

“The Sidewinder”—Lee Morgan (1964)

Added to the National Registry: 2024

Essay by Faye Anderson (guest post)*



*Lee Morgan and Billy Harper,
Industrial Workers of the World Hall, Chicago,
April 11, 1971. Courtesy: Ozier Muhammad*

Lee Morgan’s “The Sidewinder” album was released in July 1964. The title track’s infectious blend of hard bop, blues, soul and funk reflects Morgan’s confidence and swagger. Bob Cranshaw was the bassist on the recording session at the Rudy Van Gelder Studio on December 21, 1963. In an interview with filmmaker Bret Primack¹, Cranshaw said Morgan composed the tune on the spot:

It’s weird. We go in. We finished the date but we need one more tune. Lee goes into the bathroom at Rudy Van Gelder’s and he’s in there 10 minutes, 15 minutes, 20 minutes and we’re wondering what is he doing? What’s happening? But, of course, nobody is saying a word. We’re just waiting for him to come and let’s do whatever we’re going to do for the last tune. Let’s do it. He was in the washroom about 20 minutes or more. When he came out, he passed this sheet of music around and it was “Sidewinder.”

The catchy tune became a cultural phenomenon and introduced jazz to a wider audience. “The Sidewinder” was a rare crossover pop hit, climbing to No. 81 on the “Billboard” Hot 100 chart in the January 2, 1965 issue of “Billboard.”² The album spent weeks on the “Billboard” Top LPs chart, peaking at No. 25 in the January 9, 1965 issue of “Billboard.”³ “The Sidewinder” secured Morgan’s place in music history. The album was inducted into the GRAMMY Hall of Fame in 2000.

Morgan was mindful of the impact of “The Sidewinder.” KPFA is the flagship station of the Pacifica Radio Network. Program host Dan McClosky⁴ interviewed Morgan between sets at the Both/And jazz club in San Francisco on June 18, 1969. Morgan told McClosky “The Sidewinder” is his biggest hit and “started the ball rolling. It was *the* most important thing I had in helping me to start my own little thing going with my own group.”

Morgan noted that “30 different artists have done it since I’ve done it.” Since the 1969 interview, an additional 40 artists have covered “The Sidewinder,” including Ray Charles, Benny Golson, Bobbi Humphrey and Bernard Purdie.

Saxophonist Billy Harper was a member of Morgan’s last quintet. Harper was with Morgan for his final hometown appearance at the Aqua Lounge in Philadelphia in October 1971. He was with him four months later on that fateful night at Slugs’ Saloon⁵ in New York City when Morgan’s life was tragically cut short at age 33. On International Jazz Day 2024, Harper joined Morgan’s family, friends and jazz enthusiasts for the unveiling of the legendary trumpeter’s Pennsylvania historical marker.⁶

I asked Harper what it was like performing “The Sidewinder.” In an email, Harper wrote:

“The Sidewinder” is sort of an uplifting, happy tune, and performing it with Lee was a true joy. Remembering audiences’ reactions when we would start playing it is something that still brings a smile to my face. I believe that people loved the fact that they could dance to it, that it really made them move. In fact, something that delighted me and the other guys in the band was to watch Lee dancing whenever we played the tune. This is not something he ever did on any other tune. But “The Sidewinder” made him move! I always chuckled and thought he reminds me of Howdy Doody, the way he was moving. I still see it.

Ozier Muhammad, a former staff photographer for the “New York Times” and 1985 Pulitzer Prize winner, witnessed the joy during an engagement in Chicago on April 11, 1971. Muhammad met Morgan when they were both in a bodega to purchase a snack between sets. He recounted that Morgan “looked good. He looked healthy.” In their brief conversation, Morgan gave “very cryptic responses.” Muhammad took this photo at the top of Lee Morgan and Billy Harper at the Industrial Workers of the World Hall.

The origin of “The Sidewinder” has become an urban legend but little is known about the inspiration for the title. During his interview with McClosky, Morgan said “the title is the last to come.” In a cryptic comment in the album’s liner notes⁷, Morgan told jazz critic and journalist Leonard Feather, “The tune kind of put me in mind of the sidewinder--you know, the ‘bad guy’ on television. There’s a snake called the sidewinder, but I was thinking of the bad guy.”

According to his nephew, Raymond Darryl Cox, Morgan loved television westerns, particularly “Bonanza.” So perhaps the “bad guy” was an antagonist of Ben Cartwright and his sons. Morgan was captivated by the soundtrack of the 1958 epic western “The Big Country.”⁸ Composed by Jerome Moross, the music score was nominated for an Academy Award. The film featured two feuding families, the Terrills and the Hannasseys. Was the villainous Buck Hannassey the bad

guy that Morgan had in mind? Or was Morgan inspired by an episode of “The Rifleman” titled “The Sidewinder” that aired on ABC on January 21, 1963? Whatever the inspiration, Harper believes “the tune became a bridge, a gateway into jazz.”

Lee Morgan told Dan McClosky, “A band has to stay on the road. You’re either appearing or disappearing.” The listing of “The Sidewinder” on the National Recording Registry ensures that his masterpiece will not disappear from public memory.

Faye Anderson is director of “All That Philly Jazz,” a place-based public history project that is documenting and contextualizing Philadelphia’s golden age of jazz. She nominated Lee Morgan for a Pennsylvania historical marker.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

¹ Jazz Video Guy. Bob Cranshaw Remembers Lee Morgan and “The Sidewinder.” YouTube. Published November 22, 2010. Accessed June 24, 2024.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMtvXd6TKUw>

² Billboard Hot 100. *Billboard*. Published online January 2, 1965. Accessed June 19, 2024.
<https://www.worldradiohistory.com/Archive-All-Music/Billboard-Magazine.htm>

³ Billboard Top LPs. *Billboard*. Published online January 9, 1965. Accessed June 19, 2024.
<https://www.worldradiohistory.com/Archive-All-Music/Billboard-Magazine.htm>

⁴ Dan McClosky radio interviews. (2023, January 4). Lee Morgan radio interview - 1969 [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBN5zoETTFw>

⁵ Jazz Musician Slain in Nightclub Fight. *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1972/02/20/archives/jazz-musician-slain-in-nightclub-fight.html>.
Published February 20, 1972. Accessed June 24, 2024

⁶ Report TS. Photos: Jubilant marker dedication for jazz legend Edward Lee Morgan in West Philadelphia. *The Philadelphia Tribune*. Published May 1, 2024. Accessed June 24, 2024.
https://www.phillytrib.com/news/photos-jubilant-marker-dedication-for-jazz-legend-edward-lee-morgan-in-west-philadelphia/article_dd4ea666-48e0-56e6-a9a8-29d776af1358.html

⁷ The Sidewinder. *albumlinenotes*. Accessed June 24, 2024.
https://albumlinenotes.com/The_Sidewinder.html#google_vignette

⁸ The Big Country. Wikipedia. Published June 17, 2024.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Big_Country