

**Author's response to review, "Henry Grimes and the Spiral of Time,"** by Pierre Crépon, published in Point of Departure – an Online Music Journal, issue 55, June 2016, <http://www.pointofdeparture.org/PoD55/PoD55Grimes.html>

**by Barbara Frenz**

I appreciate the positive comments in the above-mentioned review of *Music to Silence to Music, A Biography of Henry Grimes*, but sections of the review contain errors of fact and unjustified criticism of my book that cannot be allowed to go unchallenged.

First off, "Frenz has been engaged with her topic for some time now, having written the introduction to Grimes' collection of poetry, *Signs Along The Road: Poems (Köln: Buddy's Knife Jazzedition, 2007)*." This is false. The musician and scholar Marc Ribot wrote the foreword to *Signs Along The Road*, not I. Pierre Crépon should be held to the same rigorous research standards he applies to others, and he certainly starts off on the wrong foot here.

Next, the review claims that the record and concert reviews I have used for the book "seem to have been gathered more through existing bibliographical listings than through systematic perusal of the jazz press. ... the documentary corpus from which Frenz draws remains partial. ... missing are quotes from a wider range of concert reviews... This research could also have helped to establish some inconclusive dates more precisely, as the details of Grimes' time in San Francisco illustrate." These notations suggest I haven't done my homework as a historian, while the truth is that I spent many long days thoroughly combing through all available jazz magazines in the well-resourced Jazz Institute Darmstadt (Germany), with additional support from jazz historian and double-bassist Joe Dimech in Canada, who systematically studied publications that were not available at Jazz Institute Darmstadt, which he did during work on his dissertation about bassist Steve Davis (see acknowledgement in introduction to *Music to Silence to Music*). I admit that my research for the year 1969 was somewhat deficient, because I thought Henry Grimes had stopped recording and performing by then, and this was an error, but this error does not justify the rejection of my research work as a whole. For the years before 1969, I researched systematically, which becomes more than obvious just by checking the voluminous footnotes in the book. But automatically expecting numerous results from thorough research is naïve, especially considering the racial bias, mainstream sensibilities, and attentiveness only to leaders that characterized the jazz press then, and arguably now as well. Experienced historians know what I'm talking about. I would be astonished to learn that Pierre Crépon is not aware of these factors.

Next, the review says: "To tell Grimes' story, Frenz conducted interviews, principally with Grimes, but also with Sonny Rollins, Andrew Cyrille and Clarence Becton. Rollins remains rather superficial in his comments and Cyrille is not quoted at length." After reading Sonny Rollins' foreword to *Music To Silence To Music*, it should be clear that he deeply appreciates

Henry Grimes and his artistry. Sonny Rollins often remains reserved in his interviews, and in jazz circles he is well known for his tactfulness regarding musical colleagues, but this fine attitude should not be confused with superficiality. And pages 107/108 should correct Pierre Crépon's claim that Andrew Cyrille is not quoted at length. But the quantifying approach to interview material is of a limited worth anyway, as the reviewer himself acknowledges when he writes, "*Grimes does not talk much*" but "*often makes valuable comments*". There is much power in pithiness.

Pierre Crépon writes, "*It's likely most people picking up a book about a musician known primarily for playing bass on '60s free jazz recordings will be familiar to some degree with the era's New York scene. Some prior knowledge will be necessary, as Music to Silence to Music does not try to outline a larger historical picture. This is understandable since a comprehensive reference work on the topic has not yet been written* [here Pierre Crépon ignores essential studies I relied on by Amiri Baraka, A.B. Spellman, Val Wilmer, Ingrid Monson, and others cited in my book], *but it remains problematic since assessing the importance of the events discussed is made more difficult without a clearer view of the context. The dynamic at play at this time in the music, which could be described as still being brought into existence, is mostly absent from the book. This might be explained partly because of the plan chosen to discuss Grimes' work with musicians such as Cecil Taylor, Albert Ayler or Don Cherry in isolated sections dealing with those musicians' recorded output featuring the bassist.*" But *Music to Silence to Music* contains material about the historical-political context of the developing "free music" in "Freedom now. Political and musical changes from the late Fifties". This initiates the large fourth chapter of the book, which indeed particularly deals with the most important avant-garde musicians and Henry Grimes' work with them in the '60s. Additionally, there is a subchapter within this fourth chapter about Henry Grimes' close affinity to the civil rights movement: "Henry Grimes and the Civil Rights Movement (1963-64)". And there is another subchapter about the precarious life conditions of avant-garde musicians in New York in the '60s ("A new alertness'. Free music and precarious living in the Lower East Side"). So why does Pierre Crépon miss the historical context of the music as presented in the book?

The review gives the reader the impression that I haven't written enough about Henry Grimes' health issues. Truth is I have written about them, though in a deliberately restrained manner. I decided to use only Henry Grimes' own public statements here and deliberately omitted Perry Robinson's memories and views about this, which Mr. Grimes believes are more true of Mr. Robinson than of himself. And how much research has been done to verify or discredit Mr. Robinson's statements? In any case, whether Henry Grimes' health problems were related to drug use or not, this matter is not essential for any artist's biography. The drug issue in jazz is a subject that is overrated by a notoriously sensationalist press. Drug use and mental illness are a presence in the lives of many artists who are perhaps too sensitive to live in this cruel world. Everyone has personal problems, but

personal problems do not tell the story of an artist's value, whose true legacy is the transformation of life (including personal problems) into art.

My final point here opposes Pierre Crépon's distaste for my enthusiasm for Henry Grimes and his musical and poetic opus. This enthusiasm does not mean I am a naïve fan unable to think about her subject from an appropriate distance, as the reviewer makes the reader believe: *"The constant praising for every musical endeavor (except for those of poor Frank Smith and Frank Wright, who do get negative comments) tends to flatten the narrative once again. Are all records made for ESP-Disk' masterpieces? Probably not, and saying this does not amount to betraying or disrespecting the musicians who made them."* This is a plain caricature of my concept and work. The intention of my Henry Grimes biography is not to give an assessment of the protagonist and his opus; rather, it is first and foremost meant to be a vivid documentary of Grimes' work and life as an artist. In his final statement, the reviewer recognizes this: *"The main contribution of Music to Silence to Music resides in its bringing together a good part of the scattered data available about Grimes and in presenting his life trajectory as an object of reflection, something important that Frenz does well."* However, this does not change the fact that the reviewer confuses my enthusiasm with naive affirmation of everything the avant-garde has produced. Once again, this leads to caricature, a stereotyping and belittling way of judgment, instead of a differentiated picture as a result of conscientious reading.

Thank you very much.