

Lawrence Douglas "Butch" Morris Eulogy

By Don Heffington

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I first played with Butch Morris back in 1965.

There was a radio station in LA back then called KBCA. It was a great station and it was pretty much the only station that played jazz at the time in LA.

One day they had a public service announcement saying that there were gonna be some music workshops ... jazz workshops starting up at a community center down in Watts. I lived on the other side of town – the east side of Los Angeles – but I wanted to go down and check this out. So I started going down there every Saturday and sitting in with different people and somewhere along the line I met Butch ... I met Sam Johnson, and Clarence and Butch. They were all playing together and needed a drummer and they asked me to join the band. It was Sam's band but some how Butch ended up taking over the reins after awhile (imagine that).

Now one thing about Butch Morris back then was that he wasn't "Butch" Morris. He was DOUG Morris or more specifically – and what he preferred – was Lawrence Douglas Morris. Butch was perhaps too casual a name to reflect his more lofty aspirations. I mean, his family called him Butch – his mother called him Butch and Wilbur ... but Butch wasn't really his thing. We all called him Doug.

So anyway Butch Morris ... Doug Morris ... we had a band with Sam and Clarence and Andre which became the Doug Morris Quintet. We'd practice over at Sam's place or Butch's. We'd play a lot of Miles ... Butch was way into Miles back then ... some standards. I don't know what all.

A lot of people are surprised when they see that he was playing trumpet instead of cornet back then. But it was trumpet all the way, until the 70's. I mean who starts out on cornet anyway? (Buddy Bolden maybe).

Butch was always very serious about his music ... very thoughtful. There's a picture of us somewhere ... I don't know if it's up or not, but Sam's soloing and Doug's just holding his horn LISTENING. It might be my favorite shot of him in a way. That's how I remember him. His playing was thoughtful, too. Nice tone. Never in a rush.

They were all a few years older than me ... all the guys in the band ... I was 14 or so ... the other guys were about 17, 18, and that's a pretty big spread at that age. At that age that's a BIG spread ... so I really looked up to these guys and Butch ... he was like a big brother to me.

He had a funny way of dressing, you know, he always did. He could put different things together and make it work. I remember he had this plaid Madras sport coat that I thought was so cool. I tried to get one too but ... you know ... it made me look like Pinky Lee or something ... but Butch could look so cool in something like that. Or the hats. He could put on a Cossack hat and it was happening. Shave his head ... whatever. He always looked sharp.

But unfortunately, after a year or two the guys started getting drafted. I was young so I didn't have to worry about it ... but the guys started gettin' drafted. Sam went in the service, Butch went in the service and a little later Clarence went in the service. And you know, I'm sure it was rough. I'd exchange letters with Doug ... and when he'd get out on leave we'd get together and play.

I sent him 3 records when he was at Fort Ord. I sent him Albert Ayler's "Bells" which had just come out in '66, Ornette's "The Empty Foxhole" and "Unit Structures" by Cecil Taylor. I sent him those three records. Now, I don't know how he was gonna put on an Albert Ayler record around all these hillbillies in the barracks ... I don't know what I was thinking, but he must of listened to 'em somehow. He told me that there were three records he took overseas ... and "Bells" was one of 'em – the Ayler record.

And, uh ... THAT WAS IT. Butch faded out of my life at that point. I think we got a couple of letters from

Viet Nam but that was it. I didn't know WHAT happened. I used to wonder all the time. My Mother, you know, she loved Butch. She still does. We talked about it all the time.

So, fast-forward to about 2005. I was a little slow on the draw with the Internet but I had been trying to look him up for awhile. I used to put in "Doug Morris trumpet" ... "DOUGLAS Morris Trumpet." It never would have occurred to me to type in "Butch Morris." And you know, nothing came up ... there was nothing there. And finally one day I just put in "Douglas Morris MUSIC" or something like that ... no trumpet – and that did it. Something came up. "LAWRENCE DOUGLAS "BUTCH" MORRIS" ... Black February maybe and I went from there to different links. There was all kinds of stuff on him so I flipped, man ... I called him right away. One of these websites had his phone number and I called him right up. I said, "Doug!" and he said, "YES?" Like with a question mark ... sort of like he wasn't sure ... and I said, "Hey, it's Don Heffington, remember?" And he flipped out. He says, "Where you been, man? Don't think for a minute that I've forgotten any of it."

He says "Look, man, I'm gettin' in a cab ... there's a cab waitin' right here." He was goin' someplace, Istanbul or something, and he says, "What's your number, I'm gonna call you as soon as I get back. I'm back in a week." I said alright, man, I gave him the number. And he took off, but I guess just before he left he fired me off an email with a picture of him and Alice Coltrane. Butch bent over a B3 in a huddle with Alice Coltrane. I think he sent it just to blow my mind cause we were so into all that ...you know. Coltrane used to play after hours at the Kubuki and at the It Club ... we were so way into all of that back then.

So I started comin' out to New York to see him. He'd put me up at his place for a week or so at a time. He'd throw the doors open. And when he showed me what he was doin' I was amazed. I asked him, "How'd you get from 'Green Dolphin Street' to here?"

I asked him about the name, the "Butch" thing, and he said, "Man, I guess I just couldn't shake it. I finally just went with it." He considered it one of life's little jokes 'cause, like he said, "Butch is one thing I've never been."

And we'd go out on the street and EVERYBODY knew him. He was like the Mayor of Greenwich Village or something. Everybody – little kids, old men, they all wanted to talk to Butch.

So I played with him on a few things. I guess he either liked what I was doing or just liked having me around. So he told me to come out and play anytime. I did. I'd come out and play now and then.

I know he had had a rough time adjusting after Viet Nam. He didn't complain, but I know it was rough. They made him a medic for some reason ... out of the blue. Once he told me that he "just saw too many dead people." But he said it was good for him, too. It made him realize that if it's all over that fast, you better make the most of it. When I came out to see him last October he looked pretty good. We signed off in Thompkins Square, which is as good a place as any, I suppose.

I want to close with an excerpt from a letter regarding his health which he sent to Clarence Peace in response to an email of support ... which I think says a lot about Butch:

Thank you. Peace. (But) understand: I am cool with this! I have had a glorious life ... and met some wonderful people. Some are trying to "save me," but my question is from what? This is "my cycle" and I am cool with it. God has "always" been in my life ... but so have you. We cannot see eye-to-eye with everyone and there will "hopefully never" be a color blindness ... this is the beauty. I have attempted to show my love for this plain in my work ... It has been very difficult at times, but not impossible.

BIG KISS TO YOU AND MARY

That's Butch. I cannot express: How I feel about this guy. What an important roll he's played in my life. Or how much I'm gonna miss him.

I'll always love him.

– Don Heffington