

Sonny Clark is not a name that appears with any frequency in documents of jazz history. He has never been proclaimed a major original pianist. Yet from his earliest influence, boogie woogie pianist Pete Johnson to his last and strongest influence, Clark's major influence seems to have been his own creativity. His style was full and rich, yet carried a bright irresistible swing that swept away the musician and listener alike. He was, to these ears, the realization of the perfect post bebop pianist. By all accounts, the musicians that worked with him regarded him a source of joy and inspiration. And any listener that stops and really hears his work will be hooked forever.

After spending the first twenty years of his life in and around Pittsburgh mastering the piano and playing vibes and bass as well, Clark ventured out to the West Coast in 1951 with his older brother. He worked the Los Angeles area with Wardell Gray, Art Farmer, Dexter Gordon, Shelly Manne and a score of others. In 1953, Oscar Pettiford came to LA, formed a band that included Clark and went up to San Francisco. There Sonny met Buddy DeFranco who was leading a quartet with Art Blakey and Kenny Drew. Blakey and Drew left, and Sonny was asked to join. During the next two and one half years, Clark appeared on 3 DeFranco recordings and toured Europe, the American Midwest and Hawaii with the clarinetist.

In January of 1956, Clark settled into a more stationary life, joining Howard Rumsey's Lighthouse All Stars. During that year, he recorded in a quartet setting under the leadership of Serge Chaloff with Philly Joe Jones on drums (EMI Capitol) and with drummer Lawrence Marable's quartet, which featured tenor saxophonist James Clay (Jazz West). On that album, Sonny was not only featured as a player, but also contributed three compositions.

In February 1957, he joined Dinah Washington in order to work his way back East. Referring to West Coast music, he said, "I did have sort of a hard time trying to be comfortable in my playing. The fellows on the West Coast have a different sort of feeling, a different approach to jazz. They swing in their own way...The Eastern musicians play with so much fire." On another occasion, he was quoted as saying, "Jazz is jazz wherever it's played. The whole thing has to do with the individual and his conception toward jazz. The thing is that my playing is different from the way most of the fellows out West play. I'd rather work in the East because what is played here is closer to the traditional meaning of jazz. They're getting

away from the tradition out West – combining jazz with classical music and playing chamber music type jazz. What they play is really very good, but it's just not the way I want to play. That's why I came back East.” And come back he did in April 1957 at the end of the Dinah Washington tour.

He worked at Birdland under the leadership of J.R. Montrose and Stan Getz and gigged briefly with Anita O'Day and Charles Mingus. In early June, he recorded with Sonny Rollins (Riverside). On June 23, he recorded as a sideman for Blue Note on a Hank Mobley session. A month later, he made his first album as leader for Blue Note. Thus began a long and fruitful association wherein Clark appeared regularly on Blue Note dates with a variety of artists.

In fact, between June 1957 and March 1959, he was in the studio 8 times as a leader and another 15 times as a sideman with Mobley, John Jenkins, Curtis Fuller, Johnny Griffin, Clifford Jordan, Lou Donaldson, Lee Morgan, Louis Smith, Tina Brooks, Bennie Green and Jackie McLean.

Then for some strange reason, Sonny was totally absent from Blue Note for the next two and one half years. In 1960, he recorded a trio album and appeared on albums by Bennie Green and Stanley Turrentine, all for Time Records and all very much Blue Note in style and personnel. That two and one half years of relative inactivity is usually credited to his bouts with drug addiction.

In October, 1961, he re-entered the Blue Note fold on a Jackie McLean date and during the next twelve months appeared on 13 sessions under the leadership of McLean, Don Wilkerson, Dexter Gordon, Stanley Turrentine, and Grant Green as well as making his last album as a leader “Leapin’ And Lopin” in November 1961. After his final session in October 1962 (Stanley Turrentine’s “Jubilee Shout”), Clark suffered a heart attack. He was released from the hospital in January 1963. He played two nights at a New York Club called Junior’s and, in the early morning hours, he died from an overdose. To preserve the club’s image and liquor license, his body was moved to a private apartment before the police were called in. Thus a short ten years after his first record dates with Teddy Charles and Buddy DeFranco, his career and his life came to an end with the most tragic cliché in the jazz life.