

Rhythm
Flow



PEE WEE ELLIS

THE STORYTELLER

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In 2015, as I was preparing a new release of the first Pee Wee Ellis Trio recordings from 1993, one of the best contemporary US writers, who published another million selling book in 2023 "The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store", made his way to a sleepy little town in the South West of England.

James McBride, who had initially embarked on a professional career as a pop and jazz musician himself, had travelled from America to interview Pee Wee Ellis about his time as James Brown's musical director.

With "Kill 'Em and Leave, (Searching for James Brown and the American Soul)", McBride has written a unique book on American popular music in the 20th century. Rarely does such a gifted writer bring to-

gether sociological, historical and musical knowledge with such a captivating sense of humour.

In the chapter "The Earth Beneath His Feet", he creates a wonderful portrait of Pee Wee Ellis as the man with the horn from another planet, who feels very much at home in the UK, his adopted country for almost 30 years. In just 20 pages he gives us a short history of African-American music from early jazz to bebop, and soul to hip hop, and sums up the importance of Pee Wee "the principle architect of James Brown's sound" as composer, arranger, bandleader, saxophonist, organist and producer for James Brown's organisation, which comprised of over 30 musicians and entourage.



The ironic thing about Pee Wee's entry into the Brown cosmos was his original motivation: he wanted to earn enough money to be able to devote himself more intensively to his true love, jazz. As a seven-year-old, he discovered a saxophone in his grandmother's household, which became an anchor for him in his childhood. When his mother left the South with her children after a family tragedy, the talented teenager met like-minded, slightly older teenagers, Ron Carter and Waymon Reed in Rochester, New York. As soon as he had unpacked his saxophone, his age no longer mattered. At 16, while visiting family in New York City, he met one of his idols Sonny Rollins (then 27) outside a saxophone repair shop. From then on Pee Wee flew down to New York once a week to have one-to-one lessons with Sonny and that summer of 1957 led to a lifelong friendship.

(Pee Wee paid the \$12 return plane fare from his gigs at The Pythodd, an iconic Rochester Jazz Club)

Pee Wee ended his work with James Brown at the end of 1969 only appearing on one or two later studio sessions. Of course, there were plenty of stars who wanted to get Pee Wee on board as he helped to develop the typical sound of the legendary CTI label, which celebrated its greatest successes in the commercially successful intermediate realm of soul and jazz in the 1970s: Esther Phillips, George Benson, Hank Crawford and many others benefited from this.

One of the many qualities of the artist and man Pee Wee Ellis was his gift of walking through life with open eyes and ears, always ready to respond positively to new challenges, ideas, people and collaborations. His discography with musicians from all over the world is correspondingly extensive.

When I first had the chance to record former James Brown musicians in 1988, around the singer Bobby Byrd, who had been making music with James Brown since they were children, I got to know Pee Wee Ellis as well as Maceo Parker and Fred Wesley. Of course, as a teenager in Germany in the 70s, you couldn't get past James Brown. Sex Machine, Hot Pants, his hits were main staples of the jukeboxes and discos.

As always, the new enthusiasm for old soul hits, the rarer the better, spilled over from the UK to Germany as a wave of "rare groove". After the production of the live recording by Bobby Byrd and The J.B. All Stars, "Finally Getting Paid", with covers of their own hits, I quickly realised that this chapter was closed. The real potential lay in the three horn players.

But first I had to fulfil a recording contract with Maceo Parker as solo artist, with whom a windy co-producer had left me on my own.

After a few commercially unsuccessful studio attempts with Maceo, in the spirit of the typical studio tinkering with drum machines, keyboards etc which makes a lot of music from that time so unbearable today, we turned our attention to the real talents of these thoroughbred musicians. It made total sense for Fred and Pee Wee to be involved, as although all three had only played together for a relatively short period with James Brown, in the meantime they had developed an unbeatable horn section and sound.

The short film "Blow Your Horn" by Markus Gruber documents the recording of the first Maceo album "Roots Revisited" in New York City in November 1989, a few days after the fall of the Berlin Wall. (As a DVD extra on Maceo Parker "Life on Planet Groove Revisited-25th Anniversary Edition").

The rest is history.

Which brings us to the subject: After three hit albums with Parker and individual productions with Fred Wesley, I still hadn't done a project with Pee Wee by early 1993. I realised in the meantime that Pee Wee was actually the unrecognised genius among the 3 funkateers and an idea was born: Pee Wee in a trio format with just double bass and drums.

His mentor Sonny Rollins had made some groundbreaking studio and live trio records at the time the two met, as did John Coltrane, another big influence on Pee Wee.

Thus on 10 May 1993, the Pee Wee Ellis Trio with Dwayne Dolphin on upright bass and Bruce Cox on



Dwayne Dolphin



Bruce Cox

drums took to the big stage at the Hofheim Jazz Festival. The night before, the three musicians had performed there as part of the Maceo Parker - Roots Revisited Band, the acclaimed finale of a months-long, energy-sapping European tour. "Gruelling tours" Pee Wee called them. Everything tedious was suddenly washed away as if by a cleansing summer storm:

Three skilled, highly motivated musicians improvised at the highest level, despite Dwayne Dolphin not having played a double bass in many moons, and after all the months playing a long, tight funk programme every night they produced an inspired spontaneous jazz performance. Over the next few days, the three of them recorded Pee Wee's first jazz album in Cologne's "Schmuckkästchen" club, almost 30 years after he had joined James Brown for this very reason. These recordings are now available almost in their entirety as "Cologne Concerts".

The New York Times voted the originally single CD, first released as "Twelve & More Blues", one of the best of 1993. The following year saw the release of his organ quartet studio album "Sepia Tonality", an absolute milestone in jazz history. This trio toured Europe several times, and the by now well-rehearsed team celebrated its almost first anniversary in March 1994 at the Schmuckkästchen. Which was of course recorded. A CD was then released in 1995 as "Yellin' Blue", which unfortunately never received its true appreciation.

Over the years, it matured like a great red wine. And even after the re-release of the '93 recordings, which evoke a real club experience when played loudly on a good hi-fi system it now seemed almost imperative to us to remaster the two concert evenings from 1994 in high-definition, because today they are even better and more substantial in terms of recording technology and music.

So here is the complete first evening from March 21st 1994.

Why the title "The Storyteller"? The first great saxophonists of jazz, Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster, Johnny Hodges and Benny Carter were all storytellers, which was best expressed in their ballads.

They also emphasised again and again how important the lyrics of the songs they interpreted were to them. The more complicated and academic the development of jazz became, the more this art was lost. Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane, who were admired by Pee Wee, still mastered it, even if they turned to so-called free jazz or the New Thing in the 1960s. We will never know how Coltrane or Eric Dolphy would have developed after 1967, but others such as Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler and Pharoah Sanders returned to the tradition, most notably Rahsaan Roland Kirk, who died far too early.

If Pee Wee Ellis learnt anything from Sonny Rollins as a teenager, it was certainly to find his own way and sound. Maceo Parker rightly said: "Nobody can teach Pee Wee anything about the saxophone." After Pee Wee's death, a musician wrote in a letter to the editor in response to the obituary in the New York Times: he had played in a support band for Van Morrison in the 70s and heard the stories in Pee Wee's solos night after night during the US tour and found them to be the greatest lesson and joy of his life. This is exactly how I experienced the trio concerts: no memorised licks, no precisely calculated, ecstatic antics or technical show-offs just to win the audience's applause - here someone tells his stories, which continue from note to note until everything is told.

Take a seat, play it and just listen!

Stephan Meyner, June 2024

PEE**WEE****ELLIS****Rhythm
Flow****THE STORYTELLER****CD 1**

- 1 Stable Mates** (Benny Golson) 9:07
- 2 Groovin' High** (Dizzy Gillespie) 7:06
- 3 Tag Alone** (Alfred "Pee Wee" Ellis) 6:18
- 4 Sophisticated Lady** (Duke Ellington) 9:39
- 5 Do Dee Dum Diddy** (Alfred "Pee Wee" Ellis) 14:16

Total Time: 46:30

- 1 Like Sonny** (John Coltrane) 8:33
- 2 In a Mellow Tone** (Duke Ellington) 11:27
- 3 Doxy** (Sonny Rollins) 8:11
- 4 Yellin' Blue** (Alfred "Pee Wee" Ellis) 11:56
- 5 Lazy Bird** (John Coltrane) 4:52
- 6 Mañana** (Peggy Lee & Dave Barbour) 13:05

Total Time: 58:08

CD 2

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to **Charlotte
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who supervised
the liner notes
and translation.

Original recordings produced by **Pee Wee Ellis** and **Stephan Meyner**
Recorded live at "Schmuckkästchen" Cologne, Germany on **March 21st 1994**
Recording Engineer: **Gerhard Veeck**
An original analogue recording
High Definition Transfers: **Wout de Kruif** at Dutch Tapes Transfers
Editing and and mastering: **Elmar Gillet**
Artwork & Cover Photo: **Heinrich Buttler** | All other photos: **Hyou Vielz**
Executive Producers: **Stephan Meyner** and **Elmar Gillet**