

ERIC REED

Out Late & On Time

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COURTESY OF SMOKE JAZZ CLUB



Eric Scott Reed frequently posts short videos on Instagram at his piano working through the music of Thelonious Monk, Duke Ellington, Thomas Whitfield or his own compositions. He might share what's on his mind or give an impromptu music lesson, but always with sincerity, honesty, humility and the unassuming authority of a teacher. He's willing to be vulnerable and allow strangers to see him rehearsing, or thinking aloud about the state of the world, personal challenges and the things that bring him joy—whether it's the music of Cannonball Adderley, a sandwich his partner made for him, or the devastating impact of the Altadena fires.

What makes these posts particularly compelling is Reed's extraordinary gift for storytelling, which I recognized twenty years ago when we were asked to talk about Monk at a Jazz at Lincoln Center-sponsored private salon. His warmth, humor and brilliance held the room spellbound, as he combined anecdotes, technical insights and intricate musical examples to create a seamless, riveting story of Monk's music. Reed is known as a hard-swinging virtuoso, but his lyricism and sensitivity to the narrative qualities of melody set him apart. The songs he heard coming up in the Black church were *stories*—of redemption, repentance and revelation.

Out Late, his fifth album with Smoke Sessions, is a spectacular recording of his own compositions, which offers a glimpse into his personal journey to fully embrace his queerness. And to tell this story, he assembled a magnificent band of old friends: tenor saxophonist Eric Alexander, trumpeter Nicholas Payton, bassist Peter Washington and drummer Joe Farnsworth. It is not a "coming out" statement, since he'd proudly proclaimed his identity two years earlier with *Black, Brown, and Blue*. Rather, this record is joyful, contemplative music meant to narrate feelings and emotions we all can connect to without necessarily knowing Reed's story. But his is a story worth knowing.

"I always knew I was queer," he told me. "I had no language for it as a child and it wasn't discussed in our families, let alone in the church, other than being the path to hell." As a child growing up in '70s Philadelphia, he remembered playing with neighborhood boys who, like kids everywhere, would show affection toward each other and experiment. "It was perfectly innocent," he recalled. But when Reed's mother found her five-year-old son in the basement "experimenting" with another boy, she came down hard on him. "I now understand she was afraid I was going to hell. She was maybe even more afraid of what my father would do if he got to me first. I'm a preacher's son."

His father, Reverend David Reed, pastored a storefront Baptist church in Philadelphia and sang with a local gospel group, the Bay State Singers. Reed was only two when he began finding melodies on the piano, and by age five he was playing for his father's congregation. We'll never know what Reverend Reed thought about his youngest child's life choices (he passed in 2002), but Reed does wonder whether the fact that his dad had two lesbian sisters deepened his hostility toward homosexuality. Age five is also

the moment when he got bitten by the jazz bug. His maternal aunt and uncle bought him a small stack of records from the flea market; three in particular struck him: Ramsey Lewis' *Sound of Christmas*, Dave Brubeck's *Time Further Out* and especially Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers' *Live at the Café Bohemia* with pianist Horace Silver's soulful blend of bebop, blues and gospel, which changed everything for Reed—and his precocious playing. His love of the Jazz Messengers shows in his leader debut, a tribute to Blakey titled *A Soldier's Hymn*.

The family moved to Los Angeles in 1981 when Reed was trying to find his way as a musician and struggling with his sexuality. "I was heavily involved in church. I'm trying to figure out why I'm this way but had no one in the church to talk to. It would have been easier if I had a drug problem, or if I had killed someone—anything but being gay." Meanwhile, his star as a budding jazz pianist was rising. As a teenager he started working with Clara Bryant, Teddy Edwards, John Clayton and other stalwarts of the L.A. jazz scene. And as a student at the Community School of Performing Arts (now the Colburn School), he impressed a visiting Wynton Marsalis enough to hire him as Jazz at Lincoln Center's principal pianist.

Reed spent the next 15 years on top of the world, contributing to some of Marsalis' best recordings and launching his own career as a leader. Jazz critic Stanley Crouch was uncharacteristically effusive in his 2003 *JazzTimes* profile, "Eric Reed: Piano Prodigy," proclaiming him "a consummate jazz musician" who "can easily outplay all other piano players under 40." The music and accolades flowed, but it still meant living a closeted life. "The more you try to hide something," he confessed, "the more obvious it is, right?...One guy said, 'Reed, I knew you were gay because of the socks you wore!'"

During the 1990s and early 2000s, there were few queer role models in the jazz world. Vocalist Andy Bey and pianist Fred Hersch were out, both HIV positive. Reed thought about reaching out to them but changed his mind aware of the general panic around AIDS. "I knew it was going to be guilt by association. I felt awful for feeling that way. I was terrified." So he continued to play the game. He tolerated the jazz world's often toxic masculinity, and eventually got married to someone he cared about. But after about three years called it quits. By 2008, Reed began falling into a depression. "I had been divorced two years. My father had died. I'm about to hit 40. I had lost myself and my belief system. I didn't know who I was." He gained weight and struggled just to leave his house. "My 40s were awful. More than just a midlife crisis, it felt like the culmination of all of the repression, the suppression, the delusion, the phoniness, the lack of accountability, the lack of authenticity in my life. That's when I moved back to L.A."

Judging by his performances and recording output, Reed remained prodigious. One might not think he was suffering from an emotional crisis, especially with his completion of an astounding Monk trilogy. He also returned to his sacred roots, making some of his most

introspective albums, including a solo piano session titled *Reflections of a Grateful Heart* and *A Light in Darkness* with a quartet, while wrestling with his faith's homophobia and Christian support for Donald Trump in 2016. He continued to find solace in religion and served as minister of music for his church. And then he overheard the Sunday school teacher recounting the time when Christians "used to stone homosexuals." He had heard this before but was still taken aback. "I told myself to keep on praising the Lord, keep on praying, keep on fasting, because God's going to deliver me. It was awful. Everything that I believed about God and Christianity was crumbling." It was only after meeting others who questioned church doctrine and watching the documentary, *1946: The Mistranslation That Shifted Culture*, that he came to see the Christian attack on homosexuality as a modern phenomenon that had nothing to do with the original Bible.

In 2019, Reed moved to Knoxville to teach at the University of Tennessee. When the pandemic hit he turned his isolation into an opportunity. "I realized, nobody knows me out here. I could be myself." He worked out, lost about 60 pounds, and began meeting other men. He also came out to his mother in the summer of 2022. "She didn't handle it well, but she came around." Not long after, Reed met his life partner and moved back to L.A. last May to be together.

Reed's *Out Late* is really the culmination of his journey, and therefore a departure from some of his earlier work. "Instead of saying 'you play here, you play here, and so forth, I said, 'Listen here.' I had to not only trust the other musicians but myself. That was the hard part, bringing my whole self to the band, which I'd never done," he says. The title track is a clever, double-entendre—and difficult to play with its Ornette Coleman vibe. Says Reed, "It is not bebop in terms of the vocabulary, even if the rhythms suggest that. The key is challenging (A major) as well as the ascending chord progression, which follows the melodic structure, but there's no resolution. It just keeps looping. After I played it through the first time, it reminded me of my journey. We're in a new key. The loop I was in before was just this toxic mix of depression and sameness and no growth. But this new loop got better with each cycle. I love the painter, Vasily Kandinsky. He creates these overlapping, intertwined geometric circles and loops. Like life, there's variance, and we have to pursue change. But in order to get a balance, you've got to do some loops for a while."

For more info visit ericstreed.com. Eric Scott Reed's album release concert is at Smoke Jun. 25-29. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Wynton Marsalis Septet—*Citi Movement* (Griot New York) (Columbia, 1992)
- Eric Reed—*Pure Imagination* (Impulse!, 1997)
- Eric Reed—*Mercy and Grace* (Nagel Heyer, 2001)
- Wycliffe Gordon/Eric Reed—*We2* (WJ3, 2006)
- Eric Reed—*The Adventurous Monk* (Savant, 2013)
- Eric Scott Reed—*Out Late* (Smoke Sessions, 2024)