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The Improvisation of Tubby Hayes in 'The New York Sessions'

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*“Imagine for a moment that it is 1959 and that you are a young jazz fan visiting the new Ronnie Scott's club in London; you descend the rickety staircase to the basement venue and are greeted by the overwhelming torrent of musical energy emanating from a small but rotund, sharply suited, incredibly confident looking young tenor saxophonist half crouched before a microphone.”*¹

Introduction

Tubby (Edward Brian) Hayes; prodigious self taught multi-instrumentalist and virtuoso tenor saxophone player has been proclaimed by some to be the best saxophonist that Britain has ever produced: *“Indisputably the most accomplished and characterful British jazzman of his generation.”*² His career, although cut short (he died undergoing treatment for a heart condition in June 1973, aged 38) was perpetually intense, incredibly prolific, and non-stop from his debut at the age of fifteen until his premature death.

Hayes was proficient on many instruments; all saxophones, clarinet, flute, violin and vibraphone as well as being an accomplished bandleader and arranger. However it was his virtuoso tenor saxophone playing that found him acclaim.

Although well known in his time and widely renowned for his ability, Hayes until recently has been little studied. It is only in the last few years that many critics and students of jazz have attempted to gain an understanding of Hayes' improvisational concept, which has been both praised as genius and criticised as directionless:

*Tubby Hayes has often been lionized as the greatest saxophonist Britain ever produced. He is a fascinating but problematical player. Having put together a big, rumbustious tone and a delivery that features sixteenth notes spilling impetuously out of the horn, Hayes often left a solo full of brilliant loose ends and ingenious runs that led nowhere in particular...*³

However, Hayes, his legacy, and his inimitable style of tenor saxophone playing would truly leave their mark on the British Jazz community for generations to come. Dave Gelly summed up Hayes by saying that Tubby "played Cockney tenor – garrulous, pugnacious, never at a loss for a word and completely unstoppable."⁴

¹ Simon Spillett 'The long shadow of the little Giant' November 2004 available from www.jazzscript.co.uk/extra/art.hayes.htm accessed 12 January 2009

² Simon Spillett, 2004

³ Cook, Richard. Morton, Brian. The Penguin Guide to Jazz Recordings (8th ed.). New York: Penguin Group, 2006.

⁴ Gelly, quoted in Spillett, 2004

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