

Harold Budd – Limpid Crystal Music

MARK PRENDERGAST LOOKS BACK AT THE LIFE AND WORK OF THE COMPOSER AND MUSICIAN, WHO DIED LATE LAST YEAR AGED 84. BUDD WAS THE SUBJECT OF ONE OF MARK'S FIRST INTERVIEWS, MORE THAN THREE DECADES AGO...

When the news came through in January that the great American Minimalist composer and pianist Harold Budd had passed away in a hospital in Arcadia in California due to COVID-19, the world of music took a sharp intake of breath. Not only was Budd one of the first musicians I interviewed in London after I arrived in 1985, and one of the most modest, disarming and cheerful bods I'd ever met. There didn't seem to be a drop of angst in the man, just an openness - an expansiveness and a willingness to embrace new musical experiences. Almost 50 to my 25, the age difference meant nothing to him.



Photos: Mark Richardson

Budd's long life (he was born in Victorville in the Mojave desert north east of Los Angeles in 1936) charts the endless exploration and experiment of 20th Century music. He always pushed upwards and outwards at the conventions expected of him whether it be jazz, serial music, minimalism, ambient, beat poetry or ensemble playing. His life charts a series of collaborators that would be the envy of any musician.

Saxophonists Albert Ayler and Marion Brown; the abstract painter Mark Rothko; composers Gavin Bryars and Michael Nyman; a rich and fruitful relationship with Brian Eno and Daniel Lanois (U2 producers) over a series of pivotal records; ex-Tangerine keyboardist Michael Hoenig, Scotland's the Cocteau Twins; Bill Nelson, B.J. Cole, Andy Partridge, John Foxx, David Sylvian and Robin Guthrie – and that's naming just some. Budd's output up to his death numbered 45 albums!

Budd's soft-pedalled, slow and reverb drenched piano style became synonymous with ambient once he teamed up with Eno but all his life he resented the term. In 1986 he told me, "I view myself as a French post-modern American composer. I see my music as clouds floating freely in space. I've always worked out of the left-end of modern music. I react negatively to being called an ambient musician but it's not as bad as being called New Age. I can't get used to the idea of music as a passive experience.

"All music can be listened to on many many different levels. It's really about communication like the astonishing Terry Riley whose live improvisations were the very best I ever heard in my life and he was doing it very very early on when it was esoteric. Art's a concrete thing: it's right there in front of you. Music starts with ideas and atmospheres which later on become formulated into something that you listen to on a recording."