

## **In the Mood for Trombone ! :** Biography *Glissando Forte*

It's difficult to find the words to embrace the fertile career of **Glenn Ferris**, artistic chameleon, a major figure on the contemporary Jazz Scene, high priest of "**Trombone Attitude**", eclectic and bantered...

In the early 60s, success was far from assured. While the American Jazz Scene was blasting horns all over the country, a kid in Hollywood, born in 1950, secretly dreamed of grafting the trombone's *glissando* onto the growls and caresses of that magic trumpet + sax equation. To the uninitiated the instrument was an ungainly contraption offering no opportunity for grace or style. At a concert by the Los Angeles Philharmonic (managed by his uncle, an oboist), Glenn Ferris fell instantly in love with his future instrument of choice. He was eight years old. He started learning the Trombone and at the same time studied classical music. 1964 saw the turning point, when he heard the latest record from the saxophonist Eric Dolphy (*Last Date* - 1964). He moved straight into high gear, focussing on Jazz theory, improv and composition; his teacher, the massive and much missed trumpeter Don Ellis (who died in 1978, at the age of 44, and still famous today for his great original soundtrack for the film *French Connection* - 1971), accelerated his progress, making him Trombone Soloist of the Don Ellis Big Band in 1966 and later, his Assistant Director until 1970.

Inside this formation, a teeming patchwork of ideas, Glenn Ferris was a meticulous student, but kept his eyes wide open to the rest of the world. He was only sixteen and already developing an insatiable musical appetite. But this full-on enthusiasm did not stop him from recording four albums with Don Ellis: *Autumn - 1968*; *The New Don Ellis Band goes Underground - 1969*; *Live at Fillmore - 1970* and *Connection - 1972*.

At the same time, his interest in cinema inspired a curiosity about a Europe full of musical and aesthetic possibilities (first encountered during his international tour with Don Ellis, in 1968 at the Juan-Les-Pins Festival), building into a major obsession to become a Jazzman in Europe, with France as the definite location of preference - a romantic ideal *à la Truffaut*, which did not prevent him from getting into other sounds, especially rock music. Hearing about his passion for the subject, George Duke, pianist with the Don Ellis Big Band, introduced him in early 1972 to the prodigious Frank Zappa. Lightning struck, love at first sight and Frank recruited him for his recently formed jazz-rock orchestra, the *Grand Wazoo* Big Band.

Glenn scrutinized Zappa at the full height of his considerable powers, taking on board his methodical rigour, his ability to react to every instrument, observing his complete omniscience down to the shortest solo. Ferris played concert after concert, first with the *Grand Wazoo* then with the on-stage adventure that was the '72 Tour of *The Mothers of Invention* (aka *The Petit Wazoo*), the other Zappa outfit. Almost 34 years later, a CD entitled *Imaginary Diseases* is set to hit our racks in 2006, a compilation of the highlights of that memorable **1972** tour, mixed, produced and edited by Zappa just before he was whisked away in an ironically mean gesture by the Grim Reaper in December 1993 at the age of 53.

Moving on: in 1973, Glenn worked with numerous other artists : studio, live and international tours at an incredible rate. Some of the people he worked with include: George Duke (*Save the Country - 1969*), Billy Cobham (*Total Eclipse* and *Shabazz - 1974*), Stevie Wonder (*Songs in the Key of Life - 1976*), Philly Joe Jones (*Philly of Soul / Filet de Sole - 1982*), Jack Walrath

(*Live in Europe - 1982*), Tony Scott (*African Bird - 1983*), Barry Altschul (*That's Nice - 1985*), not forgetting Harry James, Tim Buckley, Lou Rawls, Bobby Bradford, Art Pepper... And to add to this impressive roll-call, in 1969 Glenn Ferris created with Jack Walrath the group *Revival*. He formed his own 20-piece band, the *Celebration Orchestra*, in 1970 - a fine riposte to the many who cast doubt on the Trombone's capabilities as a featured-front instrument...

A million miles from the cliché of a 'difficult' instrument, Ferris makes it vibrate, take flight, makes its voice heard, makes his Trombone sing with his compositions, some free influences, some Ellingtonian; when he really takes off, he likes more than anything to sensually intertwine his breath to his own and others' melodies.

In 1980, his talents confirmed, acknowledged, sparkling at the top of the International Scene, he was able to fulfil his dream, like an old French film in black & white: he moved to France, making it permanent in 1982. In Paris, he lent his expertise to a number of universities and began to live the bohemian life he had dreamed of all those years. Touring all over the world, he has become the *must-have Trombonist* for any venture in the Jazz world and all its offshoots.

But back to the list, both impressive and fragmented, of his collaborations in bands and on albums, with, among others: Michel Petrucciani, Martial Solal, Joachim Kuhn, L'Orchestre National de Jazz (*Orange then Blue - 1988* and *African Dream - 1989*), Steve Lacy (*Anthem - 1989*, *Itinerary - 1991* and *Clangs - 1992*), Quincy Jones, Franco d'Andrea (*Flavours - 1992*), Archie Shepp, Chris McGregor and the Brotherhood of Breath, Dave Frishberg (*Where You At? - 1991*), Enrico Rava, Louis Sclavis, Michel Portal, Henri Texier in his Azur quartet and quintet (*An Indian's Week - 1993*, *Mosaic Man - 1998* and *String's Spirit 2002*), Ricardo Del Fra, Collectif Palatino Quartet (*Palatino - 1996*, *Tempo - 1998* and *Chap.3 - 2001*), guest artist with Peter Schärli (*Guilty - 2001* and *Hot Peace - 2006*), the *Collectif Bex / Ferris / Goubert* or B. F. G. Trio (*Here & Now - 2001*), guest artist with Belmondo & Yusef Lateef (*Influence - 2005*)... Apologies to anyone we forgot

However, in terms of his own sound creations, looking at the last few years, let's dip into an ideal CD library: his brilliant spins with the episodic Collectif Palatino Quartet (*Aldo Romano*, *Glenn Ferris*, *Paolo Fresu* and *Michel Benita*); the superb "Glenn Ferris Trio" Opus with Vincent Segal on cello and Bruno Rousselet on bass (*Flesh & Stone - 1995*, *Face Lift - 1996* and *Refugees - 1997*); the wonderful equivocations of the Glenn Ferris "Chrominance" Trio, featuring Jeff Boudreaux (drums) and the loyal B. Rousselet (*Chrominance - 2001*); or, finally, a taste of the latest and hottest: his PENTESSENCE Quintet (Jean-Michel Cabrol: tenor sax, Philippe Milanta: piano, Bruno Rousselet: bass, Jeff Boudreaux: drums), with the remarkable *Skin Me ! - 2004* already under their belts.

Glenn Ferris has just added a cornerstone to the imposing edifice of his discography and to his last album, its perfect successor : *X Actimo ! - 2006*, which he likes to explain mischievously, "This record is called 'X Actimo!', because it is 'exactement' the music I wanted to hear...". Philippe Milanta, as well as piano, adds a number of organ touches. The album is a reflection of its creator's most sincere and immediate desires, even the craziest ones. The title track, for example, is a long journey with marked echoes of reggae, taken on with panache by a horn section whose lyricism punctuates purposefully throughout the twelve pieces; a tribute to Charles Aznavour (together on several concerts in L.A.) with a sumptuous adaptation of 'Qui?'; a new

look at 'You Are So Beautiful' by Preston & Fischer (which would make its creators blush with pleasure). The rest of the album features the Maestro's own compositions, with the charm tested over time and loved by his fans, from the ethereal circumvolutions of 'Flying' to the precious volutes of a divine 'Istanblues'.

François CAU 2006

IN BRIEF:

**Glenn FERRIS**

**1950:** born in Hollywood on 27 June

**1958:** attends a concert by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, decides there and then to learn the Trombone

**1966:** becomes Trombone Soloist of the Don Ellis Big Band, being Assistant Director until 1970

**1972:** memorable live experience: taken on by Frank Zappa for the famous *Grand Wazoo* and *Mothers of Invention* Tours

**1980:** Glenn's first Album, in France: **FERRIS "Alive in Paris "**, with Collectif Planète Carrée (RCA)

**1982:** settles in France, where he teaches in Nîmes, Salon-de-Provence and Nancy, while continuing his prolific career as a ' *Trombone Hero* '

**1995:** debut Album from the " Glenn Ferris Trio", combo using innovative instrumentation based on the trombone / cello / bass trinity : **Flesh & Stone** ( Enja)

**2000:** appointed a Professor at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris

**2002:** received the title of ' Chevalier des Arts et Lettres '

awarded the ' Grand Prix ' at the *International "Strade del Cinema" Festival* of Film Music in Aosta (Italy) with the " Glenn Ferris Trio "

**2004:** release of the debut Album: **Skin Me!** (Naïve) from his new band: PENTESSENCE Quintet, named " Best Album of the Year 2004 " by the Académie du Jazz

**2006:** release of **X Actimo!** (Naïve) the second Album of PENTESSENCE Quintet

author : François CAU