

Jazz drummer Paul Motian (1931-2011)

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Influential American jazz drummer Paul Motian died November 22 at the age of 80. Best remembered as the drummer for the classic Bill Evans Trio of the early 1960s, Motian was also a member of pianist Keith Jarrett's quartet in the 1970s, and in the 1980s began leading his own successful trio, featuring tenor saxophonist Joe Lovano and guitarist Bill Frisell.

At the time of his death, Motian remained a significant figure in the jazz world. His 2010 album *Lost in a Dream* was among the best jazz releases that year. This past year saw the release of Motian's *The Windmills of Your Mind* and the drummer appeared as a sideman on several other recordings.

Motian was born March 25, 1931 in Philadelphia to parents of Armenian ancestry, who had emigrated from Turkey. He was raised in Providence, Rhode Island, where he began playing drums at the age of 12. By the late 1940s, he had begun performing with a local big band.

Motian chose to join the Navy in 1950, during the Korean War, rather than be drafted into the Army. He was able to study music at the Navy School of Music in Washington, though he reportedly did not remember the experience fondly later in life. The next few years were spent performing in Navy bands. Discharged in 1954, Motian settled in Manhattan's East Village and began attending jam sessions with area musicians.

The cultural atmosphere in which Motian was then immersed was a very rich one. The jazz scene in New York was flourishing. Motian was able to see many of the major groups and players of the period perform, an experience which had an enormous impact on him. He studied the performances of his favorite drummers. He was able to see the remarkable quintet led by drummer Max Roach and trumpeter Clifford Brown. He saw Philly Joe Jones with Miles Davis's classic quintet and Art Blakey with his band the Jazz Messengers.

New opportunities were also becoming available to young musicians during the postwar period. Up and coming musicians were able to gain greater access to music

education. Motian, for example, attended the Manhattan School of Music on the GI Bill, where he was able to study tympani, xylophone and piano.

Motian first met the gifted pianist Bill Evans in 1954 when the two toured as sidemen for clarinetist Jerry Wald, and later Tony Scott. When Evans decided to form a new trio of his own in 1959, Motian joined him along with a talented young bassist named Scott LaFaro. They made their recording debut with the 1960 album *Portrait in Jazz*.

The trio, well known for the harmonic inventiveness of pianist-leader Evans, was also notable for playing with a very loose and open sense of rhythm and for placing a special emphasis on group improvisation. Leaving behind the traditional roles of a rhythm section, LaFaro and Motian were placed on equal footing with Evans. LaFaro improvised counter-melodies on bass to Evans' lead lines, while on drums Motian began to experiment with the methods that would come to define him as an artist. Rather than "playing time" with a steady beat, Motian improvised longer or shorter rhythmic phrases, adding "color" and texture to the performance, in a sense becoming another melodic voice in the group's improvisation. His playing was sensitive, even lyrical. He was especially adept at playing ballads.

Motian always possessed a generous musical personality. In a 2006 interview with NPR's Fresh Air, Motian said "I'm not a showpiece drummer ... I feel like I'm an accompanist. It's my sort of thing to make the other people sound good, as good as they can be. I feel like I should accompany them, and I should accompany the sound that I am hearing and make it the best that I can—that I can do."

The preoccupations of Motian, Evans and LaFaro, with their special attention to harmony and group performance, and their relatively "cool" sound, seem particularly bound up with new social moods taking hold during the postwar period. A section of working class and middle class youth, for whom the Depression and War years were now in the past, were able, for a time, to see their living conditions improve. New opportunities presented themselves and a certain confidence was felt. The struggle for equality waged by the black population in the South would have had a

significant impact on these sensitive artists as well.

The trio's finest music can be found on two highly regarded albums recorded during a 1961 stay at the famed jazz club, the Village Vanguard: *Sunday at the Village Vanguard* and *Waltz for Debby*.

Just ten days after these albums were recorded, in what would be a major loss, Scott LaFaro was killed in a car accident. He was only 25 years old. LaFaro's death left Motian and Evans devastated. After some time, the two eventually chose to carry on with Chuck Israels succeeding LaFaro on bass. Motian would eventually leave the group in the mid-1960s.

From the late 1960s through the 1970s, Motian was a member of pianist Keith Jarrett's groups, first as part of a trio, then as a member of Jarrett's so-called "American Quartet," along with bassist Charlie Haden and tenor saxophonist Dewey Redman. The group fused together a number of different influences, including "free" and straight-ahead jazz, R&B and gospel, with varying results. The 1971 album *Expectations* may be the group's most successful outing.

Motian released *Conception Vessel*, his first of many albums as a leader, in 1972. The groups Motian led in the 1970s tended to fall firmly into the "free jazz" camp, and also demonstrated a certain political radicalization. One finds a number of songs envisioned as protests against the Vietnam War. There are also many of the limitations and missteps one might expect, including a recording of the Charlie Haden composition "Song for Che."

There are moving performances to be found, including a recording of the Ornette Coleman composition "War Orphans," from *Tribute* (1974). However, much of this material feels slight compared to Motian's earlier work with Evans, or the much stronger recordings of his own later groups. Too much of it tries for a cohesive "group improvisation" but only achieves a kind of simultaneous, but disconnected, improvisation.

The drummer far surpassed these recordings when he formed a trio in the 1980s with tenor saxophonist Joe Lovano and guitarist Bill Frisell. This group proved to be one of the more interesting small combos in jazz from the 1980s onward. The "freedom" and openness of rhythm and group improvisation Motian began exploring with Evans and his free jazz groups remained, but the excesses of the previous period were gone. Motian also returned to performing standards from the "American songbook" and the work of other significant jazz composers.

One of the trio's albums in particular, *Monk in Motian* (1988), deserves special notice. Motian had a special affinity for the music of Thelonious Monk, with whom he had played some live dates in the 1950s and again in the

1960s. *Monk in Motian* features ten of Monk's compositions performed by Motian's trio at their best. The drummer and band leader's loose rhythmic sensibility was perhaps uniquely suited to navigate the often surprising turns of Monk's compositions.

In 1989, Motian began recording a series of albums of standards, each called *On Broadway*. The fifth and final entry into the series was released in 2009. *On Broadway Volume One* (1989) features some of Motian's strongest drumming, with the solos he takes on Gershwin's "Liza (All the Clouds'll Roll Away)" being especially memorable.

Motian formed the Electric Bebop Band in the early 1990s, comprised of two saxophonists, two or more guitarists, bass and drums. This unusual setting allowed Motian to explore the catalogues of Thelonious Monk, again, as well as that of Tadd Dameron, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and other leading bebop era musicians.

In recording Broadway standards and the classic works of bebop musicians, Motian avoided a "neoclassicist" or purist approach. These songs can sometimes feel like stale museum pieces. In Motian's hands, these works felt immediate and alive. They were performed by an artist who felt deeply that these songs could still speak to an audience and communicate something vital to them.

Motian continued to record and perform through 2011. Many of his recordings from the last decade, including the albums *Garden of Eden* (2005) and *Lost in a Dream* (2010) could be counted among his best work. This year also saw the release of *Live at Birdland*, a strong live recording by a quartet featuring Motian alongside saxophonist Lee Konitz, pianist Brad Mehldau and Haden.

In January, Concord Jazz will release *Further Explorations*, another live recording by a trio comprised of Motian, bassist Eddie Gomez and pianist Chick Corea performing a tribute to the music of the classic Bill Evans Trio.



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