



Arts

Astonishing Resurrection Of Jazz Great

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Chris Searle admires Barbara Frenz's Music to Silence to Music: A Biography of Henry Grimes (Northway Publications, £20)

JAZZ is a music of stories and the story of the pioneering free bassist Henry Grimes defies all expectations and predictabilities, just like his astonishing musicianship.

In this biography, Swiss jazz historian Barbara Frenz divides Grimes's life into three dramatic phases. In his twenties, he became one of the prime bassists of his era after a Philadelphia boyhood when he was a school companion of Archie Shepp, Lee Morgan and Ted Curson.

He played and recorded with Cecil Taylor, Albert Ayler, Don Cherry and Sonny Rollins — who said of him that “he has always been a serious, intense and fearless musician,” — and was heralded as one of the founders of the avant-garde in jazz with his 1965 album *The Call* considered as one of his most potent achievements.

Then, in 1969, he inexplicably disappeared from the New York jazz milieu. Leaving no trace of his whereabouts, he lost himself in Los Angeles, selling his bass and, living in a slum hotel in one of the city's grimmest neighbourhoods, earned a desperate living as a porter and janitor.

“I stopped playing to eyeball my own perspective better,” he later admitted. “I was like a dead man.” Living alone for 34 years, he wrote poems and transferred his



artistry to dozens of notebooks. Most of his former musical confreres assumed he was dead.



In 2002 he was “rediscovered” by social worker and jazz enthusiast Marshall Marrotte who, after months of searching, tracked him down to his LA hotel, bringing with him a CD player and discs of his old recordings: “So, this is a CD!” Grimes exclaimed.

The great free jazz bassist William Parker sent him his bass called “Olive Oil” and Grimes was soon playing again, as brilliantly as ever. He returned to New York to old surviving bandmates who were mystified, relieved and joyous. “I never stopped playing. Not in my mind,” he declared.

Frenz’s compelling narrative is told with empathy and her research has insights in tune with the beating pulse of the eras that she describes.

She quotes Grimes’s rationale for his art: “An innovator goes inside of a thing and comes out on the other side in another person.”

And, when you listen to Grimes’s deeply throbbing and dancing strings, whether in the 1960s or recast in this new millennium, you begin to realise the meaning of his words and his sounds.

Books Chris Searle Jazz