

The Donald Byrd-Pepper Adams Quintet (1958-61)

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Although they certainly knew each other in Detroit, trumpeter Donald Byrd and baritone saxophonist Pepper Adams rarely played together until both moved to New York City. In the early 1950s, most of their time with each other was spent at the Music Box, a record store in downtown Detroit that was, curiously enough, just off the corner of Park (Pepper's birth name) and Adams. Adams worked there part-time, and nearly every day after high school Byrd, the euphonium player Bernard McKinney, and the pianists Hugh Lawson and Roland Hanna would congregate at the store to visit with Adams and listen to jazz records.

The first known time that Byrd and Adams worked together in the same band was in February, 1950, when they began rehearsing with the Charles Johnson Big Band at Sunnie Wilson's Show Bar in Detroit. The band's personnel included some of the best young musicians in Detroit — Donald Byrd, Parky Groat, Frank Foster, Pepper Adams, Barry Harris, Kenny Burrell, Paul Chambers — along with the veterans Cleveland Willie Smith and Billy Frazier on alto sax, and the group's leader, Charles Johnson, on drums. Frank Foster, Billy Frazier and Willie Smith all contributed arrangements. Woefully, the

band would only play two or three gigs, probably at the Club Valley, due to its predominantly underage personnel.

Adams served in the U.S. Army for two years, from June, 1951 until his discharge in June, 1953. For his part, Byrd (two years younger than Adams) was in the Air Force most of the early fifties, moving to New York in 1955, about a year before Adams. Due to their time in the Service, it's unlikely that they worked together again in Detroit, except possibly at a random jam session, such as those held at the World Stage or West End Hotel.

Byrd and Adams' first gig together in New York City was probably at the Cafe Bohemia in early February, 1958. Later that month, they were paired as the front line for a Thelonious Monk studio recording, just as they began a residency at the Five Spot that lasted until June. Already in demand as a dynamic frontline duo, their four-month run (with the Detroiters Doug Watkins and Elvin Jones) gave them the opportunity to launch the Byrd-Adams Quintet. Riverside Records recorded the group live in April. Six months later, the band would record *Off to the Races*, its first of a series of recordings for Blue Note Records that cemented the band's place in jazz history.

In the Summer of 1958, however, directly after the lengthy Five Spot engagement, Donald Byrd toured Europe with Watkins and the Belgian tenor saxophonist Bobby Jaspar. Adams, for his part, accepted a six-week engagement with Benny Goodman. Again, in early 1959 the Byrd-Adams Quintet would be shelved in favor of Byrd and Adams' four-month commitment to the Thelonious Monk Big Band (culminating with the influential *Thelonious Monk Orchestra at Town Hall* date for Riverside). This on-again/off-again schedule would characterize the early history of the

Quintet, from mid-1958 well into 1960. Because steady work wasn't available for the group's first two-and-a-half years as a unit, Byrd and Adams continued to take gigs as sidemen while also maintaining active careers as solo artists.

From 1958-1961, Byrd and Adams were busy indeed, working and recording in many settings. Besides their membership in Monk's orchestra in early 1959, Adams did two tours with Benny Goodman and another with Chet Baker before May, 1959, when the Byrd-Adams Quintet recorded *Byrd in Hand*, their second date for Blue Note. By then the Quintet had already worked two weeks at New York's Village Vanguard. In October, 1959 the band was touring again, this time playing gigs in Toronto and Pittsburgh.

In the Spring of 1960 the Byrd-Adams Quintet (including Bill Evans, Paul Chambers and Philly Joe Jones) recorded three tunes for a stereophonic sampler project for Warwick Records. Before that, Byrd without Adams had worked his way from New York to San Francisco and back while Adams formed a short-lived quintet with the tenor saxophonist J.R. Monterose. But by July, 1960 the Quintet's superb rhythm section of Duke Pearson, Laymon Jackson and Lex Humphries had coalesced. And with Adams back in the group, the Quintet began its incarnation as a steadily working ensemble. A three month tour took the band to Cleveland, Chicago, Minneapolis, Dallas, Salt Lake City, Denver, Detroit, Kansas City and Pittsburgh, then back to Chicago and Detroit before returning to New York in late October.

During the group's two-month stint in Chicago (that would extend into January, 1961), pianist Herbie Hancock was hired to replace Duke Pearson. This was Hancock's

first gig outside of Chicago with a touring band. Hancock moved from Chicago to New York to join the group.

Back in New York, the Quintet recorded again for Warwick, then toured for most of the year before disbanding in October. In February and March, 1961 the group gigged throughout the Eastern United States and Canada, working at the New Showboat in Philadelphia, then Montreal and Toronto and back to the Bird House in Chicago before working in Indianapolis and Rochester, New York. Returning to New York in April, the group recorded two more dates for Blue Note (*Chant* and *The Cat Walk*) within a two week period.

Looking back at the group's history, there seems to be a direct relationship between the amount of recordings the Byrd-Adams duo made and the frequency of Quintet gigs. Stated another way, the more recordings Byrd-Adams made, the more they created demand for their Quintet to be heard live in performance. Their first recording, *10 to 4 at the Five Spot*, released in mid-1958, was followed by the release of the Quintet's first two Blue Note recordings in 1959, *Off to the Races* and *Byrd in Hand*. Those were followed in turn by a double-LP recorded in November, 1960 (*Live at the Half Note*) and five studio sessions (*Motor City Scene*, *Out of This World*, *Chant*, *The Cat Walk* and *Royal Flush*) all recorded before October, 1961. This upward arc of activity in the studios was equally true for their dense club-date calendar. Band itineraries, magazine articles and advertisements in the jazz and lay press all demonstrate that 1960 and 1961 were, indeed, the glory days for the working quintet, when the band was performing regularly and functioning at its peak. This is the main reason why I find the Quintet's cluster of six recordings made in less than a year's time

to be their finest work. Working steadily for only a year also explains why the Donald Byrd-Pepper Adams Quintet remains to this day not nearly as well-known as some of other similarly constituted great small bands of its time, such as those led by Max Roach, Miles Davis, Art Blakey, Horace Silver or Cannonball Adderley.

What other conclusions can we make about the Quintet's three early recordings leading up to their great body of work done in late 1960 and 1961? First, it's clear that Byrd and Adams favored Detroit musicians in their group whenever possible. The live 1958 Riverside date, for example, was an all-Detroit group except for the pianist Bobby Timmons, though I suspect they tried to hire Tommy Flanagan.

For their second and third dates—the Quintet's first two for Blue Note—commercial pressures dictated that Byrd, as leader, feature some of the musicians in Blue Note's stable. It also necessitated expanding the front line to three horns. These all-star sessions would soon be phased out in favor of showcasing the working Quintet. That's because the group started touring steadily in mid-1960, congealing as a unit, and attracting attention as a unique band with its own sound.

Two other things that characterize the Quintet's recordings is their inclusion of original compositions and the use of the ballad feature. Both Byrd and the pianist Duke Pearson used these recording dates as opportunities to write original tunes and arrangements for small group. The ballad feature—a convention of jazz performance, and something Byrd would've been asked to perform as a member of Art Blakey's band *a la* trumpeter Clifford Brown—is something Byrd and Adams would always do in club dates and also on several of their recordings. They used ballads as solo features for either Byrd or Adams, typically undergirded by the rhythm section, and as a way to

affect variety within each set of music. Additionally, having one of the horn players drop out on a slow-tempo number was sensible in another way. It would by necessity abbreviate the duration of the tune and not unduly disrupt the set's momentum.

Taking the entire sweep of their work into consideration, it's clear to me that Byrd's exclusive recording contract with Blue Note catalyzed the Byrd-Adams Quintet. Their increasing popularity, due to the wide distribution and overall excellence of their first two Blue Note recordings, also led to them eventually being picked up by the Shaw Agency, who booked tours for the group throughout North America.

Fortuitously, too, a brief lapse in Byrd's Blue Note contract allowed Byrd and Adams the opportunity to fit in two additional recording dates. One, *Out of This World* for Warwick, was for the working group. The other, *Motor City Scene* (under Adams' leadership for Bethlehem), was for sextet, with the addition of Detroitier Kenny Burrell on guitar.

For all their recordings, steady work on the road, and critical acclaim, the Shaw Agency's predilection for booking the Quintet on very long road trips still spelled disaster for the band. Exhausting car rides (Minneapolis to Dallas, Salt Lake City, Denver, then Detroit, for example) were already booked by Shaw in October, 1960. In July and August, 1961 the group was back at it, driving from New York to Cleveland, then St. Louis, Kansas City, Chicago and Detroit, leading up to *Royal Flush*, their last New York studio date in September. In October the band returned to St. Louis, then played Kansas City, where the club folded and the group wasn't paid. Years later Adams cited transportation costs relative to what they were earning as the main reason for ending the four year collaboration. But the Kansas City experience must have functioned as a

telling metaphor and as an embodiment of the group's pent-up frustrations. It was the Quintet's final gig.

Despite their all-too brief time together, three outstanding recordings were made in the late 1950s and six superb dates were made in a ten-month stretch beginning on November 11, 1960 with the Blue Note double-LP *Live at the Half Note*. The Half Note date is the only Quintet recording to have never gone out of print in the U.S., some measure of its enduring value. From it, Duke Pearson's composition "Jeanine" is the Quintet's only tune that has become a standard in the jazz repertoire. *Live at the Half Note* reveals the band at the height of its power and remains the best example of what the band sounded like at the time.

Just after the Half Note recording, the Quintet, in a burst of activity, recorded four more dates in New York. First was the Bethlehem session, led by Adams, that returned to the favored all-Detroit formula (with Tommy Flanagan, Kenny Burrell, Paul Chambers and Louis Hayes). A January date for Warwick, *Out of This World*, featured the working group, now with the young Herbie Hancock on his very first record session, but with the drummer Jimmy Cobb in place of Lex Humphries. In April and early May, the Quintet's two Blue Note studio dates used other drummers entirely: Philly Joe Jones on *The Cat Walk*, because they couldn't locate Humphries, and Teddy Robinson on *Chant* because he was already touring with the band at the time. One final Quintet date, *Royal Flush*, was done in September, 1961. It's just as excellent as the others. It features Byrd, Adams and Hancock, with the bassist Butch Warren and the drummer Billy Higgins.

Summing up the totality of the band's output, what is it about this group that made it unique? First and foremost, of course, the Quintet featured two great

instrumental stylists backed by a terrific, interactive, hard-swinging rhythm section. Their repertoire was fresh and compelling, comprised of a blend of unusual standards, interesting originals, and cleverly adapted tunes, such as an uptempo version of “I’m an Old Cowhand” or Henry Mancini’s “Theme from Mr. Lucky.”

Sonically, trumpet with baritone sax is an exquisite pairing, even more aurally spread than the customary trumpet/tenor sax pairing of its time. A trumpet/baritone front line was still rather unusual in 1958, especially one playing this brand of intense post-Charlie Parker small group jazz. But, more than that, Byrd and Adams meshed so well because their styles were so complementary. Byrd, at root, was a very melodic, soulful, lyrical player who used nuance, space and blues inflections in his solos. Adams did too, though he was more of a rhapsodic player, who delighted in double-time playing and exhibiting other technical flourishes. Byrd, it could be said, was more of a “horizontal” soloist, Adams more “vertical.” What a perfect counterbalance! And when Byrd and Adams stated each tune’s theme, their phrasing—often using impressive dynamics or provocative counterpoint lines—was always so beautifully rendered.

All told, during the four year stretch that reached its apotheosis in 1960-61, the Donald Byrd-Pepper Adams Quintet recorded eleven dates—seven studio albums, one sampler, and three live LPs—assuring their place as one of the great jazz groups of its time. The band launched the career of Herbie Hancock and it gave Byrd, Duke Pearson and, to a lesser extent, Adams and Hancock, a forum to write original compositions. Some of the tunes in their book (“Curro’s,” “Bird House” and “Jorgie’s”) immortalized jazz clubs. The Quintet surely helped Adams’ career too. He was heard widely in clubs

throughout North America and the Blue Note dates in particular were well distributed in the U.S. and abroad during his lifetime.

Discography/Filmography

With the exception of *Live at the Half Note*, all of the Donald Byrd-Pepper Adams Quintet's Blue Note recordings have been collected in a Mosaic Records box set. *10 to 4 at the Five Spot* and *Motor City Scene* have been reissued on CD. *Out of This World* has been reissued on CD too, but beware of cannibalized recordings from bootlegs that cut and paste some of the tunes almost beyond recognition. Most of the Quintet sessions were under Byrd's name because Blue Note's contract was with him. The dates on other labels fall under Pepper Adams' leadership or Adams-Byrd.

No film or videotape footage of the Byrd-Adams Quintet has been uncovered as yet, but a terrific clip from the 1958 Cannes Jazz Festival, featuring the Bobby Jaspar-Donald Byrd Quintet is listed below. Each member of that rhythm section (Walter Davis Jr., Doug Watkins and Arthur Taylor) recorded with the Byrd-Adams Quintet on Blue Note.

Pepper Adams, *Motor City Scene*, Bethlehem BCP-6056.

_____, *10 to 4 at the 5 Spot*, Original Jazz Classics CD: OJCCD-031-2.

Pepper Adams-Donald Byrd, *Out of This World*, Fresh Sound CD: FSR-335.

Donald Byrd, *At the Half Note Cafe* (Vol. 1), Blue Note CD: CDP-7-46539-2.

_____, *At the Half Note Cafe* (Vol. 2), Blue Note CD: CDP-7-46540-2.

Donald Byrd-Pepper Adams, *The Complete Blue Note Donald Byrd/Pepper Adams Studio Sessions*, Mosaic CD: CDBN-7-46540-2.

Bobby Jaspar-Donald Byrd, INA videotape (France), <http://youtu.be/XEwuLs5hCRE>.

Thelonious Monk, *Thelonious Monk Orchestra at Town Hall*, Original Jazz Classics CD: OJCCD-135-2.

Compositions

Who wrote all those great tunes for the Byrd-Adams Quintet? I always knew that Donald Byrd wrote a bunch and that Duke Pearson wrote a few. When I began assessing their repertoire I was surprised to see the degree to which Byrd's writing dominated the amount of original material written for 1958-61 band. 33 original compositions were written to perform during that period. Of that, 70% of the oeuvre was written by Donald Byrd or (in the case of "Each Time I Think of You") co-written by Byrd and Duke Pearson.

Nine of the tunes were written by various pianists in the band: Walter Davis Jr., Duke Pearson and Herbie Hancock. Pepper Adams wrote his two compositions for *Motor City Scene*, the 1960 Bethlehem date under his leadership. It seems doubtful that either of Adams' tunes were ever played by the Quintet in club dates. Herbie Hancock's first recorded composition, "Requiem," can be heard on *Royal Flush*, the Quintet's last studio date while still a touring band.

"Jeannine,"* written by Duke Pearson, was recorded by Cannonball Adderley about six months before the November, 1960 *Live at the Half Note* date. Although not written for the Byrd-Adams Quintet, it's included below, albeit an outlier, because Byrd-

Adams helped make the tune part of the standard jazz repertoire. That's in part due to the fact that their seminal Blue Note recording never went out of print in the U.S.

What about the rest of the book? Judging from the data, 28 other tunes were either recorded or performed in clubs. A few of these tunes were standards but most were tunes that few performed. Even some of the standards were modified in creative ways, such as the ballad "That's All" and the novelty number "I'm an Old Cowhand" being made into uptempo flag-wavers. See the Byrd-Adams repertoire list below.

Pepper Adams:

Libeccio

Philson

Donald Byrd:

Amen

Bird House

The Cat Walk

Cecile

Devil Whip

Down Tempo

Curro's

Great God

Here Am I

Hush

The Injuns

Jorgie's

Kimyas

The Long Two/Four (= Off to the Races)

Pure D. Funk

Shangri-La

6M's

Soulful Kiddy

Sudwest Funk

When Your Love Has Gone

Yourna

You're Next

Yourna

Donald Byrd-Duke Pearson:

Each Time I Think of You

Walter Davis Jr.:

Bronze Dance

Clarion Calls

Herbie Hancock:

Requiem

Duke Pearson:

Chant

Child's Play

Duke's Mixture

Hello Bright Sunflower

Jeannine*

My Girl Shirl

Say You're Mine

Other Tunes Recorded and Performed by Byrd-Adams:

Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea (Harold Arlen)

Bitty Ditty (Thad Jones)

Cute (Neal Hefti)

Day Dream (Billy Strayhorn)

Hastings Street Bounce (traditional)

I'm a Fool to Want You (Jack Wolf-Joel Herron-Frank Sinatra)

I'm an Old Cowhand (Johnny Mercer)

I Remember Clifford (Benny Golson)

It's a Beautiful Evening (Raymond Rasch)

Like Someone in Love (Jimmy Van Heusen)

Little Girl Blue (Richard Rodgers)

Lover Come Back to Me (Richard Rodgers)

Mr. Lucky (Henry Mancini)
One More for the Road (Harold Arlen)
Out of This World (Harold Arlen)
Paul's Pal (Sonny Rollins)
A Portrait of Jennie (J. Russel Robinson)
Sophisticated Lady (Duke Ellington)
Stardust (Hoagy Carmichael)
Stuffy (Coleman Hawkins)
That's All (Bob Haymes-Alan Brandt)
'Tis (Thad Jones)
Trio (Errol Garner)
When Sunny Gets Blue (Marvin Fisher-Jack Segal)
You're My Thrill (Jay Gorney)
Witchcraft (Cy Coleman)

Gary Carner is the author of *Pepper Adams' Joy Road*, *The Miles Davis Companion* and *Jazz Performers*. From 1984 until Adams' death in 1986, Carner collaborated with Pepper Adams on his memoirs. Carner's research on Adams' career, collected at pepperadams.com, spans four decades. Carner blogs about Adams at gc-pepperadamsblog.blogspot.com and has produced all 42 of Adams' compositions for Motema Music.