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E10 MONDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2006

LOS ANGELES TIMES

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# A life filled with blue notes

**E**VEN if I hadn't read Verdi Woodward's book, I'd know something about him from his music. Art, by its very nature, tends to reveal who we are, and the notes soaring from his tenor sax constituted a canvas of travail.

He blew memories and grief into his small studio in South L.A. the other day, encapsulating with jazz riffs the ordeals of his 81 years.

A tall, gaunt man, his face creased with a road map of his life, he handled his shiny gold-toned sax like it was a twig on a floodtide, the last element of rescue from a past he'll probably never get over.

His rendition of "Who Can I Turn To?" became as much a question mark of existence as a jazz interpretation of an old standard, asked in bluesy tones of desperation to no one in particular.

Then he plugged in a CD he'd made as a movie score and it rose above even the live music, played against the hum of traffic through an open door on West Jefferson Street. It was as though reality were adding a contrapuntal note to the emotional tones of his improvisation.

Woodward served 11 years in Folsom and San Quentin prisons for robberies he committed to pay for a lifelong heroin habit. "I may have been convicted of

using too," he says with a twinge of jailhouse humor. "I can't remember."

I don't know how many times I've heard about ex-cons who end up seeking religious atonement for their deeds. Woody isn't really into that, except for participation in Alcoholics Anonymous, which is more for his own good than anyone else's. I suspect it was the horn that drove his post-prison ambitions never to go back. He wanted to be heard.

I met him through a book he wrote about his life, a uniquely eloquent "memoir of jazz and justice" called "Hope to Die." There is a compelling quality to the writing style of a man who dropped out of school in the fifth grade and learned about life on the street. That life is what his book is all about. That and jazz.

A drug addict since his youth and a self-taught "bebop saxophonist," he called music his best friend, recalling a moment in prison when he began humming the bass line to a favorite tune, "Round Midnight," the metal walls of his cell acting as an echo chamber that amplified the deep tones. There was survival in the sound, and even hope, he says, adding, "Thank God for music."

But there were also times, he writes, when he came face to face with himself and didn't like what he saw. Suicide seemed an

alternative: "I brought my arm up to my mouth and with my teeth I felt for the big rope-like vein that ran down my arm. . . . It would be so easy to bite it right out of my arm."

Heroin kept him in a hazy world of light and shadow where facing one's self rarely occurred. He describes his condition after a fix: "It was a non-feeling. To feel nothing was the highest form of being high."

Born to an alcoholic mother and raised by a grandmother he adored, Woodward's love was a woman named Sylvia, at times his drug mate but always a loyal partner, even as he was doing time. She visited him, and when he was released, they married.

"We broke up after a few months," he says, rubbing a hand through receding gray hair, as if wondering why the breakup occurred. "She's coming down soon from San Francisco to see me. Who knows?"

In the last few years he's developed arthritis in his right arm that has left two fingers without feeling. Until then he had been playing at clubs around town but had to give it up. "I can maybe play for 10 minutes," he says, "but four-hour gigs are out."

He thinks about that then adds, "It's like taking my best friend away."

He's turned to composing '40s- and '50s-type music with

jazz overtones. A writer friend, Desmond Nakano, hired Woodward to score a new movie, "The American Pastime," about a Japanese saxophonist locked away in a U.S. internment camp. The film is still in production. Nakano's credits include "Boulevard Nights" and "Last Exit to Brooklyn," both of which have won critical acclaim.

Woodward has been sober for eight years now. He fell off the wagon once, before taking a look at himself and deciding he didn't want to return to a world peopled by cons named Fat Phil and Hog Jaw, where the nights were long and existence an hourly event.

Did he get out of prison free of the emotional demons that put him there? "Nobody comes out of prison better," he says, suddenly serious. "They don't teach you anything that makes you better. That's not their business."

"Hope to Die" is an amazingly literate journey through the hard life of a man who found redemption in the dreamy tones of a tenor sax. He tells a story worth reading, and worth listening to. I'm listening to it now, jazz riffs in solemn tones, painting pictures on the ceiling.

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