



Billy Lester - From Scratch

Musicians:

Billy Lester - Piano

Rufus Reid - Bass

Matt Wilson - Drums

Most musicians I've met, myself included, have spent their time searching for beauty in music. We strive day after day to create something beautiful and unique. Billy Lester presents a counter-thesis. What if one is completely unconcerned with beauty and holds only *truth* as one's musical compass?

The "typical" form for a jazz standard is a statement of the melody or "theme" and then a solo or series of solos (melodic improvisations over the harmonic parameters of the piece), then a return to the original melody before coming to some sort of arranged or spontaneous ending. Often on a "standards" record, the band will play each song two times and then we'll decide later which one we like better. With this session, featuring the legendary all-star rhythm section of Rufus Reid and Matt Wilson, Billy would play just the barest outlines of the melody to start and then take off in whatever direction moved him at that moment. On the second time through the tune, however, he'd count in the band and then play something completely tangential to the melody. After a couple of hours of this, I pulled Billy aside to talk:

— "Billy, on the second take, you're not playing the melody at all, just going straight into solos.

Long pause

— "But I played the melody on the first take."

Billy's approach is one of complete improvisation. It's not enough to play something original, you have to play something entirely new to the world. Every time. Even to play the melody a second time and pretend he had not just played it 10 minutes before, was a bridge too far for Billy.

Billy studied with the great pianist and educator Sal Mosca for 16 years. These were intense lessons devoted largely to ear training exercises, transcriptions, and endless harmonic configurations. At the age of 32, Billy found himself in a crisis of identity. After

delving so deeply for so many of his formative years into the techniques of Sal (and Lennie Tristano, Sal's mentor), Billy had no idea what his own musical identity was. One morning, Billy sat down at the piano, closed his eyes and focused on his own emotional state. He found, if he concentrated long enough, that the feelings he had in that moment had their own sound. He reached out one hand and found that note on the piano. This experience, of playing one "true" note, flooded him with gratitude. Billy says that that moment, in his early thirties, is the moment he became an artist.

Every day, over the next 40 years, Billy would go through this process of finding "his" interior sound—sometimes sitting in silence and waiting for long periods of time before playing that first note. As the first note leads to another, he'd occasionally find himself "hearing" something in his head that his hands couldn't articulate. He'd then stop, write down the phrase he was hearing in his mind and then play it in all twelve keys. Gradually over the decades his studio filled with notebooks of ideas.

There's a radical integrity to Billy's music. He's interested in playing exactly what he feels in the moment and nothing else. The beauty of his music (and I find a veritable wellspring of beauty in his playing) comes not from the *pursuit* of beauty but from the inherent artistry of a moment in time expressed completely. While certainly many master improvisers are capable of extraordinary feats of improvisation—building castles of sound from the barest of inputs—Billy apparently won't even bend his concept to adhere to basic narrative conceits. Billy's creations don't need to escalate to some pinnacle of expression. They just are.

- Elan Mehler