music*, Woody Shaw

1983

*Time is Right*, Woody Shaw

*Call it Whatchawana*, Johnny Griffin

1984

*New York Scene*, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers

1985

*Introducing Kenny Garrett*

*Confessin'*, John Stubblefield

1986

*Discernment*, Terence Blanchard and Donald Harrison

*Live at Kimball's*, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers

*Color Scheme*, Bobby Hutcherson

*Double Take*, Freddie Hubbard and Woody Shaw

*Foreign Intrigue*, Tony Williams

1987

*Civilization*, Tony Williams (recorded in 1986)

*Wind Inventions*, Bill Easley (recorded in 1986)

*Keeper of the Drums*, Marvin "Smitty" Smith

*Countin' on the Blues*, John Stubblefield

*Viewpoints and Vibrations*, Steve Turre

1988

*Blue Skies*, Cassandra Wilson

*Trio Transition* (Reggie Workman and Frederick Waits)

*Harlem Blues*, Donald Byrd

*Give and Take*, Billy Pierce

*Yardbird Suite*, Frank Morgan

*The Eternal Triangle*, Freddie Hubbard and Woody Shaw

*Intuition*, Wallace Roney

*Angel Street*, Tony Williams

1989

*Superblue* (Bobby Watson, Roy Hargrove, Bill Pierce and Kenny Washington)

*The Far Side*, Tony Reedus (recorded in 1988)

*Garrett 5*, Kenny Garrett

*A Higher Fire*, Monte Croft

*Rejuvenate!* Ralph Moore

*Brilliant Corners*, James Spaulding (recorded in 1988)

*The Standard Bearer*, Wallace Roney

1990

*Communications*, Steve Nelson

*Footprints*, Toots Thielemans (recorded in 1989)

*Storm Rising*, Jim Snidero

*Lotus Flower*, Woody Shaw

*Native Heat*, Tony Williams  
*The Standard Bearer*, Wallace Roney

1991

*Benny Golson Quartet "Live"* (recorded in 1989)  
*Tomas Franck in New York*  
*For the First Time*, Antonio Hart  
*One for Chuck*, Billy Pierce  
*The Lure of Beauty*, Gary Smulyan (recorded in 1990)  
*Horn of Passion*, Jesse Davis  
*Evidence*, Vincent Herring  
*Another Hand*, David Sanborn  
*I Remember*, Dianne Reeves

1992

*It Ain't What it Was*, Sonny Fortune  
*Six Pack*, Gary Burton and Friends  
*It's not about the Melody*, Betty Carter  
*What Am I Here For?* Harold Ashby  
*Setting the Standard*, Dave Liebman  
*New York Summit*, Steve Wilson  
*Neptune*, Tony Williams  
*John Swana and Friends* (recorded in 1991)  
*Sam I Am*, Sam Newsome (recorded in 1990)  
*Six Pack*, Gary Burton and friends

1993

*Rhythm Is my Business*, Lewis Nash  
*The Key Players*, The Contemporary Piano Ensemble (Mulgrew Miller, Harold Mabern, James Williams and Geoff Keezer)  
*Real Book*, Steve Swallow  
*Jewel*, The Robert Watson Sextet

1994

*Until we Love*, Gabrielle Goodman  
*The Red and Orange Poems*, Gary Bartz  
*Reaching Up*, Ernie Watts  
*Up Jumped Spring*, Benny Golson

1995

*Moody's Party*, James Moody  
*Come Play with Me*, Charles McPherson  
*Live at the Village Vanguard*, Joe Lovano

1996

*Benny Golson Quartet*  
*Young at Heart*, Tony Williams  
*I Remember Miles*, Benny Golson  
*Four Pianos for Phineas*, The Contemporary Piano Ensemble (recorded in 1989)

*Live at Small's, Vol. 1 & 2*, Bill Mobley Jazz Orchestra  
*Young at Heart*, James Moody  
*New York Second Line*, Terence Blanchard and Donald Harrison

1997

*Tenor Legacy*, Joe Lovano  
*Trumpet Legacy*, Nicholas Payton, Lew Soloff, Tom Harrell and Eddie Henderson  
*That Day*, Dianne Reeves

1998

*Memphis Piano Convention* (Mulgrew Miller, Donald Brown and Harold Mabern)  
*Astronauta*, Joyce  
*Mirrors*, Joe Chambers  
*Serendipity*, Gregory Tardy  
*Classic Moods*, Ernie Watts  
*Generations*, Steve Wilson  
*Jazz Masters, Jerry Bergonzi*  
*First Insight*, Jesse Davis  
*A Cloud of Red Dust*, Stefon Harris  
*Manhattan Nocturne*, Charles McPherson

1999

*New Beginnings*, Steve Nelson (recorded in 1997)  
*Bridges*, Dianne Reeves  
*Just For When You're Alone* (compilation)  
*Live at the Montreux Festival 1999*, Buster Williams  
*Freedom's Serenade*, Ronald Muldrow  
*Dizzy's World*, The Dizzy Gillespie Alumni Allstars

2000

*Restoration Comedy*, John D'Earth  
*Promised Land*, Harold Land  
*How Can I Keep From Singing*, René Marie  
*Tribute to the Trumpet Masters, Vol. 2*, Bryan Lynch  
*Day Dream*, Trudy Kerr

2001

*For Hamp, Red, Bags, and Cal*, Gary Burton  
*The Calling – Celebrating Sarah Vaughan*, Dianne Reeves  
*Moodsville*, Bennie Wallace  
*Destination Up*, Jim Rotondi  
*One Day, Forever*, Benny Golson  
*Simple Pleasure*, Vincent Herring  
*Cliffhanger*, Randy Sandke (recorded in 1999)  
*Memento*, Rick Margitza  
*My Marilyn*, David Klein  
*Blue Black*, Jean Toussaint  
*TNT*, Steve Turre  
*Vertigo*, René Marie

2002

*In Blue*, Karrin Allyson

*The Best of Dianne Reeves*

2003

*State of Mind*, Dave Ellis (recorded in 2001)

*The Golden Striker*, Ron Carter

*New Beginnings*, Terell Stafford

*Close to my Heart*, Jeremy Pelt

2004

*Eternal Journey*, Sean Jones

*Bush Dance*, Johnny Griffin

*The Spirits High Above*, Steve Turre,

*With All My Heart*, Harvey Mason

2005

*Gemini*, Sean Jones

*Dance Delicioso*, Chris McNulty

2006

*Count it All Joy*, Lance Bryant

*Pretty Blues*, Antoinette Montague

*Dizzy's Business*, Dizzy Gillespie All-Star Big Band

*The Survivor*, Donald Harrison

*Deep in a Dream*, Pierrick Pedron

2007

*Sound-Effect*, Steve Nelson

*Moodscape*, Bill Mobley

2008

*Pass it on*, Dave Holland

*Rainbow People*, Steve Turre

*Diaspora*, Ronald Muldrow

*The Best of Ronald Muldrow*

2009

*Mirages*, Alex Sipiagin

*The Lure of Beauty*, Jimmy Knepper

*Live at Smalls*, Neal Smith

2010

*Lineage*, Jerry Bergonzi

*Motherless Child*, John Blake Jr.

2011

*Bach: Brandenburg Concertos 1, 3 and 5*, Benny Golson's New York Orchestra

2012

*Live at San Sebastian – Golden Striker Trio*, Ron Carter, Mulgrew Miller and Russel Malone

2013

*Pushing the World Away*, Kenny Garrett

Uncertain date:

*A Blast of Love – Jazz Currents*

# Ev'ry time we say goodbye

Transcription : I. Leymarie

Exposition du thème par Mulgrew Miller

Intro

A  $E_b \Delta$   $F-7$   $G-7$   $F-7$   $E_b \Delta$   $C7$   $F-7$   $Bb7$

1 2 3 4

$E_b \Delta$   $F-7$   $G_b \Delta$   $Bb7$   $Bb-7$   $E_b7$   $Ab-7$   $Db7$

5 6 7 8



## Ev'ry time we say goodbye

**B'** Eb 6/G F#° F-7 Bb7 Bb-7 Eb Δ Ab-7 Db7

25 26 27 28

G7 C7 F7/B Bb7 Eb Δ Eb Δ

29 30 31 32

lead-in to the solo

33 34

Ev'ry Time (Expo)