

Richard Grossman, 1937-1992

In an even semi-ideal universe, Richard Grossman, who died last week of cancer, would at some point in his 54 years have received at least a down payment on the recognition he deserved as a true monster of the jazz keyboard, a player and innovator on a par with Cecil Taylor, Borah Bergman and nobody — really — contemporary else. As with '50s piano giant Herbie Nichols, with whom he shared both the refusal to compromise his artistry and a Buddha-like professional forbearance, it would be easy to say he died unsung, but in his last decade Grossman accomplished much, even most, of what he set out musically to do.

In its final form, his music was totally spontaneous, totally unpremeditated — “free” — free from chord changes, from explicit, even implicit, time signatures, from easy reliance on riffs, licks and all such habitual et cetera — free as relatively few improvisors, even in Free Jazz per se, have actually played it. Coltrane, for instance, for all his courage and genius, rarely if ever played this quantitatively (or qualitatively) free. (I once asked drummer Alex Cline what sort of tempos had been used on a record he'd just made with Richard. “Tempos? No tempos.” “Yeah, but was it fast no-tempo or slow no-tempo?” He

just shrugged.) Perhaps most tellingly, Grossman's was never a bludgeoning free music — a run-away freight train, a continuously brandished weapon. With silence as nearly half the equation, and its unit occurrence so varied in context and duration as to have its own distinct temperature and flavor, tensions of a purely sonic



order would emerge, shift, be resolved and/or ignored in collusion with parallel *existential* tensions rising/falling to accentuate the music's intimacy with its own non-being.

Originally from Philadelphia, where he played with people like Lee Morgan, Odean Pope and Jimmy Garrison, Grossman moved to L.A. in 1978. He cut a solo LP in '82 and by mid-decade was collaborating with such fellow travelers as drummer and bassist Ken Filiano, with whom he formed an amazing, and amazingly egalitarian, trio, and reedmen Vinny Golia, Lynn Johnston and John Carter. A total of four albums, including *Trio in Real Time* (one of the great trio recordings, all time, and we're talking Cecil, Monk, Bud Powell, you name 'em), documents this fruitful period.

Such stuff may not be “for everyone” — player, listener — it doesn't have to be. But in an era when shameless parrots (the Marsalises), appealing if fastidious reshufflers (Geri Allen, Marcus Roberts) and former firebreathers playing it safe on the dotted line (Charlie Haden, David Murray) are the basic face of jazz to the world, jazz *needs* men/women willing to revisit the fount, to unwaveringly man the frontier — to be way the heck Out There — and Richard Grossman was out there. May his legacy enrich and nurture us all. (Richard Meltzer)