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What Happened to Ronnie Free?

A young jazz phenomenon disappeared on the cusp of fame.

ON THE MORNING OF AUGUST 12, 1958, Ronnie Free, from Charleston, South Carolina, met the pianist and vocalist Mose Allison, from Tippo, Mississippi, at Allison’s apartment on 106th Street in New York City. Free was a dazzling young drummer in Allison’s trio, a band beginning to make its mark on the jazz scene. The two had received word that musicians were to congregate that morning in front of a brownstone on 126th Street in Harlem for a historic group portrait. The photograph was to be published in an upcoming Esquire magazine issue devoted to jazz. However, by the time Free and Allison arrived at the designated address, the photographer Art Kane had already snapped a picture known today as “Great Day in Harlem,” a remarkable and now-famous shot of fifty-seven assembled musicians. The photograph included such icons as Thelonious Monk, Count Basie, Dizzy...

Free and Allison's presence that day was documented, however. As they mingled on the sidewalk, Dizzy Gillespie took their picture alongside Lester Young, Mary Lou Williams, Charlie Rouse, and Oscar Pettiford. For Allison, who in the four decades since "Great Day" has had a recording career that's made him a legend, the obscure snapshot is a souvenir. For Free, who left New York eighteen months later never to return—and whose incendiary drum work is heard only on a few albums and in the memories of surviving musicians—the picture is a tangible reminder that he was once a rising star in the jazz world.

Today, Free is sixty-four years old and lives in Hot Springs, Virginia. He has been playing drums five nights a week for the past five years at The Homestead, a resort founded in 1766 around seven natural springs deep in the Allegheny Mountains near the West Virginia border.

The Homestead music program consists of waltzes and other tame dance numbers. It is a comfortable gig—Free and the other house musicians live in quarters provided by the resort—but it is a long way from the hot New York jazz scene of the late 1950s, where Free was sought after by many prime bandleaders. Yet, Free seems to be content. He has no regrets, no bitterness. He rarely mentions his former reputation, and many of his current friends are unaware that Free's drumming is credited with driving some legendary jam sessions in after-hours New York jazz lofts. They don't even know he used to play in New York at all. Free doesn't own copies of the records on which he played. In his room, the only clue to his jazz past is a small magazine picture of Miles Davis taped to his wall. Free seems genuinely surprised and embarrassed when told of the fond memories other musicians have of his playing forty years ago. He says he is surprised they remember his name at all.

"Ronnie had a certain raw, instinc-
tive, profound musicianship that was overwhelming and inspiring," says Dave Frishberg, a pianist and composer who frequently played with Free in loft jam sessions from 1958 to 1960. "There was one night in particular when we played deep into the night. Ronnie and I achieved this remarkable rapport for several hours. It was one of the most nourishing musical experiences of my life. I went home feeling good about being a musician, glad to be playing with big leaguers."

"I was thrilled to have Ronnie working with me in my trio at The Hickory House in 1959," says the pianist Marian McPartland. "He was considered the great young hope among drummers on the scene. A really wonderful player. He had a different style, more swinging, very subtle. Free is a good name for him. He didn't play bombastic solos like many drummers did. Ronnie was one of the best I ever saw. Then one night he just disappeared. We had a gig, and he didn't show up. Nobody saw him after that. Thirty or thirty-five years later, in the early 1990s, I was walking down the street in Columbia, South Carolina, and I couldn't believe my eyes, but Ronnie was walking right toward me, looking exactly the same. My first words to him were, 'What happened to you that night you didn't show up for the gig?'"

**RONALD GUY FREE WAS BORN ON**

January 15, 1936, in Charleston, South Carolina. His mother, Daisy, was a bartender, and his father, Herbie, was a garbage collector for the city. His sister, Joan, was born two years earlier. The family lived at 38 Spring Street in one of Charleston's poorest neighborhoods on the border between the black and white sections of town. Herbie Free was by all accounts a violent alcoholic. Daisy was a sweet, earnest woman, but no match for her husband's drunk tirades. Herbie never became the musician he wanted to be, so when Ronnie expressed an interest in drums at age six, Herbie pressured him to pursue it.

"Ronnie's father was cruel, awful to him," said the late Ms. Dale Coleman, a former writer, schoolteacher and a close friend of Free's. "He forced Ron to practice until his fingers bled. He was proud of Ron's ability, but he always told Ron he was no good. The only expressions he ever made were violent ones. You name it, he did it to Ron—screamed at him, kicked him, beat him, slapped him."

"Ironically, I owe much of my practice skills to my old man," says Free, whose tireless work habits became a trademark on the New York scene. "I developed my ability as a result of my father forcing me to practice as a kid. Plus, I realized if I became good enough, the drums were my ticket out of town. I enjoyed playing, though. The sound of drums always has seemed to fill me with courage, inspiration, and the feeling that anything was possible. Drums have a history of use in warfare as a means of providing troops with courage. It works that way for me, too."

By age eight Ronnie was taking drum lessons from a local teacher, Patrick Leonard. "He practiced religiously," said the late Leonard. "I recall passing his house on Spring Street when he was a little boy and seeing him out there on the front steps practicing with his drumsticks." Coleman and other childhood friends said that Free would turn a chair or milk crate bottom-up and knock his sticks on them for hours. At twelve, Free began sneaking into black bars and clubs and playing with jazz and blues bands.

With the blessing of his parents, Free quit school at age sixteen in 1952 to go on the road with Tommy Weeks and His Merry Madcaps, a music and comedy trio. "I waved goodbye to my parents at the bus station in Charleston, off to seek my fame and fortune," says Free. "The Madcaps were a terrible trio with funny hats and bad jokes and all that, but it allowed me to see much of the country. When we got to Minneapolis, I left for a better-paying job playing the girlie show with Royal American Shows, a touring carnival out of Tampa, Florida. It was an amazing experience, traveling on the road as a teenager with all the freaks and carneys."

By 1955 Free was being influenced by Max Roach's drum work on records with the trumpeter Clifford Brown and the saxophonist Sonny Rollins. He realized he had to move to New York City to play
with musicians of that caliber. He moved in with a family friend on Staten Island and found jobs playing for lounge singers and comedians until he obtained his Local 802 musicians' union card. His first official gig in New York was in the pit band for an off-Broadway show called *The Shoestring Review*. The eminent bassist Oscar Pettiford attended one of the shows and was taken by Free's solos. "Oscar—O.P.—called me a few nights later and had me play with him on a few record dates," says Free. "I started getting these incredible gigs overnight. But it all was happening too fast."

Early in his New York days, Free was introduced to heroin by a famous drummer who had a notorious drug habit. "At first, I think Ron took drugs because he just wanted to be accepted. He was so young," said Coleman. "Then he got hooked and before he knew it, he was in over his head."

At age twenty, Free's career and lifestyle took off. "One night I met O.P. at Junior's Bar, and Woody Herman was there. O.P. kept telling Woody how good I was. The three of us left the bar and went to O.P.'s apartment, where he and I jammed while Woody listened. A few days later Woody's manager called me and offered me the drum chair in his band, a band I'd been listening to with my parents as a kid. Some of my heroes were in that band. It was unbelievable! But I wasn't ready emotionally. I was scared, I lost all my confidence. I had a recurring nightmare where I was playing drums with sticks the size of baseball bats. I couldn't keep up with the band's tempo—the sticks were so heavy—and Woody would be standing in front yelling at me to play louder. It was awful. I was so paralyzed by fear, I couldn't hear the music at the rehearsals or gigs. I couldn't get it together. If you are scared, you can't hear the music."

Free had lasted only a few weeks in 1956 with Woody Herman's band. Herman fired him after a disastrous gig in Cleveland. Herbie and Daisy Free had driven to Cleveland to see Ronnie play that night. Free was devastated. "I was in tears backstage. Vibraphonist Vic..."
Feldman, a real gentle soul, tried to console me," says Free. "He told me it wasn't the end of the world. But all I could think of was that it was over."

Free returned to New York and continued to land good jobs, but his drug use mushroomed, and his reputation as a junkie hindered his career. He kicked his heroin habit by taking cough syrup with codeine to take the edge off. But he began consuming larger quantities of alcohol, marijuana, and especially amphetamines. "I was a neurotic, screwed-up mess," says Free. "If I found a pill on the street, I'd pop it in my mouth not even knowing what it was. At one point I was taking about a hundred amphetamines a day."

But Free never stopped playing. In fact, he played more. He found homes at two lofts where late-night jam sessions took place—one on 34th Street, where the trumpeter Ralph Hughes lived, and another a few blocks away on Sixth Avenue, where the painter David X. Young, the musician Hall Overton, and the legendary photographer W. Eugene Smith all resided. In 1959 he set up his drums in the Sixth Avenue loft and slept on Smith's recliner for more than a year. Free was at home in the casual atmosphere of the lofts, and it was there that he did his greatest work, often in the company of some of the biggest names in jazz (Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell, Zoot Sims, Gerry Mulligan, and others).

While giving a speech at the Rochester Institute of Architecture in 1965, Smith remarked that he had been inspired by Free's work habits and his determination to improve himself. Many musicians echo Smith. "[Free] was one of the absolutely astonishing musicians that I saw playing in there," says the bassist Steve Swallow. "He drove many of those sessions to higher and higher levels."

"Nobody was better than Ronnie," says Clyde Cox. "He was original. The thing is, he didn't show off. He wasn't interested in technique for its own sake. He played for the sake of the rest of the band, which was in keeping with Ronnie's personality. He was a sweet, wonderful person. He had a terrific sense of humor, too. He and Sonny Dallas actually could have made a living as a two-man comedy act."

The bassist Sonny Dallas played with Free in several bands led by Lennie Tristano, Lee Konitz, and others. "We treated our comedy bits like music, improvising them," says Dallas. "We did these bits where Ronnie would say, 'I'm a bartender and you are a customer,' and we'd make up some hilarious bit about that. Or I'd say, 'I'm Hamlet and you are Claudius,' and we'd improvise something with these fake British accents. It was hysterical. We'd have a whole room rolling with laughter."

But Free was miserable. His drug addictions were crippling him. "This should have been the best time of my life, but I was such a neurotic mess," says Free. "I didn't know which end was up." Restless, Free took to the streets, roaming every corner of Manhattan, looking for something, though he was not sure what. His mix of tremendous creativity, poor self-esteem, and chemical dependencies reached a head. He knew he was in trouble. "The drugs just stopped having any effect," says Free. "They stopped working. I went through terrible depression as a result."

One night in 1959—the night Free failed to show up for his gig with Marjan McPartland—he was arrested for jaywalking and eventually was admitted by the police to Bellevue mental hospital when drugs were found in his possession. He joined a long list of jazz musicians—Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Charles Mingus—who had spent time there. "I went to visit Ronnie in Bellevue," says Dallas, "and he was doing these comic bits all the time. I told him, 'Ronnie, man, you need to stop doing these bits. There's a time and place for it. But, here, they think you are crazy.'"

"I was in the cuckoo's nest," says Free. "The turning point began one day when I saw a magazine in our ward which had a picture of Lena Horne on the cover. I had played in her band a year or so earlier, and she'd had to fire me because I'd been put in jail for heroin possession in Las Vegas when we were out there for a gig. When I saw her picture on the mag-
azine, my eyes teared up. I was overwhelmed. One of the attendants saw me crying and came over to help me. He said, ‘What’s wrong?’ I pointed to the picture of Lena and said, ‘That’s my old boss.’ He patted me on the back and said, ‘Yeah, right.’ He didn’t believe me.”

Free was eventually released from Bellevue into the custody of his parents. Shortly thereafter, he left New York and never went back. He received a call from a close friend who said her husband had abandoned her for another woman. “So I put on my white hat, got on my white horse, and rode down to Charleston to save the day. Next thing I knew, I was married, [had] two stepdaughters, and was working as a typist at the naval shipyard there. I had to have a friend ship my drums back to Charleston.”

**SINCE LEAVING NEW YORK FORTY years ago, Free has played serious music only periodically. His marriage ended in divorce after twelve years, but he remains friendly with his ex-wife. He drove a taxi in San Diego in the 1970s and once went more than ten years without playing music at all. (“It’s astonishing that he could just stop playing like that,” says Sonny Dallas. “I mean, we are talking about a phenomenal musician here.”) In the 1980s Mose Allison had a gig in San Diego and needed a drummer. “Ronnies hadn’t been playing and didn’t even own any drums,” says Allison. “We found him some drums, and he played the gig as beautifully as always. He hadn’t lost a thing. It was amazing. He still has that great, natural touch.”

Free moved back to Charleston in the late 1980s and took up two-man beach volleyball, training himself with the same practice habits he gave to his drum work, ultimately winning some tournaments. In 1991 Free put together a trio with two young Charleston musicians, the pianist Tommy Gill and the bassist Wayne Mitchum. For three years the group practiced hard and played as many gigs as they could, mostly at bars and restaurants. Gill and Mitchum speak reverently of Free as a musician and a person.

“I’ve never heard a drummer play the tempos he plays with the kind of control he has,” says Gill, who studied formally with the renowned pianist Fred Hersch among others at the New England Conservatory, and who now teaches music at the College of Charleston. “He can play explosive tempos and make it sound like a whisper. He taught us a great deal, how to subdivide the beats and make the tempo bend. He is a hero to us, a very unique human being.” On certain nights Free said the band could reach extraordinary levels, but it was difficult to maintain their intensity without a commensurate quality of gigs. “A few times we’d be really hot at a hotel bar or restaurant—really smoking—and the manager would come ask us to tone it down a bit,” says Free. In 1993 the trio broke up. Thankfully, Gill digitally recorded many of their sets. Free moved to Hot Springs to work at The Homestead a year later.

Today, Free’s serenity seems to belie his story. He spends much of his time reading and taking five-mile hikes with his yellow laborador, Nugget. He has turned his creative energy to the writing of a memoir.

“It’s been a wild ride,” says Free. “But I’m happy. I look around at the so-called normal people today and I realize I’m doing just fine. I have no regrets. I must say it does me some good to hear that some of the old cats remember me as being a pretty good musician, because I’ve gotten to the point where sometimes I’m not sure it wasn’t all in my head, a kind of legend in my own mind.”

“I occasionally look back and think what might have happened if I hadn’t left New York. I might have become a big name. But I also might have been dead. I’m lucky to be alive today. I jump rope and do yoga every day. I feel closer to death when I was twenty-four than I do today at sixty-four. I’m not sure if I’ll ever engage the music in such an intense way again. The band I had in Charleston a few years ago with Tommy Gill and Wayne Mitchum was, at times, as much fun as I ever had with music. That might have been my encore. I feel like I’ve gone through music and out the other side.”