

## **Music To Silence To Music: A Biography Of Henry Grimes**

Barbara Frenz

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The story of Henry Grimes is one of the most enigmatic and Odyssean in modern jazz: the saga of a man and his epochal upright bass mysteriously exiting a career at the top of the New York first-call musician food chain – after playing on several definitive recordings of the 1960s avant garde – to return to that autumnal city at his full powers 30 years later with a dark lime coloured instrument named Olive Oyl.

Barbara Frenz's biography of Grimes's life, art and hard times provides a thorough accounting of his heights and depths as a man and artist across three decades of exile, exclusion and excelsior contribution. The work builds on original and prior reporting and interviews with Grimes's musical associates. It also compiles the lavish press accolades the bassist accumulated before and after his decades beyond the outer fringes of America's cultural habitués.

Because he also found true love with the angelic but practical Margaret Davis almost immediately upon his re-emergence, the Grimes story is also a near-improbably true fairytale. For that reason, it's also a critical departure from the typical tale of the forgotten and grizzled jazz genius rediscovered and dredged up, like a Delta blues battleship, in his dotage.

*Wire* readers already know this freedom jazz age tale of brave Ulysses is also a detective story – one requiring an energetic habeas corpus to dismiss reports of a

death prematurely foretold and greatly exaggerated. It was in these pages (*The Wire* 282) that many of us read of writer Marshall Marrotte's account of tracking Grimes down to a Los Angeles men's shelter by way of his social security information. There, he discovered Grimes had been barely sustaining himself and abiding bassless for three decades, variously supporting himself as a construction worker, telemarketer, soup kitchen server and a night watchman.

In the decade preceding his self-exile Grimes, a conservatory trained cellist, bassist and tuba player from Philadelphia, had left Juilliard to embark on a stellar journeyman's rise accompanying Thelonious Monk, Sonny Rollins, Cecil Taylor, Don Cherry, Pharaoh Sanders and Albert Ayler.

Grimes was part of a generation who transformed the bass's function to complement and affirm the ruptures and breaks with traditional song form which Sun Ra, Taylor, Coleman and Ayler were initiating – most prominently developed by Ronnie Boykins, Charlie Haden, Gary Peacock, Wilbur Ware, Malachi Favors and Alan Silva, and later in the 1970s, Fred Hopkins, Peter Kowald and William Parker.

Grimes remains unique among this esteemed group for becoming as renowned in the post-bop jazz mainstream as he became in the liberated territory we identify as the jazz avant garde. In one spectacular weekend of freebooting at the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival, Grimes performed unrehearsed with pro-swing groups led by Thelonious Monk, Benny Goodman, Gerry Mulligan, Lee Konitz, Tony Scott and Sonny Rollins.

With the latter he went on to tour Europe alongside Ornette Coleman disciples Don Cherry and Billy Higgins, when Rollins began pursuing the open channels Ornette had dug. Grimes was a pioneer in bringing fleet, precise and fluid arco playing into the avant garde frame. Even in clips of Grimes ably supporting Rollins in 1962 you can hear how advanced and lyrical and intrepid he was with the bow. He is also among the stalwart minority of vigorous and inventive improvising violinists the freedom movement has produced, alongside players such as Coleman, Billy Bang, Michael White and Ramsey Ameen.

In 1970 Grimes stayed in San Francisco after ending a national tour with vocalist Jon Hendricks's group; that change of venue led him in short order to Los Angeles where he was to remain out of contact with the East Coast world where all his friends, family and professional contacts were for three decades. A series of personal mishaps contributed to his isolation before he even got to California. He had become estranged from his parents and siblings; he had lost his address book. During a cross-country drive through the Utah and Nevada desert his bass, strapped to the top of car developed a vicious skein of cracks: damage so bad he eventually sold the instrument for far less than it was worth to a violin repairman.

There was also, more than anything, the economics of free jazz life. Grimes, for all his first-call status was mostly working for now-legendary but then near-penniless musicians themselves – Ayler, Cecil Taylor and Don Cherry notable among them. Bouts

of mental depression had already sent Grimes into near seclusion as early as 1966. His frequent absences became taken as an oddball character trait. Remarkably, Grimes never stooped believing he would play music again; he speaks of meticulously caring for his hand through the years hauling and lifting at construction sites. He also studied yoga and meditation for years and supplanted music as a creative endeavor by filling over 90 notebooks with his passion for studying and writing poetry and prose. Frenz provides generous examples of Grimes's writing which bear traces of his affections for Emily Dickinson and Amiri Baraka.

We've become used to associating the most brilliant black expressivity in America with hardship, marginalisation and deprivation on one hand, resourceful endurance and eventual global recognition on the other. The grinding ordeals of Grimes strip that binary narrative of whatever romance and triumph over philistine capitalism may have crept in through the side door – especially now that visionary jazz musicians routinely receive MacArthur awards and reignite the tradition for annual six-figure salaries at Lincoln Center.

Ultimately, only Grimes really gets to own his victory over the commonplace fate of many extraordinary black men in American society.

Frenz concludes with a poignant summary from William Parker: "From Henry's point of view, he was never lost. He was always Henry Grimes. Waiting and ready to fulfill his destiny. A destiny that is bigger than any logic system." Greg Tate

Henry Grimes

