

Jazz drummer Billy Higgins dies

John Andrews
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The ebullient Billy Higgins, the most recorded jazz drummer of the last 50 years, died Thursday in the Los Angeles suburb of Inglewood after a protracted battle with liver disease. He was 64.

A Los Angeles native, Higgins began his professional career in the early 1950s, forming a small band with his high school companion, trumpeter Don Cherry. In 1955 both fell under the spell of the then unknown avant-garde saxophonist Ornette Coleman. Four years later, after honing a completely new approach to jazz improvisation—one which abandoned reliance on the harmonic structure dictated by the underlying chord progressions of the blues and popular songs—Coleman opened with a quartet featuring Higgins, Cherry and bassist Charlie Hayden at the Five Spot Café in New York City.

Coleman's extended engagement at the Five Spot is considered one of the seminal events in jazz history. Night after night, musicians, critics and other cognoscenti packed the club to absorb the quartet's extended “free jazz” atonal group improvisations. Coleman was hailed by some as the next jazz giant after Charlie Parker while he was condemned by others as an outright fraud. But Higgins, the group's swinging, tasteful drummer, seemed to catch everyone's fancy.

Higgins eventually left Coleman, but remained in New York City where he seemed to be everywhere. Most notably, Higgins was the house drummer for Blue Note Records during the label's most prolific and popular period, the mid-1960s. His driving but always elegant percussion propelled classic straight-ahead recordings by saxophonists John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Dexter Gordon, Hank Mobley and Joe Henderson, trumpeters Lee Morgan, Donald Byrd and Freddy Hubbard, pianists Thelonious Monk, Sonny Clark, Herbie Hancock and Cedar Walton, and dozens of others.

Higgins moved back to Los Angeles in 1978, where

he recorded with saxophonists Art Pepper, Harold Land and Charles Lloyd, vibraphonist Bobbie Hutcherson, among others, and reunited with Charlie Hayden in a group called “Quartet West.”

Higgins became well known in California for his encouragement and education of young jazz players. During the 1980s he helped establish The World Stage, a storefront in Los Angeles's Liemert Park District, where local and visiting jazz masters provided workshop training for local youth. He also taught regularly as a faculty member of UCLA. There are now dozens of fine young musicians in Southern California indebted to Higgins' extraordinary efforts.

Watching Higgins perform in person was an unforgettable experience. A particularly wiry and animated man, when the music started Higgins would break out in a huge smile. Playing the drum kit like a melodic instrument, gently but firmly, Higgins would sometimes let out sudden whoops and shrieks when the band fell into a particularly satisfying groove. Musicians loved playing with him and audiences loved listening to the results.

Higgins' illness came to public attention five years ago, when he underwent two liver transplants within 24 hours. Several months ago, it became known that Higgins needed a third liver transplant to survive. Higgins last performed in public on January 22, 2001, at a Los Angeles benefit to raise money for medical treatment.



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