

David S Ware

1949–2012

Free jazz titan David S Ware died in October, aged 62. **Steven Joerg**, his manager and boss of the AUM Fidelity label, and bassist **William Parker**, his longterm musical partner, offer their personal tributes to a saxophone colossus

Unparalleled. My thought on first hearing David S Ware's *Third Ear Recitation*. Its complexity, intensity, structure and utterly committed strength of purpose shocked me. Matthew Shipp gave me that CD. In the mid-1990s I was manager of New York underground rock label Homestead Records and Matt had an album out on a label distributed by HR's parent company, so he stopped by the office frequently. I thanked him and after listening to the CD, thanked him again, profusely. I presumed that Columbia would be licensing the album from Japanese label DIW for US release as they had with David's previous *Flight Of i*. The first contact from David himself was through a hand-written fax the next day, inviting me to a Quartet performance. It was only then I thought: Oh my god! There's a chance I could work with David S Ware?!

My first live exposure was in September 1994 at the original Knitting Factory. I imagined that the experience was like watching the birth of a cosmic star. Light flashed off David's highly polished tenor as his imposing figure moved it and the vast sound through the air, up, down, side to side and held outward, skyward. Illuminated melodies which were their own catalyst were broken down to infinitesimal, elemental detail. Fluctuating harmonies came in massed waves. And, when the energy built so hot it seemed the structure was set to burst, a drum detonation would launch the whole of it into a higher plane. The science and mechanics of what he and his Quartet were doing was awe inspiring. It was wholly evident that this was state of the art sound organisation, jazz or otherwise.

The entire performance had all my synapses fully lit and firing. It sated something within me that had previously been scintillated for only precious fleeting moments. I was very intimidated to meet this man after the set. When David arrived backstage, he broke out with a wide, beaming, beautiful smile that put me totally at ease and asked, "So what did you think?"

That first meeting was followed by a pair of successive Saturday afternoon visits to his home in New Jersey. We sat on the porch and spoke about all manner of things. The cosmic nature of our existence, made of stardust as we are, and how each of us carries the universe within themselves as a result. Music of course, and our understandings of it. The intelligence of dogs – he and his wife Setsuko had two Shiba Inus, a small and smart Japanese breed. One of my favourite bits was discussing how entire generations of American children could have been positively affected if there had been a Saturday morning cartoon show based on the intergalactic adventures of Sun Ra and his Arkestra. Man, all of the elements were right there, ready to go!

At the same time, I was trying to convince the owner of Homestead on the wisdom of signing David to the label. The total sense it made to me was finally communicated, and we recorded *Cryptology* that December. That album and the next received attention and acclaim in media and culture far outside the insular jazz world, and that was our aim: "If [this] was played on electric guitars instead of acoustic jazz instruments, hardcore kids would go nuclear," stated the 4 star lead review in *Rolling Stone*. Opening for

Sonic Youth at New York's Hammerstein Ballroom a few years later, the kids were dancing to The David S Ware Quartet. As every concert was not merely a gig in David's eyes, but an opportunity for communion with the audience, he loved seeing that.

An image of his smile, and the sound of his laughter runs through my brain again. Though it didn't happen with great frequency, it was melodious and infectious to all present. And he had nicknames for his companions on the journey. William Parker was the Professor; Matthew Shipp, the Doctor. He called me Youngblood for the first six months or so; after our first week-long tour together, I graduated to Old Man.

He was deeply into transcendence, with meditation and music his twined methods for accomplishing the same. Having had the experience of being outside my body at performances, and feeling thoroughly centered and at peace afterwards, I was convinced that what David offered was of a profound nature.

He literally changed my life. Using every last bit of savings I had and taking out a few loans, I launched a new label devoted to his music, and that of fellow masters like William Parker. David's long-time friend, pianist Cooper-Moore, said through tears the night after his passing: "He never wavered from his path. He never wavered." That path began for him at age 12. After three years of playing saxophone he knew then what he wanted to do with his life. The commitment David exemplified has been an inspiration in these continuing years of operating AUM Fidelity through thick, thin and more thin.

David was diagnosed with kidney failure in 1999. He underwent an intense regimen of peritoneal (self-administered) dialysis, three times daily and every night, for the next decade. That he continued to travel, perform monumental concerts and create astonishing albums will always astound me. And it didn't stop there.

David S Ware's capacity for awe-inspiring invention and elocution thereof was stunning again in the last stage of his creative life, following a kidney transplant in 2009. He was back on stage five months after the operation, and in the ensuing two years produced a pair of epic studio albums and performed breathtaking concerts, both solo and with new group configurations. Planetary Unknown was to be his principal unit going forward. That group's concert at Austria's Jazzfestival Saalfelden in August 2011 was his final public performance. These last years of his life were fraught with ever-increasing health complications stemming from his body's reactions to the immunosuppressant medications he was required to take. After that final concert, the complications multiplied and accelerated. He fought hard and focused on being able to play music again, even thinking of picking up new instruments. Given what he had already endured, and prevailed over, my every thought was that he would pull through even this.

We will be poorer for not receiving what David might still have transmitted, but are blessed for the offerings he was able to leave us. This legacy will radiate for a long, long time to come.

Steven Joerg



David S Ware

Thoughts floating through the air. 1980: I remember walking down St Marks Place in East Village, New York. David S Ware pulled up in the taxicab he was driving those days, wearing gloves with cut-off fingers. He was going into the health food store to get lunch. We greet each other and begin to talk. David was on a voluntary hiatus from playing music publicly. Out of the blue, I asked him if he would like to do a few concerts with me, and to my surprise he said yes. Perhaps it was good timing, or just the right time, I don't know, but I was overjoyed. David participated in three concerts under the banner Centering Music. One was by a quartet with the drummer Denis Charles and dancer Patricia Nicholson. The others were big band concerts: one at a space called Inroads, the other at the Kool Jazz festival. David's contribution was tremendous, as I had hoped. He was always raising the bar, taking the music to the maximum level of energy and life.

David S Ware had associations with drummers Beaver Harris, Andrew Cyrille and Milford Graves. There was a quartet with saxophonist Daniel Carter and another with Bill Dixon, Peter Kowald and Andrew Cyrille. All this music was quite astonishing. In 1984 he contributed to a composition by Peter Brötzmann called "Alarm", on which he played alongside Frank Wright, Charles Gayle and Brötzmann, all on tenors.

Whenever the late Jimmy Lyons was asked who his favourite saxophone player was, he would say David S Ware. He followed that answer with the words, "I think he has something to say that is important." Thanks to recordings and films, the truth of Jimmy's statement will continue to resonate for years and years to come.

The destiny line of David S Ware was one with many

blessings and gifts all along the way. The first period of his life, he encountered the joy of 'I want to play the saxophone; don't know why but it is something I need to do. Music is knocking at the door.' Later he would find purpose, and acknowledge that music heals/music uplifts/music enlightens us. During the second period, after initial training in music high school band fundamentals, one immediately noticed that David had a fully illuminated sound. He was transforming sound into tone and accepting the gift. His voice was of someone who had been to the mountaintop in a past life. In his present life he was trying to connect things to the dots. Dots that appeared as flowers, sunsets, sunrises, clouds, trees, and all the wonderful human beings he met along the way, who loved him dearly.

David was someone who could have stood in the pulpit, or in the fields with workers, singing a new kind of blues drenched in the new and old gospel. In a way, his life was a journey to get back to a place he had already been. Trying to remember that place, he began to write chapters called melodies, themes, hymns and chants that could be sung. Learning the language of spirituals and the rules of sacred music, he proceeded full force into the unknown.

First part of the circle could be called Apogee, the pivotal group that featured the pianist Cooper-Moore. The second part of the circle was The David S Ware Quartet, which included another pianist, Matthew Shipp. The repertoire and recorded output of this band were tremendous. The third, but not the final, part of his journey was the last quartet, Planetary Unknown, which again featured Cooper-Moore, returning to embrace the music that was reborn to take on a

different manifestation. But there was so much more. David was a great human being and he had a good sense of humour; he was a devoted and loving husband to Setsuko, always there to support him. He loved his hobbies, sports, books, but it seemed, as things moved on in the last ten years, it all funnelled down to his world inside. Finding the strength to be optimistic in the face of life-threatening illness, David had to gather all the forces. And he was optimistic, continuing to create music and search for meaning in his life.

I don't hesitate to include David's name among the great tenor saxophone players – those no longer with us, like Coleman Hawkins, Gene Ammons, John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, Frank Wright, Frank Lowe, Fred Anderson; and those still living: Sonny Rollins, Charles Gayle, Pharoah Sanders, Kidd Jordan. David was a magical person, a conjuror. He was also fragile and vulnerable like all of us. But he was one of a kind, and we need him so much in this world.

There is nothing to prove, nothing to validate. The most complete musician is not a musician who can play everything – it is one who can conjure up images of God, someone who can play music that will cause human revolution through means of the soul and spirit. A complete musician is someone who takes us to heaven each and every time. This is the most important and profound contribution one can seek in music. David S Ware was a unique human being who gave his all to life. He didn't play saxophone patterns or traditional licks. David had found the self-sound, and he created music that had never been heard before and will never be heard again.

William Parker