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Eric Dolphy

Biographical sketches

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Eric Dolphy, 1961 (Photo: Hanns E. Haehl, Archive Jazzinstitut Darmstadt)

Dedication: Woe Betide the Discreet

Jazz does not churn out many idols, and rare are the musicians whose fame transcends the circle of the genre's devotees. Eric Dolphy did not make it that far. There are, of course, musicians who are more forgotten than he is, but many of them were more clearly destined to suffer oblivion. Some even deserved it. What did Dolphy lack to see his name added to the short list of jazzmen now elevated to the rank of icon? The compact biographies found in dictionaries and encyclopedias provide some answers.

Here and there, the same information is repeated. In essence: Eric Dolphy (1928-1964), American jazz musician, multi-instrumentalist (alto saxophone, clarinet, bass clarinet, flute), colleague of Charles Mingus, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, whose baroque style rooted in bebop foreshadowed free jazz. Died of complications from an undiagnosed diabetes in Berlin, at 36.

Thus appear the outlines of a dazzling career, an original discourse, and a tragic disappearance. Three factors usually doing much to turn artists into legends, but factors that Dolphy counter-balanced by another trait: independence. Like few other musicians, Dolphy developed a discourse that was too specific to survive him, too distinctive to make it possible for others to build a school of thought on the memory it had left behind.

Would a few more years have changed anything? Experiences chasing the artist's early demons away would have been necessary. One thinks, for instance, of Dolphy working incessantly since his early days, searching for the right note, keeping his discourse in check while at times pushing the music in a provocative or ironical manner, two tricks that allowed him, for a brief while, to keep omnipresent doubts at bay. In contrast with his musical language, in life the man displayed a thoughtfulness and humility that could almost have been suspect but allowed him to consolidate relationships to people of different ways.

Not in perfect synchrony with the ways of the world, altruistic, and debonair, Dolphy camouflaged his sorrows in music, on stage and in the studio, without ever appearing immune to anxiety. Sitting between Charles Mingus and Dannie Richmond, he might not simply have been waiting for his next solo. He might have been looking for a way out, longing for an elsewhere. Genuine doubt is not easily put to good use. Dolphy's only way out was to play, for himself or in front of others. He was not fooled by the answers provided by music, but simply charmed by them: "When you hear music, after it's over, it's gone in the air, you can never capture it again," he said.

In a world of illusions, why not believe in the freedom provided by music, in the autonomous development of an art form that cannot be pinned down? For a creator such as Dolphy, the essential thing was not so much to turn every note that he was inspired to play into the element of a repertoire, but maybe more to escape, at least for as long as the instrument was in his hands, the contingencies of a world where weight is the prerequisite to any serious consideration. By force of circumstances as much as through a lack of interest, Dolphy relegated the concept of "career" far away.

More than fifty years after his death, if the footprints left by Dolphy remain considerable and the tributes by other musicians numerous, his name is often associated with the title of a single record: *Out to Lunch!* Can the entirety of Dolphy's message be subsumed in forty minutes, no matter how great? Even if it means relativizing the album's status as an aesthetic milestone, the skills possessed by merchants should never be underestimated and the fact that the album was made for the Blue Note label should not be forgotten: the company, although eminent, was also capable of imposing its product like few others in jazz. Simple curiosity leads to this obvious observation: most of the records made by Dolphy under his name should be celebrated with similar zeal. Some persistence will be demanded of the amateurs wishing to know more about the man's music and personality.

With enough diligence, listeners will inevitably come across Vladimir Simosko and Barry Tepperman's biography. With some additional efforts, another book can be found, *The Importance of*

Being Eric Dolphy, by Raymond Horricks, which has the merit of extending the list of works exclusively devoted to Dolphy. Outside the English language, *Eric A. Dolphy: Die Freiheit der Klänge* by Reinhardt Wendt, and *Il Marziano del Jazz, Vita e Musica di Eric Dolphy* by Claudio Sassa can be noted. For readers of French, after observing that the biography at which musician Thierry Bruneau once worked did not materialize, an essential text by Jean-Louis Comolli should be recommended. Published in *Jazz Magazine* shortly after the musician's passing, "Eric Dolphy... le passeur" — Dolphy the "courier" — is a moving tribute that the authors of biographies even shorter than the present one are still not through with lifting from. To conclude, Hans Hylkema's Last Date documentary should also be mentioned. Needless to say, the bibliography is rather short in regard to Dolphy's stature as a musician. This is why this book was born, out of repeated listening that one day stirred the desire to evoke a musician who deserves all the honors, even if he still pays the price of his discretion.