

A Jazz Love Affair

Charles Lloyd pays homage to Billy Higgins at the SF Jazz Fest Spring Season

- by [Derk Richardson, special to SF Gate](#)

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Jazz can't abide cheap sentimentality, but it thrives on love.

For all its brainy complexity in harmony and rhythm, jazz is a deeply passionate music that does not flinch in the face of romance; it just demands a little bitter with its sweet, a sturdy spine in its tingle.

The music's history abounds with classic love stories -- between Billie Holiday and Lester Young (epitomized in their heartbreakingly wistful interaction on "Fine and Mellow" during the 1957 CBS TV special "The Sound of Jazz"), between Duke Ellington and his orchestra, between John Coltrane and his notion of the creator ("A Love Supreme") and, in our time, between [Charles Lloyd](#) and [Billy Higgins](#).

Less universally recognized than the others, this last relationship was the springboard for some of the most moving acoustic jazz during the turn of the millennium. Traces of that musical and spiritual bond still hover in the air nearly three years after drummer Higgins' death on May 3, 2001 -- in a new two-CD recording, *Which Way Is East*, and in Lloyd's S.F. Jazz Spring Season concert of the same name, subtitled "Homage to Billy Higgins," Sat., April 3, at the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco.

The Memphis-born Lloyd, best known for his tenor sax and flute playing but also accomplished on alto and such exotic reeds as the *taragato* and the Tibetan oboe, garnered a huge popular following in the late 1960s after his quartet, featuring Keith Jarrett on piano, brought down the house at the 1966 Monterey Jazz Festival and crossed over to rock audiences at venues like the Fillmore in San Francisco. Higgins, a Los Angeles native, preceded Ed Blackwell in the trailblazing Ornette Coleman Quartet and became one of the most recorded freelance jazz drummers in the '60s, '70s and '80s.

Although they had forged a deep, enduring friendship in Los Angeles in the late 1950s, it wasn't until 1998 that Lloyd and Higgins started collaborating in a substantial, high-profile manner. By then, Lloyd was a decade into the comeback from his semi-retirement of the '70s and '80s; he had recorded several [brilliant albums for ECM](#), starting with 1989's *Fish out of Water* and including *Notes from Big Sur*, *The Call*, *Canto* and *All My Relations*. Higgins, who had played on 700 or so albums, only a handful under his own name, had undergone a liver transplant and was experiencing recurring bouts of ill health, but his playing -- distinguished by a light polyrhythmic touch atop an understated but relentless momentum -- was still impeccable.

Higgins did a limited amount of touring and participated in only two formal studio sessions as a member of Lloyd's band. *Voice in the Night* (1998) featured guitarist John Abercrombie and bassist Dave Holland, and a repertoire that ranged from Lloyd's classic "Forest Flower" to Elvis Costello and Burt Bacharach's "God Give Me Strength." *The Water is Wide* (2000) found Lloyd, Higgins and Abercrombie joined by pianist Brad Mehldau and his trio's bassist, Larry Grenadier. After Higgins passed away, Lloyd issued more material from the latter date under the title *Hyperion with Higgins*.

The few times I was lucky enough to see Lloyd and Higgins play together in the drummer's final years, their personal chemistry was palpable. It was as if you could hear not only the notes and rhythms but also the actual intention -- a mighty, healing and purifying force that Buddhists call lovingkindness -- that was driving the music. There was a constant sparkle of affection in Lloyd's sad/wise eyes that seemed electrically connected to the radiance of [Higgins' legendary and irrepressible grin](#).

Which Way Is East, recorded in January 2001, finds Lloyd and Higgins alone together with a huge arsenal of instruments. Lloyd sings and plays piano and percussion in addition to his usual panoply of reeds, and Higgins sings the blues, picks up guitar, *guimbri* and Syrian "one string" and plays a variety of hand drums as well as the traps set. The intimacy that was integrated into the prior quartet and quintet contexts is completely unshielded here.

The two CDs are organized into eight suites of duo and solo tracks, with myriad instrumental combinations giving musical embodiment to such titles as "Being and Becoming," "A Wild and Holy Band," "Atman Alone Abides," "Perfume of the Desert" and "Supreme Love Dance." The likelihood that both men knew this was the last time they would play together shadows the music with authentic poignancy. But there's no room for sentimentality, because there's too much real work to be done, real appreciation to be expressed, real joy to be experienced.

At the surface level of sound, *Which Way Is East* is not always an easy listen. The high, harsh timbres of the Tibetan oboe, the unfamiliar woody tone of the Transylvanian clarinet-like taragato, and the outward-bound, post-Coltrane harmonies Lloyd sometimes negotiates on the saxophones all require occasional listening leaps of faith. But that's what got Lloyd and Higgins to this point of profound, intuitive communication in the first place, and it behooves any who loves -- or is simply curious about -- the essence of jazz to partake with the same spirit of surrender and grace.

Charles Lloyd performs "[Which Way Is East: Homage to Billy Higgins](#)" with drummer Eric Harland and special guests, including [Zakir Hussain](#), Saturday, April 3 at the Palace of Fine Arts, 3301 Lyon, S.F.; show time 8 pm; tickets \$22-\$42. (Lloyd and Hussain also perform Saturday, June 12 at the Raven Theater, 115 North St., Healdsburg, as part of the 2004 Healdsburg Jazz Festival. [Click here](#) for details.)

Other highlights of the S.F. Jazz Spring Season in the next few weeks include three phenomenal double bills:

"Generations of Innovation": A trio with saxophonist [Sam Rivers](#), bassist [Reggie Workman](#) and pianist [Jason Moran](#), and the [William Parker](#) Quartet (Parker on bass, Hamid Drake on drums, Rob Brown on alto sax and Lewis Barnes on trumpet); 8 pm, Friday, April 9, Herbst Theatre, S.F. (Sam Rivers also appears in "An Evening of Music and Conversation," Saturday, April 10 at [The Jazz House](#), 3192 Adeline St., Berkeley.)

"Solo Piano": A program that brings together legendary free-jazz pioneer [Paul Bley](#) and his former student, innovative orchestra leader [Satoko Fujii](#); 8 pm, Saturday, April 10, Herbst Theatre, S.F.

"Modern Classics": Two of the tightest and simultaneously wide-open units in acoustic jazz, saxophonist [Wayne Shorter](#)'s Quartet, with pianist Danilo Perez, bassist John Patitucci and drummer Brian Blade, and pianist [Brad Mehldau](#)'s Trio with bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Jorge Rossy; 8 pm, Saturday, April 17, Masonic Auditorium, S.F.

For show details, ticket information and the complete S.F. Jazz Spring Season schedule, call (415) 788-7353 or [click here](#).

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On his way to the Hear & Now, Oakland native Derk Richardson nearly finished his Ph.D. in history, wrote a guidebook to Thailand, jerked sodas at Ozzie's in Berkeley and taught scuba for underwater scientific research.

He has written about music since 1978 and is currently associate editor at [Acoustic Guitar](#) magazine and host of "The Hear & Now," a free-form music show (every Thursday, 10 pm-midnight) on [KPFA 94.1 FM](#).

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Tenor sax player Charles Lloyd pays tribute to drummer Billy Higgins at his S.F. Jazz Fest show "Which Way Is East: Homage to Billy Higgins" April 3 at the Palace of Fine Arts. Chronicle photo by John O'Hara



Chronicle / John O'Hara, 2001

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Charles Lloyd and Billy Higgins: "The Forest" & "Windy Mountain"

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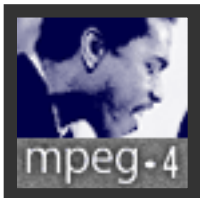
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Charles Lloyd and Billy Higgins: "Atman Alone Abides" & "Benares"

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Charles Lloyd: "Homage"

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Charles Lloyd: "Hyperion with Higgins"

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