

## **Signs Along The Road: Poems**

Henry Grimes

## **Who Owns Music?**

William Parker

The first two books in German publisher Buddy's Knife's Jazzedition series are by two prominent innovators and bass players in the US free jazz movement. Grimes carved out his reputation playing alongside such legends as Sonny Rollins, Thelonious Monk and Gerry Mulligan. He went on to make his mark as an early exponent of US free jazz, playing bass for Cecil Taylor, Pharoah Sanders and Archie Shepp. Grimes' greatest contribution to free jazz, however, was his involvement with the early ESP-Disk recording of Albert Ayler, Frank Wright and Burton Greene, for which he was eventually rewarded with an album under his own name for the label.

In 1968, two years before Ayler died in mysterious circumstances, Grimes left New York and moved to California where, with no access to a bass, he gradually lost touch with the music scene and became a recluse. Instead of turning to alcohol or drugs as a substitute for the musical career he had chosen to leave behind, Grimes picked up a pen and began to write down his innermost thoughts in the form of poetry. After a musical exile of 30 years, Grimes was tracked down by social worker and jazz fan Marshall Marotte, who had access to social security records.

*Signs Along The Road* is a selection of poems that Grimes jotted down in hundreds of notebooks between 1978-2005, some of which took months, perhaps years, to fully complete. Like his bass playing, his poetry is carefully laid down: each word seems to be there for a purpose as he goes deep inside himself in order to drag his hopes, fears and feelings about the cosmos, the world, society, music and his place in it kicking and screaming to the surface. By becoming a poet, Grimes rebirthed himself, sloughing off his old skin to take stock of himself and find a new expression.

Poems such as "Ortherama The King" and "Adama And Pourquoi" have their roots set in legend, religion and history, suggesting that the poet spent much of his time studying ancient tracts or poring through dusty volumes in his public library. There is a sense of scholarship here, together with a love of language; how it reads, how it looks on the page, how it sounds when read out loud. Grimes' sense of rhythm was still strong during this seemingly fallow period in his life, only he was working with a different instrument, and the music he was composing and playing emerged as words rather than crotchets and quavers.

New York bass player William Parker comes from the second wave of free jazz musicians, who learnt their craft from listening to Grimes and the players he was working alongside in the 60s. In a chapter of his book titled "Listening To Universe", Parker acknowledges those bassists who have played their part in helping him develop his art, including Grimes, whom he describes as "one of the great master bassists of all time".

Parker's devotion to his own music and those musicians (predecessors and contemporaries) who play it is at the heart of this slim book of essays, poems and reflections. There are some beautiful passages in *Who Owns Music?*, in particular Parker's respectful meditation on "The Death Of Albert Ayler" and three touching

memories of meeting his hero Charles Mingus – twice on Earth and once in a dream, where he was told to “keep up the good work”. Such personal recollections lift the collection from being just another stodgy set of jazz memoirs to one that grants the reader a rare insight into how a musician of Parker’s calibre works and thinks.

Elegantly designed and fleshed out with photographs, drawings and introductions by Marc Ribot and David Budbill, both volumes are essential reading for anyone who is remotely interested in free jazz and its underlying thought processes.

Edwin Pouncey

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