

I remember Bill

By Chet Williamson

I remember Bill ... like that ballad Benny Golson wrote for trumpeter Clifford Brown - sad and longing. I remember Bill ... alive and well, healthy and happy. He was my roommate when we toured Europe together with the Worcester Polytechnic Institute Big Band. He played trumpet in my band, the Mighty Valiants. The bell tone of his horn still rings in my ears.

Local trumpeter Bill Williams passed away last week. The obit reported that he died in his home at 13 Congress Street after an illness.

Music

He was 38. I never knew him as Bill Williams; I remember him as Bill Ryan. I called him "Flyin' Bill Ryan." It fit. He could reach those stratospheric notes that only dobermanns could hear.

Bill died with the highest appellation (short of poet) a community can bestow upon someone: "Mr. Williams was a musician." **Not just an entertainer, he was a musician in the ancient sense of the word. He was a healer-a medicine man, a rain man, a jazz man.**

I remember Bill always playing. A man and his horn. That's what I loved about him. He was passionate about the music. He would play anywhere, anytime, any sound. In Europe we played in a castle in Luxembourg, a benefit for the homeless in Paris, a university in Caen and the oldest jazz club in all of Europe. Bill was lead man in the trumpet section. He could reach the heavens, and his blistering solos could peel paint off cathedral ceilings.

Bill dug the after-hours sessions. In Brussels we were staying in a youth hostel. He woke me up at three in the morning to come and jam in a nearby cafe with this gypsy guitarist who played like Django Rheinhat1. A drummer from Morocco brought in some percussion. A South American singer improvised quotes from Villa Lobos' "Bachianas Brasileiras." We played until the bus left for France at 7 a.m.

Bill lived to play that hom. Three days before we were to go back home he ran out of money. He spent what little cash he had buying rare albums by Clifford Brown, Lee Morgan, Freddie Hubbard and Miles Davis. Bill was a freak for Miles. In fact, when I first met him he was playing his hom through a wah-wah pedal.

I remember Bill snored the same way he played the trumpet - loud and hearty.

Bill had a gargantuan appetite for life. He was a big guy with a gentle soul. He had long hair down to the middle of his back and a thick, full beard. He looked like Grizzly Adams on stage. And often dressed like him. Many a gig I'd get on his case for wearing flannel shirts, dungarees and construction boots. He didn't care; he just wanted to play.

Bill was always a mystery to me. He first appeared on the local scene in the early '80s. I met him at a jam session. He was just a new kid in town from California who played the trumpet. In many ways Bill became the quintessential R&B hom player. He could hit the high notes, play his parts and improvise fills. He toured the country with a band called Side Effects. Locally, Bill played with Tornado Alley,

the Mighty Belmars, Wilbur and the Dukes, Conjunto Latino and Al Arsenault. He was also seen in countless blues and jazz sessions.

Henry David Thoreau said most men live lives of quiet desperation. I knew Bill had a substance abuse problem. He loved to drink. In Belgium he drank Duval's ("milk of the devil") for breakfast. We all have our demons. Alcohol lets them out. You dance with them but you don't deal with them. In the past year friends say Bill was most troubled. He was in and out of detox. Life was surrounding him. His face began showing that alcohol-induced puffiness and his ankles were beginning to swell. It was feared he may have liver disease. There's a little piece of dying in everyday existence. Who knows what was killing Bill. Was it his art? His true voice never being heard? Was it his heart? Broken and grieving for this battered society and railroaded earth? Was he a bad-luck child? Near the end the number 13 haunted him. He lived at 13 Congress St. It was the 13th when he died and there were other conspiracies suffocating this tortured soul.

Bill may have decided his own fate. He left the signs. The day of his passing he dressed up and went out to eat his last



Bill Ryan

supper. That night his lights were left on through the night and all the next day. His neighbor and best friend noticed this and decided to call on him. His body was there, the deadly needle in his vein, but Bill was gone.

The shock and pain of this act is only soothed by the memory of the living Bill. Bill, I'm sorry if I have forsaken you. I will remember you by reaching out to others. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. Gabriel has called another trumpeter home. Bill is at peace now and I'm sure he's asking Miles Davis how he did it.

I remember Bill.