

SCOTT FRIEDLANDER



# RON HORTON

BY SEAN FITZELL

It's a project that spans more than 20 years and evolved through different permutations. But the kernel remains: a love for the music of the late pianist Andrew Hill. The project has now come full circle for trumpeter Ron Horton as he brings its latest two iterations to Greenwich House Music School this month, the same venue that hosted a Jazz Composers Collective (JCC) concert dedicated to Hill's music in 1995.

"There's something about Andrew's music... something kind of spiritual, kind of positive, kind of uplifting," says Horton. He played in and was musical director for Hill's bands in the late '90s-early '00s. Horton arranged Hill's musical sketches for the bands and his contributions permeate *Dusk* (Palmetto, 1999) and *A Beautiful Day* (Palmetto, 2002). Horton also transcribed many of Hill's early compositions and arranged them for his own big band concert in 2000.

For the first concert, Horton will perform Hill's music exclusively with his sextet of saxophonists Marty Ehrlich and Marc Mommaas, pianist Frank Kimbrough, bassist Dean Johnson and drummer Tim Horner. The Ron Horton/Tim Horner Tentet includes the same rhythm team and adds vibraphonist Mark Sherman, trombonist Mike Fahn, trumpeter Nathan Ecklund and saxophonists Scott Robinson and John O'Gallagher. Their performance will include music by Hill and by the co-leaders. Both groups have honed their approach over the last six years and Kimbrough, Horner and Horton trace their musical association back to the early '80s.

"I definitely was drawn to people that were thinking in a different way," says Horton. He met Kimbrough at a jam session in Washington, DC, likely at the One Step Down while home on a break from Berklee College of Music. It was at Berklee where he met Horner and began developing his signature melodic approach. Unlike many of his contemporaries, who favored chops—playing faster and higher notes—Horton pursued a deeper focus on melody. It still informs his playing on both trumpet and flugelhorn. His solos feel like natural extensions of the compositions, often unfurling in long lines of beautifully intoned notes, rather than smears of texture or extended techniques.

Around 1981-82, Horton relocated to New York City to pursue music, as did Kimbrough and Horner. Though lacking gigs, Horton reflects that they used the time wisely, listening to and absorbing an array of music. Horton and Kimbrough collected Hill's music and the pianist would later introduce Hill to Horton's transcriptions. Playing trumpet alongside saxophonist Jane Ira Bloom was an early breakthrough, which became a lengthy association. Around the time he recorded on her *Art and Aviation* (Arabesque, 1992), the JCC was forming.

The JCC was a way for musicians to support each other, play a variety of music, develop as bandleaders and create a scene. It included Horton and Kimbrough, bassist Ben Allison and saxophonists Ted Nash, John Schroeder (early on) and (later) Michael Blake. Horton

fondly recalls the early concerts as being great, if not making any money. "The guy [Horton] is just a consummate musician. I've never, ever seen him show up for anything unprepared, no matter what," says Kimbrough. "He plays well with others...he's very intuitive and simpatico with whoever he's playing with and that's all the time."

The JCC gained greater notice thanks to Horton's discovery of about three-dozen unrecorded Herbie Nichols compositions at the Library of Congress. They performed the material in concert and recorded some of it for three well-regarded albums. The JCC spawned a number of projects for its members and Horton contributed significantly to recordings by Nash and Blake and was a fixture in many of Allison's ensembles. "Ron has an instantly recognizable timbre and approach to playing," Allison says. "He often employs large intervals, which give his melodies a very distinctive sound." This sound elevated a half-dozen of Allison's albums and many live shows.

Horton's work in the JCC also led to composing grants from Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust and Meet the Composer. He released his leader debut, *Genius Envy* (OmniTone), in 1999. The evocative compositions boasted hints of classical inspiration and humor. The followup, *Subtextures* (Fresh Sound-New Talent, 2002), included pieces from classical composers Olivier Messiaen and Frédéric Chopin alongside his own and one each from Hill and Kimbrough. The music was more open, with the ensemble given room to stretch. "The less you give to people then the more they can put their own stamp on it and that's what I prefer," says Horton. It's an approach that Hill took even further. As Horton and Kimbrough relate, Hill constantly deconstructed his pieces and changed voicings without telling the band. This kept them uneasy, but the goal was for the pieces to be free-flowing and require the musicians to be fully in the moment.

"To try to codify that music sometimes seems pointless. But the music is so great it has to be played," says Kimbrough of Hill's compositions. "Andrew was a very special cat and any way we can honor him I think is something that his memory deserves." For the shows this month, the focus will be on Hill's later material, as Horton and Ehrlich have strong attachments to the music they played together back then.

Horton teaches through the New York Jazz Workshop and New York Jazz Academy and privately more often than he had in the past. He strives to make it enjoyable for students, recognizing the need to keep them engaged to continue playing and learning. He views teaching as a balance of instructing and coaching to help students get from point A to point B as they improvise.

From teaching more frequently, he's come to recognize something about improvising that may also be applied to his musical journey: "Improvising is a phenomenon to me, it's so abstract. It is a lifetime endeavor, really." ❖

For more information, visit [ronhorton.net](http://ronhorton.net). Horton is at Greenwich House Music School Sep. 12th with his Andrew Hill Tribute Sextet and 17th with the Ron Horton/Tim Horner Andrew Hill Tribute Tentet. See Calendar.

**Recommended Listening:**

- Allan Chase Quartet—*Dark Clouds* (Accurate, 1994)
- Herbie Nichols Project—*Love Is Proximity* (Soul Note, 1995-96)
- Ron Horton—*Genius Envy* (OmniTone, 1999)
- Andrew Hill—*A Beautiful Day* (Palmetto, 2002)
- Ben Allison—*Cowboy Justice* (Palmetto, 2005)
- Ron Horton—*It's a Gadget World* (Abeat, 2006)

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