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Texas Bebop Messengers to the World: Kenny Dorham and Leo Wright

By Dave Oliphant

*Coming as I do to the study of history as a student of literature, I have found that a little-known short story by Edgar Allan Poe aptly presents the "revisionist" attitude that I took toward my historical survey, *Texan Jazz*, soon after it was published by the University of Texas Press in 1996. Having traced the contributions of Texas musicians to jazz history over a period of almost one hundred years, from Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" of 1899 through Blind Lemon Jefferson's 1920s country blues and on to Marchel Ivery and Cedar Walton's 1994 recording of "Every Time We Say Goodbye," I came, after the publication of my book, to appreciate greatly the views on revising a work of history as expressed by the Egyptian character in Poe's short story entitled "Some Words With a Mummy."*

According to Poe's character, who is literally shocked back to life by a group of American Egyptologists who jokingly apply to his mummified body a galvanic charge from a voltaic battery, the Egyptian philosophers of the mummy's distant day-following discovery of the embalming principle-were struck by the idea that it would much advance the interests of science if life were lived in installments. In this way,

An historian, for example, would write a book with great labor and then get himself carefully embalmed; leaving instructions to his executors pro tem, that they should cause him to be revived after the lapse of a certain period-say five or six hundred years. Resuming existence at the expiration of this term, he would invariably find his great work converted into a species of hap-hazard note-

book-that is to say, into a kind of literary arena for the conflicting guesses, riddles, and personal squabbles of whole herds of exasperated commentators.

Poe's mummy goes on to say that the revived Egyptian historian, after finding his work distorted by annotations and emendations of later historians, would rewrite it and thus prevent history "from degenerating into absolute fable."¹

What interests me about Poe's short story is not so much its satire of the way that historians question and perhaps distort the work of their fellow scholars, but rather the notion that, were we able to return to our writings five hundred years hence, we would surely see them differently and would feel the need to revise them thoroughly. As a matter of fact, in my own case, it



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took far less than a single year before I wished that I could revise what I had written, and especially what I had said, or failed to say, about a jazz trumpet player by the name of Kenny Dorham, who was born near Fairfield, Texas, on August 30, 1924, who attended high school in Austin and Wiley College in Marshall, and who became one of the preeminent figures in the bebop and hardbop periods of jazz history.

Even though, after finishing my book on Texan jazz, I believed that I had covered Kenny Dorham's career as fully as I could within the limitations of a history filled with numerous important figures, it was not long before I came upon a group of compact discs which had not been available at the time of my writing. Such a discovery of additional material is not unusual in any field of study, for new information often emerges only after a book is in print. And while further data need not change a writer's essential view of a historical figure, I immediately saw that the unknown CDs would have been extremely helpful in establishing more substantially a central thesis of my book, namely, that a Texas background influenced the kind of jazz produced by Texas musicians. These newly released CDs also altered my conception of Kenny Dorham as an artist, since they demonstrated to me that I had not given this jazzman the full credit he was due as an instrumentalist and a creative thinker.

What I discovered through one recording—originally made January 10, 1960, and reissued in 1995 as *The Kenny Dorham Memorial Album*—was that, as a boy growing up on a farm in Post Oak, Texas, the trumpeter had had “aspirations of becoming a top cowhand and being able to yodel and sing songs like the horsemen of the West.” As Dorham goes on to say, “The Gene Autry-type yodelers and the local cowboys were mostly white. I had a black satin two-year-old pony with a white, diamond-shaped spot in the middle of his forehead. He was equipped with a Sears & Roebuck western saddle, bridle and halter.”² One of the tunes included on the 1960 memorial album is entitled “I’m an Old Cowhand,” and the appeal of this piece for Dorham may be accounted for in part by his early attraction to ranch life, which, as he seems to suggest, was unusual for a Black in the Fairfield area, even though there had always been Black cowboys in Texas.³ But, more importantly, Dorham's performance of “I’m an Old Cowhand” reveals much about the jazz artistry of this native Texan who traded his bridle for Bebop.

Written in 1936 by Johnny Mercer, a native of Savannah, Georgia, “I’m an Old Cowhand” was conceived at the time during a trip that Mercer and his wife took across the state of Texas. Refer-

ence in the lyrics to the Rio Grande River establishes the specific setting, and this must have been important to Dorham as a Texan. Yet the melody itself—the only one ever composed by lyricist Mercer—was undoubtedly the most attractive feature of the piece. Curiously, Mercer's melody is based on a famous English tune, “Westminster Chimes,” which was itself inspired by the clock in the tower of the Parliament building in London. Dorham possibly heard Mercer's song when it was sung in a 1941 movie by Roy Rogers, but certainly it seems that the combination of the cowboy connection and the enduring English tune stimulated the trumpeter's musical imagination.⁴ Dorham's improvised variations on the Mercer tune are pure jazz, with his glissandos and flutter-tongued notes lending to the melody a unique quality that is so different from the song's British source or the lyricist's comic treatment of Dorham's Lone Star state. Indeed, the Texan's inventive handling of the theme represents a vital feature of the art of jazz.

What makes jazz so special is difficult to define, but hearing Kenny Dorham perform this type of music makes it clear that any definition would include the blend of varied sounds that has gone into its creation. As played by Dorham, this one piece, “I’m an Old Cowhand,” brings together two continents and a wide range of human expression, from joy and playfulness to technical and intellectual ingenuity. And this was characteristic of Dorham's work as a jazz artist by the time he spent two years as the trumpeter in the Charlie Parker Quintet, which in May of 1949 traveled to Europe for the first Paris International Jazz Festival where it proved to be “one of the greatest and purest bop units . . . producing . . . some of the finest small-group bop ever heard in France.”⁵ It was at that time that Dorham incorporated into his recorded solo on “Out of Nowhere” a phrase from Australian composer Percy Grainger's *Country Gardens*.⁶ The reach and all-encompassing nature of jazz are indicated not only by these examples of differing types of music coming together in the playing of a Texas jazzman, but also by the worldwide impact of jazz, which, as “the most democratic music on this planet” and a symbol of freedom, has even been credited in some quarters with the Glasnost movement that revolutionized the Soviet Union.⁷

On a smaller scale, we can witness the effect of jazz abroad through recordings that Kenny Dorham made in Norway and Denmark with jazz musicians from those two Scandinavian countries. In 1960 Dorham recorded in Oslo and in 1963 in Copenhagen. On the second of these visits, the trumpeter composed a piece entitled “Scandia Skies” as a tribute to the region that received him so warmly.⁸ On the earlier trip to Norway, Dorham recorded with three Norwegians a tune entitled “Lament,” by American jazz trombone virtuoso J.J. Johnson.⁹ “Lament” had already been recorded in 1957 by trumpet legend

Miles Davis on a landmark album entitled *Miles Ahead*, which brought wide-spread recognition to Davis's introspective, elliptical style of playing.¹⁰ Dorham's 1960 performance of Johnson's tune thus represents a jazz tradition which the Texan shared with his fellow musicians in Norway. However, Dorham's own interpretation of "Lament" is different from the Davis version but equally moving, a very personal approach which is characteristic of Kenny's more direct statement of feeling (an attribute as well of Hardbop) and which also exemplifies the individual expression possible within the larger jazz tradition. The highly expressive, emotive power of Dorham's playing comes through fully on this 1960 performance, in spite of the fact that the recording is marred by distortion from the taping and reproductive process in Oslo.

Even before Dorham traveled to Scandinavia in the 1960s, the trumpeter apparently had already exhibited a musical connection with this part of the world. On a recording made on December 15, 1953, of "Osmosis," a tune by Osie Johnson, Dorham had quoted from what sounds to me like Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg's incidental music to Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*.¹¹ As I have discovered since the publication of *Texan Jazz*, Dorham often incorporated in his trumpet solos the same phrase that seems to derive from the "Anitra's Dance" section of Grieg's *Peer Gynt Suite*. This phrase can be heard in the Texan's solos on his own tune "Minor's Holiday" and on "Basheer's Dream" from March 29, 1955; on his own tune "The Theme" recorded on November 23, 1955 (with Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, of which Dorham was a founding member); on "Man of Moods," from May 22, 1956; on his tune "Mexico City" from May 31, 1956; and on "Why Not?" from March 13, 1961.¹² I hasten to add, however, that this is unusual in Dorham's playing, since in the dozens of solos that I have heard on his recordings, the trumpeter never really repeats himself. His solos are

all quite different in conception and style, ranging from his flowing, lyrical choruses to short, jabbing phrases, half-valve effects and flutter tonguing, dazzling runs, sudden leaps to piercing high notes, and everything in between.

Dorham's awareness of and fondness for the Grieg-like phrase could have come from any number of sources. Trombonist Jack Teagarden, a fellow Texan, recorded "Anitra's Dance" with his own big band in June 1941.¹³ Female trombonist Melba Liston, who was with the Dizzy Gillespie orchestra in 1949-Dorham having been a member of the first Gillespie big band in 1945-arranged the Grieg piece at the suggestion of the trumpeter-leader.¹⁴ My own father heard Grieg's music through a public school program in Fort Worth around 1930, and Dorham may well have first known the work while in secondary school or while he was attending Wiley College in Marshall in the early 1940s. Of course, it may simply be a coincidence that the phrase that I hear in Dorham's solos is much like a passage in Grieg and that in fact the phrase was of the trumpeter's own inven-

tion, for he was an original improviser and a fine and prolific composer. Whether Dorham is quoting from Grainger or Grieg, his adoption of this bebop penchant for musical quotation is an indication of the Texan's capacity for entwining his blues-based jazz roots with a world-music heritage, which makes of him a regional artist with an international latitude. While his incorporation of motifs from classical works demonstrates his ability to utilize such repertoire for his own jazz objectives, a tune like his "K.D.'s Blues" makes evident the significance to his creation

of Hardbop during the 1950s of his own Texas background—that is, what jazz critic James Lincoln Collier has referred to in calling the state "a blues hotbed."¹⁵ Of course, the blues have long enjoyed in themselves a universal appeal, but in combination with Dorham's blues mode, his witty allusions to Grainger and Grieg add an intellectual



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dimension that lends to Bebop one of its uniquely alluring qualities.

The notion of a connection between jazz and a world-music tradition is close in spirit to the recent work of Black historian Robin D.G. Kelley, who, through his consideration of poly-rhythms in jazz, has conceived of the importance of polyculturalism in Black history, an idea which he elaborated during a lecture entitled “People in Me: On the

Polycultural Nature of Blackness.”¹⁶ Kelley’s point was that Black culture has drawn upon other cultures to develop its own way of life, with the historian’s particular examples limited to the Black use of Mao Tse-tung’s *Little Red Book* and the folk traditions preserved by Australian aborigines. Although Kelley did not mention Kenny Dorham, he may eventually do so, since this historian is reportedly writing a biography of jazz pianist Thelonious Monk, with whom in 1952 Dorham recorded three Monk compositions: the difficult and rarely performed “Skippy”; the early jazz waltz, “Carolina Moon”; and the classic “Let’s Cool One.”¹⁷

But to return to the Scandinavian connection. The motif possibly from Edvard Grieg’s “Anitra’s Dance” that Dorham worked into a number of his solos was either evoked somehow in the trumpeter’s mind while he was playing or was simply a favored phrase that served him in the construction of his solos based on the melody and chords of a tune related or unrelated to the *Peer Gynt Suite*. Such motifs can be the building blocks or linking devices of any music, and certainly the appropriation of others’ lines or phrases is not unheard of among jazz improvisers. Charlie Parker frequently quoted from Bizet’s *Carmen* and used the opening of Percy Grainger’s *Country Gardens* as a coda.¹⁸ But so far as I am aware, Dorham is the only bebopper to have drawn upon Grieg’s “Anitra’s Dance,” although in doing so he was clearly working within the bebop tradition practiced by Parker, whose tendencies Dorham obviously absorbed during his time with Bird’s quintet between 1948 and 1950. This assimilation of world-music sources in jazz was but one aspect of the bebop message that Dorham took with him to Scandinavia.

Just as Charlie Parker had been stimulated by his visit to Sweden in 1949 to create his piece entitled “Swedish Schnapps,” so too was Dorham inspired by his stay in Norway and Denmark



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to compose his “Scandia Skies.”¹⁹ Other American jazzmen were also inspired by their visits to Scandinavia—for example, Duke Ellington composed his “Serenade to Sweden” during his trip there in 1939, and in 1951 tenorist Stan Getz toured Scandinavia, picking up on a Swedish folk tune entitled “Dear Old Stockholm,” which subsequently was recorded so memorably by the

Miles Davis Quintet with tenorist John Coltrane and Texas pianist Red Garland.²⁰ But more than Parker or Ellington or Getz, Dorham, in visiting Scandinavia, forged in a way a more direct, personal bond between his own form of Bebop and one of what I take to have been its sources in the music of Grieg, which had figured structurally in his solos for more than half-a-dozen years prior to his trip to Oslo.²¹

All of Dorham’s highly melodic solos that contain the Grieg-like motif are long-lined, in what has been called his “running” style, which critic Michael James has suggested was an influence on Charlie Parker, who “tended to use longer phrases when partnered by Dorham.”²² As for Dorham’s impact on the Scandinavians, this is evident not only from the fact that Allan Botschinsky, who joined Dorham on fluegelhorn for the 1963 Copenhagen recording session, had long admired the Texan, but also from the way that on “My Funny Valentine” Botschinsky “picks up the mood [from Dorham’s solo] so completely as to maintain a virtually uninterrupted melodic flow.” Dorham’s “elegant melodic powers” were a large part of his contribution to Bebop and Hardbop, and this too he took with him on his Scandinavian visit.²³

In addition to Dorham’s “Scandia Skies,” another tune that he recorded both in Oslo and in Copenhagen, with Norwegian and Danish jazz musicians, was his tune entitled “Short Story.”²⁴ Reportedly this piece derives from “Tickle Toe,” a composition by the great tenor saxophonist Lester Young, which was first recorded by the Count Basie Orchestra in 1940. Young was an important influence on Charlie Parker, and this and the practice of basing a tune on the chords of an earlier work (referred to in bebop parlance as a “contrafact”) were again part of the jazz legacy that Kenny Dorham carried with him to Paris and the Scandinavian

capitals, as well as to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where in 1961 he recorded with an all-star group that included saxophonists Zoot Sims and Al Cohn.²⁵ Dorham's effect on the Scandinavian jazz scene seems apparent from the inspired performances by the musicians with whom he recorded: Botschinsky, trumpeter Rolf Ericson, pianist Tete Montoliu, drummer Alex Riel, and bassist Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen. While many countries have built up substantial jazz traditions, the presence of a vital figure like Dorham among musicians of another culture always brings out the best in those native or immigrant players. As for the meaningfulness of Dorham's appearance on the Brazilian jazz scene, it may not be possible to gauge this so directly, since he did not record with local musicians but only with a group from the U.S. What is evident, however, is the impression made on the Texan by Brazilian music, for Dorham's hearing it resulted in a number of his compositions that "helped shape several schools of jazz for the next decade."²⁶ In addition to recording Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos's "Prelude" in an unusual duet with pianist Bobby Timmons (a combination that harks back to a recording of "Tom Cat Blues" by Joe "King" Oliver and Jelly Roll Morton made in 1924) and Brazilian Luis Bonfás "Manha de Carnaval,"²⁷ Dorham

wrote two quite popular tunes based on his South American tours of 1960 and '61, "Una más" and the remarkable "Blue Bossa," as well as "São Paulo," "El Matador," "Afrodisia," and "Pedro's Time."²⁸ Both the Scandinavian and South American trips undertaken by Dorham suggest the reciprocal nature of his international experience, which in itself represents the openness that jazz has always fostered, regardless of its origins or where it has gone. This too was a message that Dorham, on his travels abroad, "preached"—to employ a favorite gospel analogy of hardbop adherents like brothers Nat and Cannonball Adderley and Horace Silver of the Jazz Messengers.

Beginning with his first trumpet lessons in Austin, Kenny Dorham slowly and steadily developed his musical talents, playing with most of the seminal groups and individual stars of the bebop and hardbop periods and serving in the process as a jazz ambassador to the world. As my own research has continued into his life and artistry, I have realized that there is a more profound, imaginative, and substantive expressiveness to the work of this modest, highly dedicated musician from my own state than I had previously recognized. As jazz critic Gunther Schuller has observed, "it is always a source of surprise to discover in what diverse regions of the country many of the major and lesser figures of jazz were born and/or grew up."²⁹ In the case of Kenny

Dorham, it is especially striking to learn that as a boy he took part in cattle round-ups, helping drive the herds to the dipping vat for five dollars a day, and that his most cherished dream was to become a hobo, thinking "it would be very exciting to . . . hitch rides on freight trains and [go] as far west as San Francisco and southwest to the border towns of Mexico."³⁰ Little did he suspect, perhaps, that one day by means of his own music—both through such compositions as his "Mexico City," "São Paulo," "Monaco," "Bombay," "Tahitian Suite," and "Scandia Skies" and by

virtue of his long-lined, "running"-style, solo-trumpet "rides," at what often has been identified as a Texan's "loping" trot—he would traverse the globe in the astonishing saddle of Blues and Bebop.³¹

Like Kenny Dorham, his fellow Texan Leo Wright, who was born in Wichita Falls on December 14, 1933, also transported his native musical heritage and his own "brand" of Bebop to a world audience. Wright's father, Mel, an alto saxophonist, played at the end of the 1930s with the San Antonio band called Boots and His Buddies,³² and also gigged professionally with the father of Buddy Tate, a tenor saxophonist from Sherman, Texas,



Courtesy of: Atlantic Records

who was featured with the Count Basie band.³³ Leo first studied the alto with his father when they moved to California in the early 1940s, but on returning to Wichita Falls, the son was instructed during his senior year of high school by Texas tenorist John Hardee, who had been recorded in the 1940s by Blue Note, Savoy, and the newly formed Atlantic label.³⁴ Leo earned a scholarship to Huston-Tillotson College in Austin and later attended San Francisco State College before being drafted into the army. While stationed in Germany, Leo was in charge of a jazz group and met up with a number of important jazz musicians, including Dallas pianist Cedar Walton. On returning to the U.S., Wright enrolled again at San Francisco State, but when his money ran out he headed for New York to try his luck.

At New York's Half Note nightclub and at the Newport Jazz Festival, Wright performed with the Charles Mingus jazz workshop, which included three other Texas sidemen, tenorist Booker Ervin, altoist John Handy, and trumpeter Richard Williams. Although Wright did not record with Mingus, he did appear on albums with Dizzy Gillespie, whose quintet Wright joined in 1959, traveling in September to Copenhagen where the group was recorded in concert. Just as Kenny Dorham had formed part of the Charlie Parker Quintet, Leo Wright also worked with one of the two masters of the bebop movement.³⁵ Gillespie was especially attracted to Leo Wright for his facility as both an alto saxophonist and also as a flutist. Wright had studied the flute at San Francisco State, but "he had begun to resent the instrument," until Dizzy started featuring him on such pieces as "I Found a Million Dollar Baby" and the trumpeter's classic tune, "A Night in Tunisia."³⁶ Wright's performances on both flute and alto add much to Gillespie's music. Even though Gillespie recorded "A Night in Tunisia" innumerable times over the years following his first recording of the piece in 1946 with Don Byas on tenor and Milt Jackson on vibraphone, every Gillespie performance of this piece differs from all his others.

While the Copenhagen version is

similar to the one recorded at Newport in 1960, both differ from one another and also from the version the Quintet recorded on February 9, 1961, at the Museum of Modern Art, and especially from the big-band orchestration by Argentinian pianist-composer Lalo Schifrin (entitled "Tunisia Fantasy") recorded at Carnegie Hall on March 4, 1961, with Wright as usual on both flute and alto.³⁷ In every instance, Gillespie's classic remains an appealing, stirring piece, and Leo Wright contributes in several ways to convey the exotic flavor of this masterful composition.

Although neither Kenny Dorham nor Leo Wright was ever on the same level of originality or expressive power as Parker and Gillespie, each of these Texans had his own voice and both had been from the beginning of their careers drenched or baptized in the blues tradition, which invests their playing with a soulful, hardbop feeling. Gillespie himself confessed that he was not a blues man, contrasting his playing with that of Texas trumpeter Oran "Hot Lips" Page; Wright, on the other hand, was definitely a blues man.³⁸ On alto Wright at times sounds more like a tenor, his tone gruffer than Parker's and his ideas more ferocious. While Wright does not offer Parker's complex bebop locutions, he does at times reel off strings of breakneck runs that are reminiscent of the Bird's phenomenal musical flights. In tandem with Gillespie on "A Night in Tunisia," Wright flawlessly negotiates on alto the demands of the composer-trumpeter's exotic rhythms and harmonic changes. On flute, Wright evokes the Middle Eastern (or is it Caribbean?) mood of the piece, as he does on "Kush," Gillespie's self-described "African rhythm and tone poem," written on the Quintet's trip to Africa and performed at the 1961 MOMA concert.³⁹ Just as Poe's Egyptologists revived their 500-year-old mummy, Gillespie's "Kush" brings to life the rediscovered ancient lost Nile city of that name, and Wright's flute once again sets the mood for this African composition. On alto, Wright not only enters the spirit of the piece with his primitive-like screams but also at one point recreates something of an Arabic-sounding motif. Both "A Night in Tunisia" and "Kush" illustrate the comment by bassist Bob Cunningham that playing Gillespie's music showed him "the world," while "Kush" underscores the view of Lalo Schifrin that this piece demonstrates Dizzy's interest in "other cultures, and his African roots."⁴⁰ For his part, Wright aided Gillespie musically in exploring and expressing such cultures and roots.

Another work performed by the Quintet at the MOMA concert was Duke Ellington's "The Mooche," originally recorded by the composer and his orchestra on October 1, 1928, and characterized variously by Ellington as "a stylized jungle . . . a sex dance."⁴¹ Surely the source of much of Gillespie's own exotic music,



Ellington's piece remains a modern-sounding work and was a natural choice for the MOMA program, along with Gillespie's African-inspired "A Night in Tunisia" and "Kush." As for Leo Wright, one of his own inspirations on the alto was reportedly Ellington's star altoist, Johnny Hodges, who dialogues on the 1928 recording of "The Mooche" with growl-trumpeter Bubber Miley. However, Wright's alto solo on the Quintet version is stylistically quite different from Hodges's approach. Although both players share a certain austerity and clarity of tone, Wright's style is more "crackling," a term several commentators have used to describe his attacking, even somewhat tormented cry. Also, there is a blues quality to Wright's sound that is rather more aggressive than the lovely, floating style of Hodges. This

difference serves to point up the approach of earlier saxophonists with that of sidemen of the hardbop persuasion who were often more anguished and even perhaps more bitter than Hodges ever was in his solo or ensemble work. This distinction also makes evident that, through Gillespie's music, Wright brought to audiences here and abroad the more aggrieved manner of sixties jazz as it had developed out of the bebop revolution.⁴²

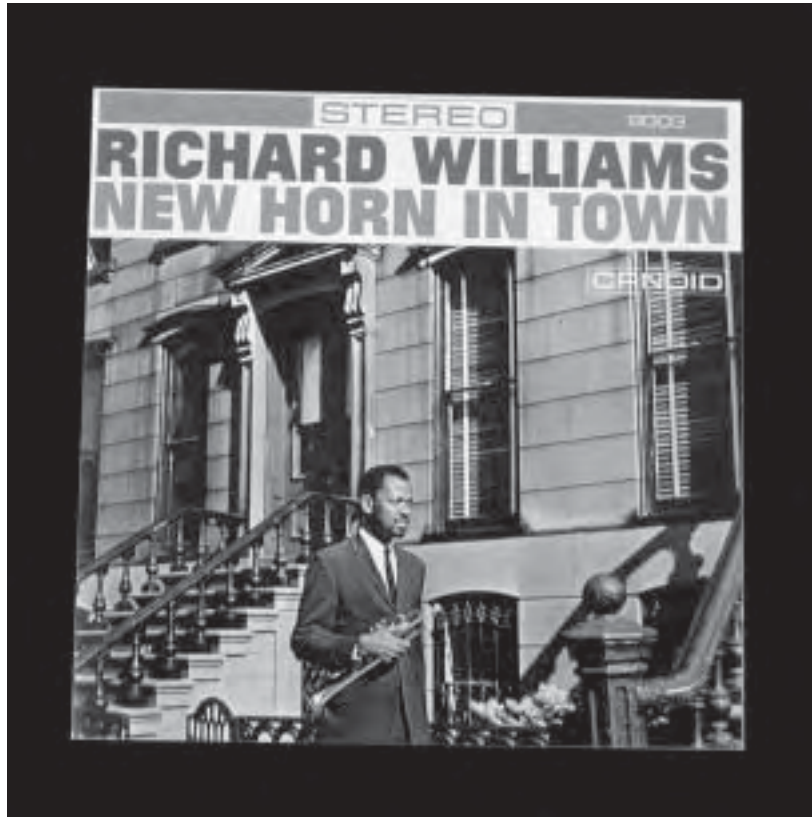
In 1960 Lalo Schifrin would write a suite for the Gillespie big band entitled *Gillespiana*, with the Quintet serving as soloists in something of a concerto format.⁴³ In the 1940s, Gillespie had incorporated Latin American elements in his music, especially through the percussion work of Cuban bongo player Chano Pozo. For the Gillespie big-band concert at Carnegie Hall in 1961, Wright solos along with the leader on the Gillespie-Pozo Afro-Cuban classic entitled "Manteca." (Wright is the featured soloist on the ballad, "This Is the Way," which he performs on alto with a magisterial sound and technique.) *Gillespiana* continued with the tradition in jazz of having a "Spanish tinge," a phrase used by Jelly Roll Morton to describe what he considered to be the necessary Latin American element

in the music. Leo Wright, the only reedman on the recording, solos on alto with intense swing in the Prelude, Panamericana, and Toccata sections and adds his lovely flute voice to the Blues and Africana sections, which combine Latin American rhythms

with a jazz blues feeling. In 1962, Wright left Gillespie and recorded with his own group a piece by Schifrin entitled "Dionysos," which the Argentinian composer had created for and dedicated to the Texan, thus bringing together the music of South America and the American Southwest. Prior to going off on his own in 1962, Wright had already helped to bridge the music worlds of the two Americas, touring there with the Gillespie Quintet. From this experience he necessarily came to share with Kenny Dorham an affinity for Brazilian music, later recording his

own version of "A Felicidade," a bossa nova by Brazilian composer Antonio Carlos Jobim, from the film *Black Orpheus*.⁴⁴

In *Texan Jazz*, I discuss Wright's work with his fellow Texan, trumpeter Richard Williams of Galveston, whose first and only album under his own name, *New Horn in Town*, was recorded in November, 1960. Wright in turn enlisted Williams for the altoist's own first album, his 1960 *Blues Shout*.⁴⁵ The title tune of the album, by Gigi Gryce, shows most clearly Wright's blues roots, as well as what Leonard Feather calls his manner of cutting "through with knife-like clarity, his dynamics more flexible, more a part of his personality than on flute."⁴⁶ Wright's version of Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia" has him playing the accompaniment figure to Williams's theme statement in a rhythmic, phrasal manner that is unlike any other rendition recorded with Gillespie. "The Wind," a beautiful tune by pianist Russ Freeman, reveals Wright's ability to slip convincingly from a very touching ballad mood to bluesy, twisting, bop-like lines. The final tune on this first album, a Wright original entitled "Two Moods," likewise shows the altoist moving from something of a ballad feeling to a boppish jump style. Capable of a



Courtesy of: Candid Records

wide range of expression, on both flute and alto, Wright was certainly a master of the bebop genre, yet he was equally effective on a lush, more mainstream touchstone like "Body and Soul," which was given its classic reading by Coleman Hawkins in 1939. Wright's rendition of "Body and Soul," accompanied by another fellow Texan, pianist Red Garland, was recorded in San Francisco in 1978, and is a tour de force performance that exhibits the altoist's total control of his instrument and his amazing musical imagination.⁴⁷

Leo Wright emigrated to Europe in 1963, and apparently his wife Sigrid, with whom he performed duets and from whose name he derived the title for his composition "Sigi," was German or Scandinavian.⁴⁸ Living first in Berlin and later in Vienna, Wright became a member of the Radio Free Berlin Studio Band, performed at festivals in Germany, Switzerland, and Finland, and appeared with jazzmen like Lee Konitz in Paris, continuing in all of these venues to spread the good word of Bebop and his own native Texas blues. Like Kenny Dorham, Leo Wright played a significant role in the creation of jazz during the late bebop period, although both were overshadowed at the time by the startling arrival of their fellow Texan, Ornette Coleman, and his avant-garde Free Jazz. Both Dorham and Wright have been described as quiet-mannered, cooperative men, even as their jazz comes across as urgent, dynamic, assertive. Both musicians also shared a sense, as Wright put it, that "jazz is the greatest medium for bringing people together—here, and all over the world."⁴⁹

To what degree their Texas upbringing determined either their admirable personal qualities or their impressive and treasurable music making may remain an open question, but what seems important to bear in mind is that from their early years in Texas, they went on to participate in the creation of a world-renowned art that continues to be valued beyond the borders of the state. Hopefully, the contributions of Kenny Dorham and Leo Wright (and their fellow Texans) to jazz history will become more fully appreciated now and in the future, and not just as they already are abroad, but right here in their own "stomping grounds." ■

Notes

- 1 Edgar Allan Poe, "Some Words With a Mummy," *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Modern Library, 1938), p. 543. Coincidentally, in writing about the effect of jazz according to "an elite predatory audience of white hunters," i.e., white writers on black jazz, David Meltzer, in his *Reading Jazz* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1993), has employed a similar metaphor: "The slave music bags its hunters, turns them into pale-skinned savages in wild spasms juiced by galvanic bolts of electricity à la Frankenstein; the victim is hurled back into a primal state of being and, as such, repudiates the progress dynamo for the tom-tom of regress . . ." (p. 22).
- 2 Mark Gardner, insert notes, *The Kenny Dorham Memorial Album* (Xanadu Records, XCD 1235, 1975, 1995). According to Gardner's notes, Dorham's statement about his youthful ambition was taken from his *Fragments of An Autobiography*, but where this had been published was not revealed. Only later, thanks to another CD entitled *Kenny Dorham: Blues in Bebop* (Savoy, SVY-17028, 1998), did I find that this autobiographical work was published in the *Down Beat Music Yearbook* for 1970, although to date I still have been unable to see this volume.
- 3 See Sara R. Massey's Preface to *Black Cowboys in Texas* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2000), where she writes that it is "plausible that the total number of African-American cowboys herding cattle up the trail 1866-95 was 8,700, or twenty-five percent" of all the cowboys involved, white, Mexican, and African American (p. xv).
- 4 It may be that Dorham had been inspired by an earlier version of "I'm an Old Cowhand" by his fellow jazzman Sonny Rollins, who recorded the Mercer tune for his 1957 album entitled *Way Out West* (Contemporary, OJCCD-337-2, 1988). Dorham appears with Rollins on a 1954 recording entitled *Moving Out* (Prestige Records, OJCCD-058-2, 1987), and the trumpeter's playing on this occasion is truly superb.
- 5 Sinclair Traill, "Boppin' in Paris," *Jazz Journal* 26, no. 1 (1973): 16. Traill remarks of Kenny Dorham that he "was one of the best bop trumpeters, a musician who had an immediately identifiable sound and more than the average quota of original ideas. His brisk 'running' style was a good foil for Parker's lucidity, and it has always seemed true that Dorham was one of Bird's better trumpet partners."
- 6 *Bird in Paris* (Yard Records, CP3, n.d.).
- 7 *Russian Jazz: New Identity*, comp. and ed. by Leo Feigin (London: Quartet Books Limited, 1985), p. 2.
- 8 Kenny Dorham Quintet, *Scandia Skies* (SteepleChase, SCCD 36011, 1993).
- 9 *Kenny Dorham: New York 1953-1956 & Oslo 1960* (Landscape, LS2-918, 1992). The Oslo session was recorded in January at the Metropole Jazz Club.
- 10 *Miles Ahead: Miles Davis + 19, Orchestra Under the Direction of Gil Evans* (Columbia, CL 1041, 1957).
- 11 "Osmosis" is on *Kenny Dorham Quintet* (Debut Records, DLP-9, 1953; reissued as OJCCD-113-2, 1993).
- 12 "Minor's Holiday" and "Basheer's Dream" are on *Kenny Dorham: Afro-Cuban* (Blue Note, BLP 1535 and 5065; reissued as CDP 7 46815-2, 1987); "The Theme" is on *The Jazz Messengers at the Café Bohemia, Vol. 1* (Blue Note, BLP 1507, 1955; reissued as CDP 7 46521 2, 1987); "Man of Moods" is on *Kenny Dorham: Blues in Bebop* (originally on Signal LP 1203, 1956; reissued by Savoy as SVY-17028, 1998); two takes of "Mexico City" are included on *Kenny Dorham: 'Round About Midnight at the Café Bohemia* (Blue Note, BLP 1524, 1956; reissued as CDP 7243 8 333576 2 8, 1995); and "Why Not?" is on *Kenny Dorham: West 42nd Street* (Black Lion, BLP 60119, 1961; reissued as BLCD 760119, 1989).
- 13 See *Swingin' the Classics* (Viper's Nest Records, CD-VN-1010, 1996).
- 14 See Dizzy Gillespie's autobiography, *To Be or Not . . . to Bop*, produced with the aid of Al Fraser (New York: Doubleday, 1979; rpt. Da Capo Press, 1985), p. 415.
- 15 James Lincoln Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 233.
- 16 This lecture was delivered by Dr. Kelley on December 4, 1997, at the University of Texas at Austin, as part of The Texas Union Distinguished Speakers Series.
- 17 *Thelonious Monk: Genius of Modern Music, Vol. 2* (Blue Note, BST-81511, n.d.).

- 18 See Thomas Owens, *Bebop: The Music and the Players* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 34-35.
- 19 One version of "Swedish Schnapps," from August 8, 1951, is included on *Bird's Best Bop on Verve* (Polygram Records, 314 527 452-2, 1995).
- 20 Duke Ellington, "Serenade to Sweden," included in *The Ellington Era, 1927-1940, Volume Two* (Columbia, C3L39, n.d.); Stan Getz, "Dear Old Stockholm," on *Miles Davis, 'Round About Midnight* (Columbia, CJ 40610, 1956). Davis first recorded "Dear Old Stockholm" in 1952 with his All-Stars.
- 21 A different type of personal connection with Norway is found in Dorham's association with Randi Hultin, a jazz buff in Oslo whose account of her relationship with and hospitality toward jazz musicians is recorded in her book, *Born Under the Sign of Jazz: Public Faces / Private Moments*, trans. Tim Challman (London: Sanctuary Publishing Limited, 1998). Hultin's book includes a CD with Dorham playing piano and singing in her home in 1964. Hultin taped Dorham performing his song entitled "Fair Weather," which was used in the 1986 movie, *'Round Midnight*, starring tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon. Hultin's 1964 taping was the only time that Dorham performed his song, for which he composed the music and wrote the lyrics. Hultin also mentions Leo Wright as having visited her home and as having been amazed by her young daughter who did improvised dancing to jazz. See pp. 227-228 for Dorham and p. 132 for Wright.
- 22 Max Harrison, et al., *Modern Jazz: The Essential Records* (London: Aquarius Books, 1975), p. 18.
- 23 Chris Sheridan, insert notes to *Kenny Dorham: Short Story* (SteepleChase, SCCD 36010, 1993).
- 24 "Short Story" is included on *Kenny Dorham: New York 1953-1956 & Oslo 1960* and on *Kenny Dorham: Short Story*.
- 25 Kenny Dorham, *Hot Stuff From Brazil* (West Wind, 2015, 1988).
- 26 Michael Cuscuna, insert note to *Kenny Dorham: Una más* (Blue Note, BLP 4127, 1963; reissued as CDP 0777 7 46515 2 0, 1995).
- 27 Heitor Villa-Lobos's "Prelude" (recorded in November 1961) is included on *Kenny Dorham: Matador/Inta Somethin'* (Blue Note, CDP 7 844602 2, 1991); "Manha de Carnaval" (recorded on December 19, 1963) is included on *Kenny Dorham: Short Story*. Of a performance of "Manha de Carnaval," Dorham noted in an article that he wrote on the Longhorn Jazz Festival, held in Austin on April 28-30, 1967, at which he also played his trumpet, that it was "frolicking and basking in the Brazilian-Texas sun. I have a special affection for this music-seems to be the music of many languages-internationale" ("With K.D. in Texas," *Down Beat*, June 15, 1967, p. 29).
- 28 "Una más" (first recorded in November 1961) is included on *Kenny Dorham: Matador/Inta Somethin'* and (as recorded on April 1, 1963) on *Kenny Dorham: Una más*; "Blue Bossa," as well as Dorham's "La Mesha" (recorded on June 3, 1963), are included on *Joe Henderson: Page One* (Blue Note, 84140, 1963; reissued as 7243 4 98795 2 2, 1999); "São Paulo" is included on *Kenny Dorham: Una más*; "Afrodisia" is on *Kenny Dorham: Afro-Cuban*; and "Pedro's Time" (recorded on September 9, 1963) is on *Joe Henderson: Our Thing* (Blue Note, BLP 4152, 1963; reissued as 84152, 2000).
- 29 Gunther Schuller, *The Swing Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 562.
- 30 Quoted in insert notes to *The Kenny Dorham Memorial Album*.
- 31 "Monaco" is on *Kenny Dorham: 'Round About Midnight at the Café Bohemia*; "Bombay" (recorded on August 23, 1946) is on *Opus de Bop* (Savoy MG 12114, 1991) and *Kenny Dorham: Blues in Bebop*, and "Tahitian Suite" (recorded on April 4, 1956) is on *Kenny Dorham and The Jazz Prophets, Vol. 1* (Chessmates, GRD-820, n.d.). This last album is one of Dorham's very finest recordings, with his solo work on his own tune, "The Prophet," a marvelous piece of improvisation and his "pecking" with tenorist J.R. Monterose a thrilling interchange between these two highly complementary hornmen.
- 32 Although Boots and His Buddies recorded during the 1930s, Mel Wright was not in the band at the time of the group's recording sessions. Two CDs by the Clifford "Boots" Douglas band are now available: *Boots and His Buddies 1935-1937* (Classics, 723, 1993); *Boots and His Buddies 1937-1938* (Classics, 738, 1993). Leo Wright recalled that his father taught him "a lot-two things he used to say I'll never forget.' Those things were 'learn your horn' and 'don't forget what came before. . . . And believe it or not, one of the first altos I became conscious of was Jimmy Dorsey-my father used to play his records'" (quoted by Dan Morgenstern, "Introducing Leo Wright," *Metronome* 78, no. 1 [1961]: 26).
- 33 Buddy Tate can be heard soloing on "Super Chief" from 1940 (included on *Count Basie and His Orchestra 1937-1943: Jumpin' at the Woodside* [Jazz Roots, CD 56015, 1991]) and on "Seventh Avenue Express" from 1947 (included on *Basie's Basement* [RCA Camden Records, CAL-497, 1959]).
- 34 See *The Complete Blue Note Forties Recordings of Ike Quebec and John Hardee* (Mosaic Records, MR4-107, 1984).
- 35 So far as I am aware, Dorham and Wright never recorded together, even though Dorham did record with most of the major and minor saxophonists of postwar jazz, among them Coleman Hawkins, Charlie Parker, Sonny Stitt, Sahib Shihab, Musa Kaleem, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Hank Mobley, Harold Land, Lucky Thompson, James Moody, Cannonball Adderley, J.R. Monterose, Joe Henderson, Jackie McLean, Eric Dolphy, Jimmy Heath, Ernie Henry, Ernie Thompson, George Coleman, Cecil Payne, Junior Cook, Charles Davis, Oliver Nelson, Zoot Sims, Al Cohn, Frank Haynes, Rocky Boyd, and Joe Alexander. Dorham appears in a photograph on stage with Ornette Coleman during the November 1960 Newport Rebels concert in New York City, organized by the Jazz Artists Guild in protest of the regular Newport Jazz Festival of the same year. But so far as I know, Kenny and Ornette never recorded together. Dorham does appear on piano on a recording from the Newport Rebels concert but not with Coleman (*Newport Rebels* [Candid, CCD79022, 1991]).
- 36 Chris Sheridan, insert notes to *Dizzy Gillespie Quintet: Copenhagen Concert* (SteepleChase, SCCD 36024, 1992).
- 37 *Four Jazz Legends: Live at Newport 1960* (Omega, OCD 3025, 1994); *The Dizzy Gillespie Big Band: Carnegie Hall Concert* (Verve, V6-8423, 1961; reissued as part of Dizzy Gillespie and His Orchestra, *Gillespiana* [Verve, MGV83914] by Polygram Records [314 519 809-2, 1993]).
- 38 Gillespie is quoted as having said, "I know the blues, but Hot Lips Page is a blues man. When he plays trumpet, he plays it like a blues player would play. My music is not that deep-not as deep as his-not as deep as Hot Lips Page or Charlie Parker, because Yard knew the blues" (*To Be or Not to . . . Bop*, p. 310).
- 39 Quoted by Mark Gardner, insert notes to *An Electrifying Evening With the Dizzy Gillespie Quintet* (Verve, V6-8401, 1961; reissued by Polygram Records, 314 557 544-2, 1999).
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Duke Ellington, quoted by Stanley Dance, album notes to *The Ellington Era 1927-1940, Volume One* (Columbia, C3L27, 1963).
- 42 For a discussion of jazz from this period, see David H. Rosenthal, *Hard Bop: Jazz & Black Music 1955-1965* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- 43 Dizzy Gillespie and His Orchestra, *Gillespiana*. In the original liner notes to the album, Gunther Schuller refers to the work as "one of the few successful large-scale attempts to blend authentic South American rhythms and sonorities with those of jazz" and as being "in the eighteenth century 'Suite' form . . . namely the Concerto grosso format, as exemplified in this instance by a quintet featured within a large accompanimental brass and percussion group."
- 44 Both "Dionysos" and "A Felicidade" are included on Leo Wright's *Suddenly the Blues* (Koch Jazz, KOC CD-8544, 2000; originally Atlantic, 1393, 1962). An additional side on this album that has ties with another culture is entitled "Tali," a piece composed by Tom McIntosh, based on the name of his Iranian friend, which means "dawn" in Persian. In Kenny Dorham's article in *Down Beat* for June 15, 1967 (cited in footnote 27 above), he speaks of performing "A Felicidade" and also refers to Art Blakey as his favorite drummer because, in Dorham's own Spanish, Blakey exhibits "*Fuerte y mucho fuego*" (pp. 26 and 28).
- 45 Leo Wright, *Blues Shout* (Atlantic, 1358, 1960; reissued on Hank Crawford, *The Soul Clinic / Leo Wright, Blues Shout* [Collectables, COL-CD-6281, 1999]).
- 46 Leonard Feather, liner notes to the 1960 Atlantic album, *Blues Shout*, reproduced in the Collectables reissue.
- 47 Red Garland, *I Left My Heart . . .* (Muse, 5311, 1978; reissued by 32 Jazz, 32107, 1999).
- 48 See insert notes by Leonard Feather to *Blues Shout*.
- 49 Quoted by Morgenstern, "Introducing Leo Wright."