

# THE HIGH FLYER

He may have been one of the greatest trumpeters in jazz, but **DONALD BYRD** was so much more besides. Possessed of a razor sharp intellect and a thirst for knowledge his many years as an educator were matched by his sage-like mentoring of countless rising stars, not least Herbie Hancock. One of Blue Note's best-selling artists, he spanned hard-bop's heyday, spearheaded hip shaking soul-jazz, while his jazz funk band the Blackbyrds paved the way for fusion-era heroes such as The Headhunters and Weather Report. He reached the hip hop crowd too after being sampled dozens of times in the 1990s. A lover of fast cars and a qualified pilot, it wasn't unusual for him to fly to his own gigs. Passing away in February, aged 80, he left behind an extraordinary legacy, which he discusses here with **Michael Jackson** in one of his last ever interviews, while Freddie Hubbard, Herbie Hancock and others pay tribute to his profound influence

**T**he Donald, no, not the dubious real estate tycoon with the orange combover, but genre-hopping trumpet/flugelhorn purveyor Donald Byrd, who was born in Detroit in 1932 and made his transition at 80 years old this past February. Debuting with *First Flight* (Delmark) in 1955, Byrd cut noteworthy sessions on Transition with Doug Watkins before becoming a prolific Blue Note mainstay of the late 1950s and 60s, replacing Clifford Brown in The Jazz Messengers and cutting such hard-bop dates as *Byrd In Hand* with early running buddy Pepper Adams, and *Free Form*, a brief dalliance with free play alongside Wayne Shorter. Having innovated, introducing gospel elements and choirs to his music, in the 1970s Byrd plugged into funk, becoming one of Blue Note's biggest sellers with *Blackbyrd*, *Electric Byrd* and *Street Lady*.

Though feted by the acid jazz posse for his accessible collaborations (including vocals) with protégés the Mizell brothers and Guru's *Jazzmatazz* (check the surprisingly fierce fusion date from Montreux 1973 streamed by Blue Note recently, at the behest of Gilles Peterson) – while solidly derided elsewhere for the same – what's less recalled about Byrd is his reputation as a boss, specifically his own boss, someone who refuted racial or financial exploitation and mentored countless musicians both as official teacher and professional advisor/networker, notably Herbie Hancock.

Though largely inactive as a player in recent years, despite coming back with several straight-ahead dates in the late-1980s, *Jazzwise* caught up with Byrd, aged 75, at Nisville Jazz Festival in Nis, Serbia, in August 2007, where he showcased young musicians from Delaware State University and was paraded through the streets, welcomed like a deity by the local population. After his concert in the ancient castle of Nis, which spontaneously including a Serbian brass band and the hiphop/dance-jazz presentation of his students, trumpeter Harold Smith and bassist Terrance Stiegel, we spoke with Donaldson Toussaint L'Ouverture Byrd II backstage, to review aspects of his career.

***Inclusiveness is your thing; you bring people together and have seriously enabled/employed***

***your students over the years. Was teaching a necessity or, given that your father was a minister, more of a mission?***

A mission, not a necessity. I made enough money in the streets and even today my royalties are hundreds of thousands of dollars, I don't need a job!

***That's interesting, because didn't you study law to get reparation from the samplers? Did that plan work effectively?***

It did, and then I went around to various universities, such as Howard University and Howard University Law School, I started a course in Entertainment Law. I have a bachelor's and masters from Manhattan School of Music, the Masters is in education, but then I went to Columbia University and got four more masters.

**“The greatest art, the greatest way of showing democracy is through jazz and gospel and spiritual, OK? ”**

***Four?***

Don't make that face! That was enough and I came to Europe and studied with Nadia Boulanger. After Clifford Brown died, I was with Max Roach, so I am sorry to hear that Max just died (in August 2007). When I look at my records, all the people that I knew, everyone is dead; I'm the only one alive.

***What do you put that down to? Your regimen? Working with young people?***

That, yes, and also I live clean, I don't smoke, don't drink. I made a name making records; I didn't need my doctorate to make money. I teach because I like to deal with students, work with them, that's what happened with the Blackbyrds.

***You like taking risks. Coming to Eastern Europe with two young students who have never left the US – using last minute pick up musicians to round out the band – isn't that putting your reputation at stake?***

Did you see the audience? Did they like it? All right then, what the hell, that's it! I do that every place in the world, that's what I'm known for. I didn't know anyone here, any of the gypsies, any of the musicians in the army. I would like to come back and teach at the university, and then I can travel to the Eastern Balkans. I also want to go to east Africa. I've been to Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria but I want to go further east.

***The Bulgarian wedding band tradition has fascinated you, hearing the brass bands in Nis.***

This was all spontaneous. The greatest art, the greatest way of showing democracy is through jazz and gospel and spiritual, OK? That way no one is telling me what to play, what to do. What we demonstrated this week was democracy. I talked to the band from Haiti, Tifane (on the bill at Nisville) they know about me because my middle name is famous: Toussaint L'Ouverture. That is what my father named me, for the Haitian warriors that died in Paris.

***Do you think your spearheading of disco-jazz fusion and predilection for funk has been fairly appraised, or maligned?***

You saw the people tonight; we were doing hip hop and rap in the beginning right? They liked it, they know about that here. *Kind of Blue* with Coltrane that was the number one jazz album when my record with 'Cristo Redentor' was number two.

***That was from 1963's New Perspective with the gospel choir, was that your E-Type Jag on the cover?***

My Jaguar – I had three of them (check *The Cat Walk* sleeve, 1961, for a vintage Jag) and a Mercedes (*Off to the Races*, 1958); I always put them on the album cover, but did you see the airplanes? I had three of those, I put them all on Blue Note covers. I learned to fly at 18. I always wanted to be a pilot and said to myself if I ever got some money I'd buy an airplane. The first was a Cessna 101-50. Then there's the one you