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Horace Silver: Feeling Healing

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[Josef Woodard](#)

The weatherman is putting out a wake-up call to Southern California this winter. Forecast: geothermal voodoo courtesy of the freak-ish condition known as El Niño, which toasts the ocean and can trigger torrential rains, which, in turn, breeds fear into the hearts of a hillside beach town like Malibu. Rain begets mud begets landslides begets possible trouble in paradise.

There might have been twitches of nervousness when a drizzle came down here one early October morning. A marquee by an oceanfront restaurant voiced skepticism perhaps verging on denial: “El Niño, Hype or Hoax.”

From where Malibu resident Horace Silver sits, in a pink and blue house on a hill, all is pretty much right with the world, impending storms or no. At 69, he’s a smiling survivor: just in this decade, he has weathered rain, the devastating Malibu fire of 1993, and his own brush with death that year, just after the release of *It’s Got to be Funky* on Columbia, his first major label album in a decade.

For the bulk of the ’80s, Silver operated his own Silveto label, an ambitious self-generated project which did not dispel the impression that he had slipped into a marketing black hole. Now, he’s in the midst of a touted “comeback.”

Who better to propose a *Prescription for the Blues*, the title of his new album? The album is his second for GRP/Impulse!, after two for Columbia, and is arguably the strongest of his ’90s work thus far, full of infectious melodies and a sturdy quintet identity—the format which Silver helped popularize with Art Blakey in the early ’50s. Silver’s history is deep enough by now to involve layers—such as the brief but memorable affiliation in the early ’70s with the then-fledgling Brecker Brothers, Randy and Michael, who reunite with Silver on this album.

The Breckers are on the list of players who got a jump start or a boost from playing in Silver’s bands, including Joe Henderson, Woody Shaw and Tom Harrell. The *Prescription* band also features bassist Ron Carter and drummer Louis Hayes, whose affiliation goes back to Silver’s seminal quintet in the ’50s.

His own long history swirls around Silver in his house, its living room liberally lined with mementos and pictures of family and friends scattered around the room. The coffee table is piled high with glossy magazines, as well as his two books published by Hal Leonard, *The Art of Small Combo Jazz Playing, Composing, and Arranging* and *Horace Silver Collection*. The memorabilia extends to jewelry: Silver is wearing a ring with a familiar-looking symbol, a silver eighth-note used on the cover of an album of unused tracks called *Blue Silver*. At times, the note gleams as he stabs at the air for punctuation when he speaks, at an excited clip.

You can sense, in talking to Silver, that he puts his bubbling energy to good use, adding to his canon of songs. “I’ve got a lot of tunes that I’ve compiled over the years,” he says, “you can only do so many on one record. Maybe I have 50 to 75 tunes that I haven’t done yet. I just keep writing. I have this insatiable urge to write, even realizing that you can only record so many tunes at one time.

“I feel that the good Lord has given me the talent. He puts these ideas in my head, and there’s no sense in wasting them. I just have to write them down, and hopefully they’ll all be recorded at some time.”

It’s still got to be funky for Silver, whose music follows a creed that has remained fairly constant throughout his nearly 50-year-career: listening to his new album, the aesthetic continuity is evident, the happy Silver sound intact and inspired. It’s like he never left. And, in a way, he never did.

In a sense, Silver helped make the jazz world safe for funk, injecting ideas from a palette which included soul, blues and gospel music, to create the rhythmically undulant cadences of hard bop. Silver’s career had a long, steady run in the ’50s and ’60s, but things began to change, externally and internally in the ’70s. Fusion grabbed hold of the music scene and Silver himself began to explore personally satisfying, but commercially perilous conceptual projects to express his newfound interest in metaphysics.

He made the now-infamous albums in his United States of Mind series, which caused some confusion with audiences and the label. As he relates, “I did those three albums for Blue Note, and they didn’t sell as well as my other albums did. In my opinion, it was good quality music, with good solos and everything. But I guess a lot of people didn’t want to hear Horace Silver with singing, and they didn’t want to hear any kind of spirituality in the music—I’m talking about not only in the notes, but in the words. So it didn’t fare too well.

“After that, I went back to my straightahead instrumental stuff with Blue Note, but in the back of my mind, I wanted to get back into that spiritual. My contract expired with Blue Note, they didn’t pick up any options. This was at a time when all these other artists were being dropped. They were putting jazz on the shelf at that time.

“I had an opportunity to go with two other companies, but I decided to go on my own. I knew that if I went with either of these companies, they wouldn’t like my spiritual approach. I said, ‘Well, let me put my money where my mouth is and my heart is. I believe in this.’”

Around that time, in the late ’70s, he also consulted with the New York-based medium, Beulah Brown, who gave him the name for his label, Silveto. The music was jazz-oriented, but with vocals and messages, which Silver describes as “self-help holistic metaphysical music. I put some of my savings into it and spent ten years of my time at it, but after ten years of trying to get it to work, I came to the realization that it wasn’t going to happen. I couldn’t get it off the ground, and couldn’t get the right distribution. I decided to throw in the towel.”

As it happened, throwing in the towel was tantamount to career renewal. The two Columbia albums—It’s Got to Be Funky and Pencil Packin’ Papa, and now the two for Impulse!—Hardbop Grandpop and Prescription for the Blues—amount to an impressive artistic rebound.

Born in Norwalk, Connecticut in 1928, Silver was a frail child, suffering from scoliosis and other ailments. His fragility led him to pursue healthy habits in life, such as vegetarianism and avoidance of chemical indulgences, and later, non-western spiritual ideologies. He studied

saxophone before health problems guided him to the piano. On that instrument, he got a foundation with classical training, but had jazz in his veins, an obsession which came to a head when he heard the legendary beboppers as a teenager: “they blew my mind.” And opened it.

His lifelong pursuit of writing began early. “I was 14 or 15 years old when I started wanting to write some music, after listening to Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk and Dizzy and Bird. I started trying to write some little bebop lines.”

As a player, Silver’s first break came when Stan Getz hired him in 1950, having heard him playing piano in Hartford, CT. Getz pulled out Silver’s original charts and the public heard his music for the first time.

Later employers included Miles Davis, and his comrade-at-musical-arms, Art Blakey. Blakey, Silver offers, “was a great help to me. He was one of the guys who gave me a start in the music business, along with Stan Getz and Miles Davis and other people. Thank God he left this beautiful legacy of recording for us to listen to and be inspired by. He was a beautiful guy, outside of being a great drummer. I learned a lot of things working with him, but the major thing was that when you get on that stage, you give 100% of yourself. Don’t hold anything back. He always did that.”

Silver and Blakey were involved in forging a new language, or at least a dialect in the post-bop era, particularly in connection with a quintet concept that sounded bigger than the sum of its parts. And, much as Silver’s name is associated with the cause of the groove—and the funky factor—his ideas were innovative, as well.

“I say this humbly, because I’m not trying to toot my own horn,” he says, “but before I started doing this in combo writing, most guys would go to make a record and they’d play the melody, solos, melody and out. That was cool, and they played their asses off, but I brought more of a big band concept to small combo playing. If I thought it was a good idea, I would write an introduction to a tune, and maybe a little riff or something behind the soloist, and maybe an interlude between solos. A lot of times, I’d have a shout chorus and maybe a tag ending—all the kind of stuff they have in the big bands.”

With Blakey, Silver crystallized the new quintet sound, as heard on the 1955 album *Horace Silver and the Jazz Messengers*, after which Silver headed out on his own. He remembers the heady feeling of being young and ready to wail. “We wanted to kick ass,” he smiles. “We didn’t want to pussyfoot around. We were full of fire and brimstone. We were young and daring and aggressive. We just wanted to kick ass and burn, make the shit really swing and groove.”

Was he striving to push the music into an area other than bebop?

“Well, we were playing bebop. The only difference, when me and Art got together, myself being a person who loved the blues and loved black gospel music, more of that music came into the bebop. It wasn’t just all bebop. It was bebop, yes, but we brought in ‘Doodlin’, ‘The Preacher’ which was more on the funky side, bringing the blues and the gospel elements into the music, whereas the bebop didn’t have that before then.

“I listened to some R&B in those days, but I wasn’t that much influenced by it. I was influenced by real down home funky blues. I used to listen to the old singers like Muddy Waters and Lightning Hopkins, Memphis Minnie, Memphis Slim, all those kinds of cats. Then I used to love the black church music and the gospel music, the quartets...

“I used to go to Catholic church and Catholic school, because my father was Catholic, but sometimes I would go to my mother’s church and she was Baptist. They would have these quartets come up from New York to Connecticut to give a concert. I used to love to catch them. It was a cappella, just four men singing, no bass or drums. They would be getting down, soulful stuff. I loved that.”

It was in 1953 that Silver began his unusually long and symbiotic association with Blue Note records, which would last for more than 25 years. He was especially tight with Blue Note founder Alfred Lion, a confidant who stayed in touch with Silver even after Lion went into seclusion. Silver remembers, “he was not a musician, but he knew what he wanted to hear. He had good ears. He could tell when you were really playing it and when you were not playing it. He knew what kind of sound he wanted. Many times, in the studio, Alfred and Rudy van Gelder would get into these very heated arguments. Alfred would say he wanted this and Rudy would say ‘no, that don’t go like that.’ But finally, they’d settle on something and what they settled on would be very groovy.”

Silver’s westward migration came about in the early ’70s, after his New York apartment was robbed. Suddenly, fond memories of days touring the west coast planted a notion he could no longer resist. “I was fairly disgusted when we got ripped off that badly. That’s when I decided we should move to California. Also, I thought it would be a better place to raise my son, who was three at the time. We just up and left. I love New York and still do, but I don’t want to live there any more.

“In New York, I lived in the Park West Village, on the 14th floor and I had a beautiful view of downtown from up that high. I could see the skyscrapers and the sunset was gorgeous and I could see all over Central Park from up there. So that was inspiring, too, but not as much as the view from this house. I have a 360 degree view of the ocean from my back yard, and also, on the left side, I can see the Santa Monica coastline.

“On the right, I can see Catalina. And straight ahead is the ocean. From my front yard, I have a 360 degree of the mountains, across the street there. It’s really inspiring. There’s a tune on my new album called ‘Sunrise in Malibu.’”

That song, a sweet waltz, had its origins in an in-house way. “Sometimes, I get up at five in the morning and I look down to the end of the house where the picture window is. I can see the sun coming up, and I just stand there and linger for a minute, and just absorb the view. There have been occasions where it looks magical, where somehow the sun coming up casts a kind of a hue on the ocean, and it almost looks like there’s a lamp shining from underneath. With the colors in the water and the sun coming up on the horizon, it’s breathtaking.

“I’ve written a few tunes inspired by nature. For example, a cricket inspired me to write a tune. A cricket only sings one note, but he sings it in a certain rhythmic pattern. I got that pattern and that note and worked with it on the piano, and made a tune out of it. I haven’t recorded it yet. Another one was inspired by a bluejay who was singing in my backyard one day. I got those few notes he was whistling, fooled around with it and made a tune out of that.

“There’s a tune on the Hard Bop Grandpop album called ‘Serenade to a Tea Kettle.’ My tea kettle was whistling on the stove one day, with three or four notes. I went to the piano to find out what the notes were, and I made a tune out of it. Music is everywhere, man. You just have to keep your ears open for it and have an open mind.”

More than most composers in jazz, Silver has told his personal story through songs, written in honor of family members and members of the jazz family. Family is never far from Silver’s mind as he writes. “Brother John and Gene,” another ballad from the new album, commemorates his two late brothers—John died of pneumonia at six months old, and Gene lived to be 85. “Song for My Father,” his oft-covered tune and title track of his 1964 album, came about as a tribute to his father, who hailed from Cape Verde. At root, Silver wanted to honor his father’s island heritage.

Another of Silver’s classic tunes, “Nica’s Dream,” is dedicated to the famed jazz supporter Baroness Nica von Koenigswarter, who Silver remembers as “a great friend of the Messengers. She helped us out so much. When we were just trying to get things going, she supported us and paid for our uniforms, bought us suits and shirts to match to go on the road with so we’d look good. As for how the tune was inspired, I remember the first two chords are minor chords with major sevenths. The first person to show me those voicings was Miles Davis.”

Many of Silver’s best-known tunes have never slipped out of circulation, as real book staples. He has found his music paid tribute to in specific ways, as on Dee Dee Bridgewater’s 1995 album of his tunes, Love and Peace. Silver recalls, “She called me up and said ‘Horace, I want to do a whole CD dedicated to your music.’ She gave me a list of tunes, and I said, ‘Well, Dee Dee, I only have lyrics to a few of those tunes.’ She said, ‘Well, I’ll put some lyrics to them.’ I said, ‘No, no, I’ll do it myself.’ So I did it. I was getting ready to go out on tour to Europe at the time. On the plane and in the hotel room, I’d be busy writing lyrics. When I’d get them done, I’d fax them to her.

“She did a tremendous job on that. Her musicians did an excellent job, too. All in all, I think it’s one hell of an album.”

As prolific as Silver appears to be as a songwriter, the muse can be fickle with him, just like the rest of us. “You never can tell how inspiration is going to come to you. Sometimes, I’ll get on a roll, as they say, and I’ll wake up for four or five days in a row with songs in my head. I’ll hear eight bars and go to the piano and figure it out with one hand. I’ll harmonize it and work out a bridge to go with it, and then I’ve got a tune. That might happen for several days in a row. Then I might have a dry spell and nothing will come for a week or two. You can’t predict it. A lot of times, I’ll hear something in a dream and I’ll wake up and work it out on the piano. I feel that these things are given to me. I know they are.

“With the tune that I did on the Hard Bop Grandpop album, ‘Diggin’ on Dexter,’ I had a dream where I heard Dexter (Gordon) playing that tune.”

Writing comes more or less as naturally as breathing—or dreaming—for Silver. “I’ve got tons of stuff. I wake up in the morning with tunes in my head and I go to the piano and put them on cassette tape. When one tape is finished, I throw it in a cardboard box and put a fresh one in. And it keeps going like that. So I’ve got a whole bunch of material.

“What I’ve been doing in compiling material for these albums is that I go to this box and start listening to things which may have been written five, ten, maybe 15 years ago, but have never gotten around to doing. So I try to figure out the strongest combination of tunes possible, working on a concept.

“That’s what I did with this new album—picked out about 15 or 16 tunes. I listened very carefully and picked my favorite nine or ten tunes out of them. Then I let Tommy LiPuma, my executive producer on this album, pick his favorite nine or ten. Amazingly, he came damn near close to every tune I picked. I was just striving to get the strongest songs possible.”

The jazz musician population in Los Angeles tends to be divided along the lines of players who make their living in the studios and established artists, like Silver, who have relocated to a sunnier clime. One kindred spirit in Los Angeles who Silver worked with was the late Eddie Harris, who played on several of Silver’s projects, and who died of cancer in 1996.

“He’s a great guy and what a musician he is, or was. He still is, wherever he is, in the spirit world. I hate to talk about people when they’re so-called ‘dead,’ because nobody dies. Only the body dies. The spirit and the mind move on to another dimension. I hate to use that term, but that’s what we use here, so I’ll use it. He’s such an innovative guy, always stretching and trying to come up with something different, something unique.”

Harris is a case of a musician who didn’t get as much respect as he deserved as an innovator who was widely misunderstood. Silver explains, “Eddie had a complex, I would say. He thought he was not appreciated by the jazz fans, just because he had several commercially successful recordings. He felt that he had to continually try to prove himself to the public to show that he could play jazz. But he sure could play straightahead jazz. That’s evident on records he played with me on and on some of his own records, too.”

Has Silver, too, felt misunderstood in jazz circles?

“There was a time when I felt pretty much the same way that Eddie felt. I felt that maybe the jazz fans or jazz people out there thought of me as only a funky player, that I could just play the blues or just play commercial—‘Filthy McNasty’ or ‘Song for My Father’ or ‘Senor Blues’—and that I couldn’t play hip, you know? But I got out of that.

“Finally, I started having more faith in myself. I know my capabilities and my limitations. I know I can play straightahead jazz and that I can play hip as well as funky. I can go back to my

records and point out certain solos where I played hip. I was playing some slick shit, with really slick harmonies and slick ideas.”

Silver’s assertive piano style, with his propulsive, interactive comping and minimalist soloing voice, have had a strong impact on the development of the modern jazz piano. “I’m very pleased that whatever I’ve done in the past has had some positive influence on some of the younger musicians. Maybe they’ve done what I’ve done in the past. Being a Virgo—Virgos are very analytical—I’ve taken Bud Powell or Monk or Tad Dameron and analyzed it, and tried to apply it to some of what I’m trying to do. In other words, I was really studying with these cats, although they weren’t live, there to teach me. But I was learning from the records, figuring out what they’re doing. ‘What is that chord there he’s using?’ I was learning from what those cats were doing.

“I’m hoping that some of these younger guys will analyze some of the stuff that I’ve done and will go on to use it in their stuff. They don’t have to copy it note-for-note, but it can influence them for the good. They can turn it around and use some of it for their thing. That’s the thing: you don’t want to be a clone. There ain’t no sense in copying your idol note-for-note, but take what you get from them and try to turn it around and make it into your thing, so you don’t sound exactly like them.

“Someone could say, ‘You can tell that Horace Silver has an influence from Monk and Bud Powell, but he don’t sound like them. He sounds like Horace Silver.’ But there’s an influence there, just like you can tell there’s an influence of Earl Fatha Hines on Nat King Cole. But he don’t sound like Earl Fatha Hines, he sounds like Nat King Cole.”

These days, Silver is working hard at catching up with the momentum of his latest career chapter, even when wavering health gets in the way (as it did last fall, when a tour following the release had to be postponed). He feels blessed, after a close call in 1993, when an undiagnosed blood clot problem sent him into the hospital, where he nearly died.

“I have some great friends and great family, so that held me in great stead during my illness,” he says of the incident. “But I’ve got to say this: I firmly believe in the power of prayer. Outside of my family and friends being so supportive, I was praying for my recovery and my family and friends were praying for me, but there were also all those fans out there praying for me.”

As the title *Prescription for the Blues* suggests, Silver’s spiritual beliefs extend to the therapeutic properties of music. “I may be prejudiced, but I believe that jazz music has the strongest healing potential, and it’s not just because I play it and love it so much. I feel that it’s the improvisation in jazz that makes it so strong as a healing tool, what each individual gives to a tune from their heart and their soul when they take a solo. It’s all spontaneous, and it’s all love, and from the heart.

“I think that’s what makes the music stronger and more adaptable for healing. I’m not going to say that you’re going to play a tune and be healed. That’s possible, but not likely. But I feel that positive, happy music will definitely relieve stress, and stress is the cause of most of our illness.”

In short, it will take more than El Niño to waylay Silver at this point on his trajectory. It seems obvious by now that retirement is not Silver's agenda.

"No, no, no," he responds to the r-word. "Like Duke Ellington said, 'Retire to what?' Music is my life and I hope to be able to do it all my life, until the very last moment when my spirit leaves my body.

"I'm so happy that I was blessed with the gift of music. It has seen me through my life. When everything else gets down, when I get the blues, I always think 'well, I've got music.' I may have lost this and lost that, but I've still got music. Lady music has not left me. She's always my sweetheart," he laughs. "She ain't never gonna leave me, because she loves me and I love her. This is forever. What's the song? "This Isn't Sometimes, This Is Always."