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YOUR FREE GUIDE TO THE NYC JAZZ SCENE

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**STEVE
NELSON**

The Full On Nelson

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KENNY
DORHAM

STEVE NELSON

The Full On Nelson

BY RUSS MUSTO

ALAN NAUGHTAN



Veteran vibraphonist Steve Nelson, who celebrates his 70th birthday this month, got into music in a very fateful kind of way. One day he was with one of his buddies, hanging out in his friend's basement, and there was a vibraphone there. Nelson recalls, "His father played vibes and it just so happened that this one time when we were down there, his dad came down and was playing 'Days of Wine and Roses'. I knew from that moment on that was what I wanted to do."

Nelson's friend's father happened to be none other than the legendary Milt Jackson-influenced Pittsburgh vibraphonist George Monroe, who would soon thereafter teach the youngster how to play the vibes. Nelson had an old player piano in his house, and Monroe would come over and the two would go through changes on the piano. "It was a very different way of learning," Nelson admits. "He'd just say, 'Take this finger, put it here, put this finger there; now press, that's the chord. Now move this finger over and switch.' And so I would practice that all night long. I learned pretty fast because I really fell in love with it." Monroe would also take Nelson around to see and hear the many musicians within the rich jazz scene of Pittsburgh, many of whom worked in the steel mills: "He took me around to catch the bad cats in Pittsburgh who people never heard of, tremendous players, but just never came to New York." Nelson wound up playing with many of these musicians, including one who would become a frequent collaborator, Pittsburgh-born Jerry Byrd, the guitarist who played extensively with such organists as Gene Ludwig, Don Patterson, Jack McDuff and would become pianist/vocalist Freddy Cole's longtime bandmate. Byrd called to recommend Nelson to the great Grant Green after Green's vibraphonist at that time reportedly had broken his leg and so needed a quick vibraphonist replacement to go out on the road with him.

Soon after his experience with Green, the next big step in Nelson's career came with his decision to enter the jazz program at Rutgers University. He says, "I was trying to find what to do with myself. At that time my brother was in New Jersey going to Rutgers, and he told me that they were starting a jazz program there, so it seemed like a good thing for me to do." It was there that he met professors in alto saxophonist/flute player James Spaulding, guitarist Ted Dunbar and pianist Kenny Barron. All three would hire the young vibraphonist for their bands, leading to his first recording opportunities: Spaulding's *Plays The Legacy of Duke Ellington* (Storyville, 1976), Dunbar's *Secundum Artem* (Xanadu, 1980) and Barron's *Golden Lotus* (Muse, 1980). Barron, who Nelson recently reunited with on the pianist's newly released recording, *Beyond This Place* (Artwork/[PIAS]), says, "I have known Steve since 1973, when I started teaching at Rutgers University and he was a student there. In all these years he still blows me away. He's an amazing vibraphonist and improviser (and) I'm happy to be working with him again."

While at Rutgers, Nelson's closer proximity to the burgeoning New York jazz scene quickly led to increased recognition of his prodigious talent. He began collaborating with many of the young lions of his generation including pianists Donald Brown, Mulgrew Miller and James Williams, bassist Curtis Lundy and alto saxophonist Bobby Watson. Watson, who originally met Nelson through Lundy, gigged with the vibraphonist up and down the East Coast. He recalls Nelson as also being one of his original musical partners upon the altoist's arrival to New York: "I learned so much from him musically, about phrasing and how to build a solo. He's on my *Jewel* (Amigo-Evidence, 1983) album from back in those days with both Mulgrew and Curtis." The vibraphonist was also one of the first musicians Lundy met in New York and the bassist's debut album *Just Be Yourself* (New Note, 1987)—with Nelson, Watson, pianist Hank Jones, drummer Kenny Washington and the bassist's vocalist sister Carmen Lundy—is actually named after the vibraphonist's composition. As with Watson, the bassist is also very complimentary of friend and musical collaborator Nelson: "Steve is one of the most thoughtful and prolific musicians of our time. He's a consummate professional who is able to adapt to any musical situation."

Nelson was quite busy during the '80s, particularly his associations with saxophonist David "Fathead" Newman and pianist Mulgrew Miller. He fondly remarks, "I have to say I was pretty blessed. I was working quite a bit. I don't even remember how I got the gig with Fathead, but I did his record *Heads Up* (Atlantic, 1986) and toured all over with him." The band at that time included Kirk Lightsey (piano), David Williams (bass) and Eddie Gladden (drums), and following *Heads Up*, after frequently performing at the Village Vanguard, the group recorded *Fire! Live at the Village Vanguard* (Atlantic, 1988). Nelson would then join Dave Holland for an extended period of time, after he was recommended to the bassist by old friend and collaborator, drummer Tony Reedus. The vibraphonist played with Reedus in Miller's Wingspan group and, as Nelson remembers, "I recorded on Tony's *Incognito* (Enja 1989) album with Dave, Geoff Keezer and Gary Thomas and that's when I first met Dave."

Playing with Holland pointed Nelson, as well as Holland, in a completely new direction. Up to that point, the bassist's bands were working without a chordal instrument (with the exception of briefly utilizing guitarist Kevin Eubanks). Nelson says, "I think he was hearing another chordal instrument, but something different. So, we got to sit there and talk. That's one of the things that helped me being in that band, because you were actually expected to contribute something as a composer. I had already been writing a little bit, but I didn't really have much for that instrumentation, so I had to write some new stuff. It was an amazing experience; pretty much nonstop traveling."

When the Holland tour ended, Nelson was busy

as ever again back in the States, playing and recording regularly with his peers, as well as a new batch of emerging musicians. He additionally made guest appearances on albums by older masters such as Johnny Griffin (*The Cat*) and Jackie McLean (*Rhythm of the Earth*), continued his work with Holland over the course of nine stellar albums, and for the last 15 years has maintained a well-documented collaboration with Louis Hayes (having recorded a half dozen albums under the octogenarian drummer's leadership, including the newly released *Artform Revisited* on Savant).

Key among all of his many associations, however, was the one he developed with pianist, composer and educator Mulgrew Miller. Nelson notes, "He had such a big influence, not just on me, but on the whole scene. It was such a rich period then. The young guys just loved him, they used to flock around him. It was a great thing that he had a big, big influence on them. He had all that experience, going back to playing with the Ellington Orchestra when some of the original cats like Harry Carney were still in that band. That's special to get that kind of experience. And then all the other stuff with Betty (Carter), Art (Blakey) and Tony (Williams). The point I'm making is: you don't get that anymore because there are not bands like that today."

While such bands may not exist anymore, the lessons learned from the players who had tenures in them are still being passed down. Nelson for his part has tried to ensure that Miller's legacy continues. The close relationship between the pianist and vibraphonist was more than just musical; some might consider it astrologically fated, as intimated in the title of Nelson's recent album of Miller compositions, *Brothers Under the Sun* (HighNote), referencing their common Leo birth signs (Miller was born one year prior to Nelson). The vibraphonist notes, "We'd always play a double birthday engagement at Smoke, so when he passed I did several tributes to him there. I've been doing it ever since, often as a Wingspan reunion. This year we'll be at Smalls with my quartet."

For more info visit stevenelsonvibes.com. Nelson's 70th birthday concert is at Smalls Aug. 13. He is also at Dizzy's Club with Louis Hayes Aug. 1-4, The Jazz Gallery with Miki Yamanaka Aug. 16, and Tompkins Square Park with Louis Hayes Aug. 25 (part of Charlie Parker Jazz Festival). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Kenny Barron—*Golden Lotus* (Muse, 1980)
- Steve Nelson—*Communications* (Criss Cross, 1987/89)
- Steve Nelson—*Fuller Nelson: The Second Time Around* (Sunnyside, 1998)
- Dave Holland—*Extended Play (Live at Birdland)* (ECM, 2001)
- Steve Nelson—*Sound-Effect* (HighNote, 2007)
- Steve Nelson—*Brothers Under The Sun* (HighNote, 2016)