

# **“What I am”**

## **RED MITCHELL**



**Vocal, bass, piano and friends**

## Red Mitchell: What I am

Following his social and political impulses, in 1968 Red Mitchell moved from the United States to Sweden. His 24 years in Scandinavia were among the most fulfilling in the life and career of a man honored for the brilliance of his music making. In his book *Cats of Any Color*, Gene Lees quoted Mitchell's account of discovering his compatibility with Sweden. It happened when he was 27 years old and on tour with a group of musicians that included Billie Holiday.



Photo: Catharina Litzell

“We were being driven around Stockholm the first day in a stretch limousine,” Mitchell told Lees. “Billie thought they were just showing us the nicer parts of town. She said, ‘Take us to the slums, I want to see the slums’. Somebody said, ‘There are no slums’. And she said, ‘What?’

And somebody else said, ‘There’s no Beverly Hills, either’.

And then I reacted to that. I said, ‘No slums, no Beverly Hills? Is this just Stockholm you’re talking about?’

They said, ‘No, it’s like that all around Sweden – every city’.

I thought, ‘Jesus! Dis mus’ be de place’.”

That was in 1954. Fourteen years later, Mitchell became one of several expatriate American musicians who left behind what he described to Lees as “the *institutionalization* of violence and racism” in the US in the late 1960s. He emphasized that he was also attracted to Sweden by the cultural atmosphere, including the quality of the country’s jazz artists and its classical musicians. He made close connections in the Stockholm jazz community, and he expanded beyond the playing that had made him one of the most honored bassists of his generation. Long admired by his colleagues for his verbal and literary skills, over the years Mitchell had occasionally

sung original songs with lyrics reflecting his humanism and his dedication to an emerging environmental movement. His Caprice albums gave him important outlets for all of his skills – on the bass, at the piano and as composer and lyricist.

By the time he recorded *What I Am* a decade after his arrival in Sweden, Red had become more than just another transplanted American musician escaping benighted politics and an unfair social system. His widow Diane, a fellow American whom he met in Sweden, told me, “He realized that he had to say hello to the Swedish people if he was going to get enough recognition”. He took a job in the house band on a popular television talk show. On occasion, the host would interview him. Diane said, “Red loved to talk. That’s how people got to know him outside of the jazz world, so that he was considered one of those icons of Swedish entertainment life at the time, playing with people like Monica Zetterlund and Svend Asmussen and a lot with Alice Babs, who was really the big national jazz star”.

With this album and *Blues For a Crushed Soul* by the quintet he named Communication, Red’s presence in Sweden grew. Trumpeter Bosse Broberg remembers the pleasure of working with Red.

“His emotional gifts were indeed tremendous, emerging from his comprehension of



the word 'communication', for him a term with many dimensions, angles and facts of human and universal nature. Musically, I learned from Red to expand my modest ambitions into directions I didn't imagine being able to achieve. Besides Red was also one of the most humorous persons I've had the privilege to know and you can easily trace that in his wonderful philosophical lyrics. Of course on top of this, his music has a very special 'tinge'."

Elsewhere in this CD package you will find Red's appreciation of Broberg and the other members of Communication.

Red's "The Sun and the Water", helped stimulate the country's growing environmental consciousness and became a hit. Still, Diane remembers, "The general public probably didn't realize how much value he put on his songs and his poetry". Public awareness increased when Red began playing piano and singing his songs in the bar of the Stortorgskällaren restaurant on the square in old town Stockholm. Then, following the success of his Caprice solo album *Home Suite* CAP 21313, the company arranged for two concert tours of Sweden.

"They hired me to be the roadie", Diane said. "It was just Red and me and the sound system, and we traveled around to 44 little towns where they had small libraries or art museums, nice intimate settings. It was

terrific. That was when he was really at one with himself, playing the bass and being able to go to the piano and sing. He really wanted to communicate his thoughts. He was a great poet, and he was funny. You can hear it in the lyrics. The biggest thing I miss about not having him here is that we used to laugh all the time. When you live alone, you're not laughing as much, you know, but he used to have me on the floor laughing."

In 1992, Red and Diane returned from Sweden to the United States. They chose another haven, the Pacific Northwest, where many prominent musicians were seeking refuge from the pressures of life in New York and Los Angeles.

From their new home in Salem, Oregon, Red played engagements up and down the west coast. Some resulted in recordings, among them splendid duo albums with pianists Roger Kellaway and George Cables, and one with guitarist Joe Beck. In late October, Red had a mild heart attack that put him in the hospital. Released, he celebrated a favorable report on his health and, on November 3, the election of Bill Clinton as president of the United States. That night, he had a stroke and fell into a coma. Five days later, he was gone.

*Doug Ramsey*

Doug Ramsey is the author of the award-winning *Take Five: The Public and Private Lives of Paul Desmond*. He blogs about jazz and other matters at *Riffides*, [www.dougramsey.com](http://www.dougramsey.com)

### **Remembrances of Red from two great pianists:**

"I had many profound musical experiences with Red in the 16 years we spent as a duo. Red was a telephone person. One time he called me in Los Angeles at 4:00 a.m., from Sweden, just to ask me if I liked some chord variations he was going to use one of my tunes. Hen, for 2 hours he played and we discussed. Red was always about melody. Such beautiful solos! By the way, if I played five choruses on a tune, he would expect to play five also! Red Mitchell – one of the great Masters of Jazz."

*Roger Kellaway*

"You know, he tuned his bass in 5ths, with low C on the bottom. The way he always tuned up at the beginning of the set, he would ask me to hit a low C on the piano as loudly as I could, and would then tune from the BOTTOM up. I loved the extended range those extra notes gave him. He changed

his tuning a few days before a big André Previn movie session. Red was André's first call, and was probably the section principal. After a take Previn said, 'I'm hearing some intonation discrepancies in the bass section'. Red said, 'Sorry André, that would be me. I changed my bass tuning from 4th to 5ths last week'. Last WEEK! The man had chutzpah.

A couple other remarks of Red's: I remembering him saying several times after a gig, 'That was a smack dab in the middle of mellow'. Or, 'I don't want it to just be great; I want it to be f\*\*\*ing gorgeous'. I sure loved him."

*Bill Mays*



### What I am

Strawberry nose – sugar-cube teeth –  
Pear shaped body  
and my real name's Keith  
Bet my whole soul  
on the whole human race  
Write songs sometimes  
and I play some bass.  
My face is my misfortune

My bass is pretty, fortunately for me –  
My ace in the hole  
is the hole in my ear  
I hear:  
Dizzy and Bird and Lester,  
Sarah and Lady.  
That's what I am and that's what I do  
Hope that helps you  
when you're feelin' blue

I said what I meant  
and meant what I said  
My name's Keith  
but you can call me Red.

I'm just like you – an animal too  
Got my own bag just like a kangaroo  
Sometimes a bear – sometimes an elf –  
I'm a motley crew all by myself.

My face ...

My ace in the hole  
is the hole in my ear

I hear:

Sonny and Trane and Dexter,  
Wayne and Miles D  
Quinichette, Al and Zoot,  
Bill Evans and Scotty  
Jabbo and Satch and Roy,  
Red Allen and C.T. (and Erroll!).

Candy and cake – goodies and treats  
Face fulla hickies and I still love sweets  
Single track mind – no good at lies –  
World's worst mem'ry so I improvise ...

My ace in the hole  
is the hole in my ear

I hear:

Ellington, Hampton Hawes,  
Carl Perkins and Basie  
Illinois, Ben and Sweets,  
the Lizard and Peggy,  
Oliver, Milt, Mahalia Jackson  
and Chubby

Well I could go on all night

— I've learned from so many

That's what I am and that's what I do  
Hope that helps you with your interview

I said what I meant  
and meant what I said  
My name's Keith

but you can call me Red.

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### Talking

What does talking do for you and me?  
You say we learn –  
Thought of walking out without my key –  
But I'd return;  
But oh, these ground swells  
Like the sea before a storm  
Maybe talking helps us see the shore –  
And then, set sail once more.

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### The sun and the water

I'd like to talk to you, son,  
about using the sun and the water  
And maybe you'll have a son  
and a daughter to tell this to too  
We've taken them so for granted  
so long we've been wrong and untrue  
But it's the sun and the water  
who've won and they've kept us alive  
I am so sorry that we've been abusing  
the balance of nature  
We've been misusing our talents  
in dangerous ways in our haste  
So, though it's hard to believe,  
we'll be leaving you all kinds of waste  
But you use the sun and the water, my  
son, and you oughta survive.

You could erase some big debts  
if you'd place some big bets  
on the sunshine  
Use just a healthy percent  
of the wealth we have spent on the  
moon Choose between weapons  
in space  
and the whole human race pretty soon  
As far as we know that's the best way to  
go till the martians arrive  
Hope you don't mind a request  
that you find out the best use of water

We don't deserve it  
if we can't conserve it  
in this day and age  
Harness the tides and the ions,  
they're harder than lions to cage  
But now we're aware  
that the power is there  
and the whole world could thrive  
Turn on to the sunshine and water,  
they'll warm you and keep you alive  
Get back to the pure sun and water  
so your son and daughter survive.

Keith (Red) Mitchell© 1976

### **Micro-thought number two**

It can't be all bad and it might be just  
lovely – the rest that we'll get  
when we're dead  
Just think of the billions of times  
that we won't have to wake up  
and jump out of bed

Keith (Red) Mitchell© 1978

### **Now what are we gonna do?**

If you've ever been billed  
as appearing somewhere,  
When the management knew  
that you wouldn't be there  
Then you've had all the feelings  
that led to this song  
And the song is addressed  
to the ones who did wrong  
Now once I was taught  
An old African thought  
That was easy to feel, as you'll see:  
That one's soul and one's name  
Are one and the same  
If you injure my name you hurt me ...  
My name is my soul



Photo: Gunnar Holmberg

and you've mishandled it  
It I had my choice I'd prefer to get hit  
Neither I nor you  
Have got eyes to see  
– Now –  
What are we gonna do?  
Your name is your soul  
and you've also hurt that  
Now a whole lot of people  
have heard where you're at  
You sound like a friend  
But a friendship can end  
– Now –  
What are we gonna do?  
It may not have been  
An intentional sin  
But the mentions came in just the same  
All my friends came and paid  
And they waited and stayed  
Drug at me 'cause you  
misused my name  
It seems as though you  
with the power and might  
Have more feeling for that  
than for doing things right  
I would love to relate  
Without feeling this hate  
– Now –  
What are we gonna do?  
– Well –  
I'll do a song for you  
The worst thing to do  
To a freelance musician  
Is falsely exploit his good name –  
Those few times when our bodies  
Are not in position  
Our souls end up taking the blame  
So please don't call  
either cash or collect  
And if someone wants me  
have them call me direct  
And I'll see you around  
When I'm out with my hound

– Now –  
What are we gonna do?  
You  
Know what my hound will do  
Then  
Maybe think of you  
Good  
Bye and Tood-le-oo!

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### **You're me**

I never thought I'd love a person  
just like me  
And when we met we ditte<sup>n</sup>\* yet  
that it could be  
You read  
My head  
My needs  
Are  
Your deeds (and vice versa)  
And sometimes I confuse us  
even physically  
When we're together I love you –  
or – is it me?  
You're smart  
My heart  
Surely  
You're me.

\* New Jerseyese for 'didn't know'

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### **Envy**

Envy's so little that when people feel it  
They shrink right before your eyes;  
That's why this melody  
has a few intervals  
Smaller than normal size ...

Envy is love denied  
False as the faults of pride  
Held-in emotion you don't dare express  
Turned inside out to a "no"  
from a "yes"  
Undeserved put-downs,  
a big verbal mess  
Sounding so small and snide

Envy is needless greed  
Jealous desire, not need  
Hating to see someone else  
make some bread  
Hating the day  
someone else gets ahead  
Shrinking from winning,  
just whining instead  
Envy is small indeed

Now you know that envy's  
been felt by us all  
And one at a time,  
as a problem, it's small  
But when a whole country  
denies love this way  
Some souls can be crushed  
and some just move away  
And then, as with people,  
the spirit's diminished  
A big nation's smaller,  
a small one is finished

Now here is what we could do  
Change things before we're through  
When you feel envy,  
just say so right out!  
Say it with love and say what it's about –  
Once you've expressed it  
you won't need to pout!  
Then you'll be glad you're you  
I hope you're glad you're you ...

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### **Micro-thought number one**

Sometimes life is not quite fair  
Who is God – or – what and where?  
Well ...  
I believe  
The laws of nature  
Tend to favor  
Love

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## Red's comments

**What I am** is my answer to a young serious journalist named Per Ekman who did a nice long interview intended for a sort of leftist Swedish magazine, and then, after the tape machine was turned off, looked me dead in the eye and said – “OK now, what are you?” – or anyone else who wonders. Of course it's not complete, and never will be, I hope. Every time we really “hear” someone, a bit of that person's soul evanesces into our own and becomes a part of us. So that part of the bridge that follows “I hear –” is about two pages now and growing – much too long for a record, but you've got the idea ...

**Avsked** in this case, means “parting”, as at the end of a love affair. And this song, written by Göran Strandberg, is about what that's about. But the song says it better than words.

**Talking**, which I wrote, is dedicated to any couple that's ever had an argument. I trust that doesn't leave too many out.

**The sun and the water** is to my son. It's the only song I've ever written that was intended to be a hit. Hope it makes it, because it has a function: To help stimulate a groundswell of interest, investment and

invention which could finally free us from our unsound and temporal dependence on what I call the alternative energy sources: oil, coal and the atom.

**Tango Magnolia**, written by Göran Strandberg, is fun to play and came out of a moment of fun in Copenhagen, of all places.

**Micro-thought number two** is the second-written of what promises to be a long string of thoughts not long enough to become songs but useful enough not to be relegated to the remote realms of one's bad memory, if one knows what one means.

Next is my all-time favorite coincidence, and I love coincidences. The beautiful bassist Rufus Reid was visiting us in Stockholm and we were talking about how much it hurts when our names are advertised without us having been hired, among other things. It had happened to us both recently, and not for the first time. We got into the time-honored African belief that the name and the soul are both very important parts of one's identity and therefore very closely identified with each other. And that if one names a child or an animal after someone who has died, that child or animal becomes an extension of the soul of the deceased person. Catharina and I had, of course, been

thinking of Billie Holiday when we named our dog “Lady”. (We had also been thinking of our niece Beatrice, who was already a lady at the age of six – but unfortunately that doesn't help the coincidence.) So I put a cassette in the machine and sat down at our 1913 Blüthner Grand to play (and record for Rufus) a song I had written which deals with this whole subject. Lady came over and sat right next to the piano bench. I played the first chord and she sang. Good choice of notes, too, and even a little downward slide to the last note, just like Lady. Anyway I felt



Photo: Gunnar Holmberg

that this was too good a coincidence to not include as an introduction to the song **Now what are we gonna do?** – or was it that?

Sture Nordin plays bass on **You're me**. Both Rufus Reid and Sture are lifetime friends, by the way, which might be partly the result of some similar factors which also led us all to choose the bass. I love his playing including the little solo he plays at the end. Do you think he was putting me on?

This song might arouse cries of “sexist” in some people the idea of one person being an extension of another – but for anyone who feels like that, I suggest that the song can be sung by anyone, without changing the words, and it does describe a feeling that both Catharina and I get and that we hope everyone experiences.

Trying to find words for Bosse Broberg's playing on **Autumn in New York** is a classic example of the fact that it's impossible to verbalize music. One can add words to it as a lyric but verbalize the music itself – uh uh. Something to do with the sound, the atmosphere, the feelings, I give up.

**Envy** is for Sweden. The pretty laugh at the end was that of Alice Babs, a phenomenal and unique talent driven out of her beloved homeland partly by this strange problem,

called “the Royal Swedish envy” here. Believe it or not it's a matter of having carried equality, one of the things that attracted me here, too far – to the point where if you're really outstanding at what you do you're considered to have left the pack. Many pack and leave.

I am deeply honored to report that Alice recorded this song, among others on an album (with Davor Kajfés on piano, Rune Carlsson on drums and me on bass) on which she sings John Lewis' compositions on one side and mine on the other. Wheeee! It should be out in the fall (1979).

Again, trying to find words – this time to describe Nisse Sandström's tenor-playing on **In a sentimental mood** leaves me just wanting to give up and listen again. And, I might add, playing Duke Ellington's music gives one a feeling of permanent fertility.

**Micro-thought number one** was the first written of this series – perhaps as close to religious as I'll ever get – but I don't think ever have to take it back.

My profound thanks to Rune Carlsson for his purely musical playing, which I feel puts him in a very small group called “World's best drummers”. Profound thanks also to

Göran Strandberg for both his playing and his writing, especially his chorus on **Talking** and his song **Avsked**.

Only one way out after all that profundity:

Every species has its racket:  
Porcupines have got their quills –  
Every penguin has its jacket –  
Even skunks have got their skills.

Cats are rather independent,  
Although some get hooked on mice.  
Rats are rather more dependent –  
When they're tame they're really nice.

Dogs chose us in ancient days,  
Giving love for room and board:  
Helping out in many ways –  
Shepherding the human horde.  
And chameleons change colors  
Just as leaves and people do:  
We've got brains and pains and crullers  
And some music, me and you.

As a writer and a bassist  
I can pick my work and hack it.  
And my puns may be the basest,  
But profundity's my racket.

*Love*  
*Red Mitchell*

# "What I am"

## RED MITCHELL



Vocal, bass, piano and friends

### Touch that knob!

In order to preserve both the quality and the quantity of the music on this record it has been mastered a couple of decibels lower than normal – you may want to raise the volume a little ...

