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**David Sanborn on Phillip Wilson**

*David Sanborn impresses not just with his funky and lyrical saxophone but a life dedicated to shining a light on comparatively esoteric concepts, perhaps most notably with the amazing roster he curated for the late 80’s television show* Night Music.

*Sanborn also appears as a guest saxophonist in intriguing places, for example on terrific albums by Django Bates and Tim Berne. From the latter I learned of Sanborn’s deep connection with the St. Louis avant-garde scene, especially drummer Phillip Wilson. Wilson is one of the ultimate insider’s insiders, a brilliant force of possibly unprecedented range, unknown to many despite playing with the Paul Butterfield Blues Band (including at Woodstock, where they played the Wilson composition “Love March”) and contributing one the most important drum performances to the avant jazz canon on Julius Hemphill’s* Dogon A.D.

*The following started sort of as a conventional DTM Q&A but Sanborn is garrulous. He’s also been interviewed hundreds of times: I suspect he consented to my request for a sit-down during Blue Note at Sea because of his aforementioned dedication to shining a light on comparatively esoteric music. I offered a few prompts but there was no need for them in the final draft.*

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**David Sanborn:** Not too many people ask me about Phillip Wilson, but I’m happy to talk about him because he was one of the unsung heroes. He was the center of that incredible St. Louis scene I grew up in.

I was born in 1945, and came on the scene when I was 14 or 15 years old. My parents listened to a lot of Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Benny Goodman, and I was trying to sit in with blues bands as soon as I could: Albert King, Little Milton. There used to be like an 8-block area, Gaslight Square, which was like the Greenwich Village of St. Louis, the bohemian section with art galleries and jazz clubs.

Jimmy “Night Train” Forrest and Grant Green would play at the Dark Side, but if you went down the street and through the parking lot to the side door you could enter the Other Side, which was tiny club with about 15 tables. I went in there to sit in one night with a piano player I knew from Albert King, Rick Bolden.

I’m still small, but as a kid I was just barely bigger than the alto. I had memorized a couple of Sonny Stitt solos, and I think the novelty of this child playing a Sonny Stitt solo was enough to get me in the door, and I played there frequently. A lot of musicians would stop by because the club was on their route, and that’s where I met Phillip Wilson.

Phillip was a very gregarious guy, very social. He’d talk non-stop. For better or worse, that was his thing. He was so full of love, and wanted everybody involved in everything. He also wanted to experience and play everything himself. He was voracious.

Through Phillip I met Lester Bowie, Oliver Lake, Julius Hemphill, and Hamiet Bluiett. Lester was the comedian king: like the wise philosopher of St. Louis but funny and fearless.

Phillip and Lester did not discriminate about styles of music. Lester played in a circus band, society gigs, straight ahead gigs. He played with Jimmy Forrest. He met his wife Fontella “Rescue Me” Bass on a gig with the Clara Ward Gospel Singers.

Everyone had a day job except for Lester. Julius Hemphill sold furniture, Oliver Lake worked in the post office, Phillip worked as an arc welder at McDonnell Aircraft. Phillip worked at McDonnell all day, like from six in the morning to three or four in the afternoon, and he might of gone home and slept a bit before playing and hanging all night. Sometimes we would be hanging at like four in the morning and he’d say, “I’ve got to go home, change my clothes, and go to work.”

Hemphill was a physically imposing figure, a towering guy with a commanding presence. No one had to say it, but he was obviously the guy in control, the Einstein of everything. He was a powerful player, he had great time. And such a great composer. Eventually he was the glue in the World Saxophone Quartet, and gave avant-gardisms that were verging on tenuous more nuance. Tim Berne and I bonded over *Dogon A.D*.: that album was a life-changing experience for Tim.

He grew up in Fort Worth, basically the same neighborhood as Ornette Coleman. Julius wasn’t an Ornette clone, but he had that same thing, that kind of country meets the avant-garde.

When I first heard Ornette with Don Cherry and Charlie Haden and either Higgins or Blackwell, I thought, “These guys are funny!”*[Sings “Blues Connotation.”]* It sounded like country music to me. I recognized this music. Midwesterners understand that kind of “big sky” feeling.

Would you believe I was the third alto in a little Hemphill band for about four gigs? It was Hemphill, Lake, me, Phillip and a local bass player. I found that experience to be totally liberating.

Phillip and I would go over to Lester’s house and we’d listen to records, talk about them, and get high. That’s when I got introduced to Ornette Coleman, but there was no real distinction between Ornette or Charlie Parker or Cannonball Adderley. The first time I heard Art Blakey’s *Ugetsu* was at Phillip’s house. The Jazz Messengers really spoke to that down and dirty sensibility of St. Louis.  And, of course, every new Miles Davis record was an event. The way some people would wait for a Beatles album, we would wait for the next Miles record. When *My Funny Valentine* arrived, we wore that out! Eric Dolphy’s *Out to Lunch* was another crucial album. My god, you listen to that now, it still seems to fresh.

Phillip and Lester loved it all and they could do it all, too. Same thing with Oliver Lake, Hemphill, and Bluiett. They weren’t judgmental about style. This imprinted on me early on, and was a lifelong influence. Obviously I took a different path, but I never lost my sense of joy of hearing people be who they are.

When Lester played with Jimmy Forrest, Lester would play in for a while…but then he would go out, because that’s what he heard, and Jimmy would say, “That cat is crazy!”

Phillip tended to be better behaved, but he followed it all with great interest and enthusiasm. He would drag me around to all these clubs and make me sit in. I was his perpetual “+1.” I kind of realized this at the time but I’ve come to appreciate it more and more: He gave me entrance to a lot of these places. He vouched for me. He even got me a little gig at a club called the Blue Note with an organ trio.

I have another kind of fun story about Lester Bowie from the early years. When my first wife and I took a honeymoon, we stayed with Lester and Fontella in Chicago for a few days. In my terms, they were incredibly successful. Their apartment was nice and big, I think it was a dining room, living room, and four bedrooms. It was June or July, and there was one day that was incredibly hot. Lester said, “We need an air-conditioner! I’m going to go buy an air-conditioner.”

I was dumbfounded. He left the apartment, went to the store, and came back with an air-conditioner. I through to myself, “Now, that’s the big time! He just had the money lying around to buy an air-conditioner! *God damn*!”

Anyway, Phillip was a master drummer, a colorist who also had a special deep beat. He had a deep soul and understood the pocket. That odd-meter beat on “Dogon” is spot on.

I think Phillip got into the Butterfield Blues Band through Gene Dinwiddie. Both Dinwiddie and Paul Butterfield were from Chicago. Dinwiddie was a great tenor saxophonist who could kind of play both in and out, sort of like Von Freeman. On one of the Butterfield albums is “Love Disease,” kind of a fast 6/8 thing which is by Dinwiddie and has a great straight-ahead tenor solo as well.

When Mike Bloomfield left Butterfield to form Electric Flag, he added horns. Butterfield was competitive so he added horns as well. His first hire was Gene Dinwiddie, and then a trumpet player called Keith Johnson.

I was at the University of Iowa, but my friend Ted Stewart — a drummer who also knew Phillip — called me and said, “I’m in San Francisco. I’m in a band. You gotta come out here, there’s some wild shit happening.”

This was 1967. I came out to San Francisco in the Summer of Love, and lived in this kind of commune with this band where each member was strung out on a different drug. When I was walking along Haight street one day, I ran into Phillip Wilson, totally by accident. Typical Phillip: He told me he was playing that night at the Fillmore Ballroom with the Butterfield Blues Band and that I had to come, and to even meet him at his hotel beforehand.

I went with him to hear the band and thought, “Wow! Professional show business! This is great!”

This was the first time I heard Phillip play the Chicago blues style, the Sam Lay tradition, but he was still Phillip.  He had a certain touch, kind of light like a jazz drummer, but also heavier like rock. He could be really solid but loose on top, sort of like young Tony Williams and Buddy Miles at the same time. Really great.

Anyway, after the gig Phillip told me, “Yeah, come down with us to L.A. where we are going to make a record. Just hang out in the studio.”

I said yes of course, and so I got on a Greyhound bus and went to L.A., and hitchhiked to Phillip’s hotel, which was Sandy Koufax’s Tropicana Motel. I slept on Phillip’s floor, and at the studio the next day Philip did what he always did, which was badger people until they let me sit in. They let me sit in on a tune on the record, then I followed them to a gig at Huntington Beach where I sat in some more, and eventually I was in the band. *The Resurrection of Pigboy Crabshaw* was my first album.

But all of that was Phillip. He did it all for me. He opened up St. Louis for me and gave me that ecumenical spirit, then he got me my first real gig and my entree into making a living as a musician. I can categorically state that my life would have had a very different tack if it hadn’t been for Phillip Wilson.

Later on, when I saw him in New York, he had fallen into some rabbit holes. I couldn’t get in and help. I kept saying, “Look, come stay at my place for a while,” but it never happened. I wish I had been more effective. His ex-wife was trying to save him: we all kind of were.

In the end he must of said the wrong thing to the wrong person. Phillip always shot off his mouth, and sometimes survival means keeping your mouth shut. As we all know, sometimes the smartest person in the room is also the dumbest person in the room. At any rate it was a drug deal gone bad and somebody cut his throat.

He was just such a joy to play with. What a brilliant man. He had your back no matter what the circumstance, both as a player and as a person.

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