

American jazz great John Lewis dead at 80

John Andrews
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John Lewis, the exquisite pianist best known as the musical director of the Modern Jazz Quartet, passed away in New York City on Thursday from prostate cancer. He was 80.

First attracting attention as a sideman during the height of the bebop era, Lewis was steeped in classical music forms, and well educated. A modest, disciplined and sophisticated man, Lewis drew from the broadest musical pallet and insisted on the highest levels of professionalism throughout his career.

Born in 1920, Lewis grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico, far from the centers of jazz development. He entered college as a student of anthropology, but was spellbound by the jazz music available on the radio and phonograph. When the draft for World War II interrupted his university studies, Lewis had the good fortune to be assigned to a military band that included Kenny Clarke, the pioneer bebop drummer. After the war, Lewis followed Clarke's advice, relocating to New York City, where he quickly joined the vibrant modern jazz scene, then at its creative and commercial apex.

Lewis appears on Miles Davis's first session as a leader, an August 1947 small group session for Savoy Records, notable for Charlie Parker's appearance on tenor saxophone rather than his customary alto. Lewis also appeared on the 1948 Charlie Parker session that produced the outstanding "Parker's Mood," my nominee for the greatest slow blues recording in jazz.

Lewis played a prominent role in Miles Davis's 1949 nine-piece orchestra, whose recordings for Capitol Records were later dubbed "The Birth of the Cool," an apt title given their influence on the "cool school" jazz music of the 1950s. Using a tuba and French horn in addition to conventional jazz instruments to play harmonically advanced backgrounds for its excellent soloists, this short-lived band achieved a delicate and beautiful, yet swinging and potent sound unlike anything played during the swing era, and pointed to entirely new directions in jazz music. Other involved in these extremely influential recordings were arranger Gil Evans

and saxophonists Gerry Mulligan and Lee Konitz, all from the Claude Thornhill Orchestra.

Most significantly for his future career, in 1947 Lewis replaced the idiosyncratic Thelonious Monk as the pianist with Dizzy Gillespie's big band. During breaks for the brass and reed musicians to rest their embouchures, Lewis performed quartet numbers with vibraphonist Milt Jackson, bassist Ray Brown and drummer Clarke as a "band within a band." After years with Gillespie, the same lineup recorded in 1952 as the Milt Jackson Quartet. Percy Heath replaced Brown, and the group changed its name to the Modern Jazz Quartet. With only one more change—Connie Kay replaced Clarke in 1955—the MJQ enjoyed an amazing 22-year run as one of the best known and highly regarded small bands in jazz.

While Jackson's fluent vibraphone solos were the jazz connoisseur's focus during an MJQ performance, Lewis's stamp was obvious. Most numbers were based on tight contrapuntal arrangements which owed as much to Bach as to bebop, and the MJQ appeared only at concert halls and top-end nightclubs, wearing impeccable matching tuxedos.

Lewis was a prolific composer for the MJQ, but few of his songs passed into the general lexicon of jazz standards. An exception is his hauntingly beautiful "Django," a tune dedicated to the memory of the outstanding Belgian Gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt.

As mentioned in my obituary for Milt Jackson, Jazz vibraphonist Milt Jackson dead at 76, I am among those who feel that Lewis tended to over-arrange the material, stifling the looseness and spontaneity that attracts fans to jazz music in the first place. As a pianist, he is not among my favorites for much the same reason.

Using a minimalist style reminiscent of Count Basie, Lewis always played as if the placement of each note had to be correct. The results could be quite elegant, but sometimes lacked the feeling of abandon and adventure present in the music's greatest improvised solos. While one might prefer other approaches—I find the Bill Evans piano trios of the 1960s and 1970s much more stimulating

than the MJQ, for example—there can be no questioning the strength of Lewis's integrity and intellect.

Jackson quit the MJQ in 1974, stating that he wanted to perform within a less structured musical environment. Nevertheless, the MJQ reunited for a Tokyo concert in 1980, and even after Kay's death in 1994 continued reunion tours, featuring Percy Heath's brother, Albert “Tootie” Heath, as its drummer, until Jackson's death in 1999.

During his association with the MJQ, Lewis also pursued an active solo career. With Gunther Shuller, the renowned classical conductor and jazz historian, Lewis spearheaded the “third stream” movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s—a not entirely successful effort to meld classical and jazz music into an independent form. Having obtained a masters degree from the Manhattan School of Music in 1953, Lewis was also prominent in teaching and academic work at Harvard and the City College of New York. Finally, Lewis was a tireless proponent of the development of jazz music, for example, serving as the musical director of the Monterey Jazz festival from 1958 to 1964, its most adventurous period.

Remaining active in music to the end, Lewis released an album of new recordings in 1999 and another earlier this year. He last performed publicly at a New York City concert last January, playing piano and conducting the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra.

Lewis was an exceptional artist from an exceptional period of artistic development. His wonderful music, like that of all the top bebop artists, embodied and expressed the most fundamental aesthetic values of the generation which emerged from the caldron of World War II and matured at a time when belief in the ability of human society to better itself through the elimination of social inequality and racial discrimination was widespread. Perhaps some day we will see another generation of jazz musicians who have as much to say.



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