Donald Byrd, extraordinary jazz trumpeter, dies at 80

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Donald Byrd, an exceptional jazz trumpeter associated with the “hard bop” school of jazz exemplified by the Blue Note record label during the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, died February 4. The cause of death has not been released.

Born Donaldson Toussaint L’Ouverture Byrd II on December 9, 1932 in Detroit, Michigan, Byrd was very much a product of the post-World War II economic and cultural boom. As a student at Cass Technical High School—which then had a highly advanced music program—Byrd developed enough basic skills to fill in with the Lionel Hampton big band.

Rather than go directly into professional music, however, Byrd continued his education—interrupted by a four-year stint in the Air Force—obtaining a bachelors degree in music from Wayne State University before moving to New York City in 1955.

New York had been the center of jazz development since the early 1940s, when young musicians such as alto saxophonist Charlie Parker, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, pianist Bud Powell and drummer Max Roach modernized the conventions of swing era jazz into what became known as “bebop” or “bop.”

Byrd quickly meshed with major bop figures as well as the emerging players associated with the straight-ahead, small combo jazz style that became known as “hard bop.” He also attended the Manhattan School of Music, where he earned his first of five postgraduate degrees.

Byrd’s first recording session took place on June 28, 1955, three months after Parker’s death at age 34 from the consequences of substance abuse. Under the leadership of pioneer bebop drummer Kenny Clarke for Savoy Records, the recording session was also the first for alto saxophonist Cannonball Adderley.

Byrd came to New York with excellent technique and played with great lyricism, which placed him in great demand. Before the end of 1955, Byrd had three recording sessions for Savoy as a leader, and replaced trumpet star Clifford Brown in Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers, then considered a key incubator for the further development of the bop style.

Brown died tragically in a 1956 automobile accident, but other young, brilliant trumpeters, notably Lee Morgan and Freddie Hubbard, along with Byrd, filled the void.

By the end of the decade, Byrd had performed on dozens of records, both as a sideman or leader, with contemporaries including saxophonists John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Hank Mobley and Jackie McLean, pianists Sonny Clark, Thelonious Monk, Hank Jones, Bobby Timmons and Horace Silver, bassists Paul Chambers and Wilbur Ware, and drummers Max Roach, Roy Haynes and Elvin Jones.

These highly skilled bop and post-bop musicians performed almost exclusively in small groups, usually comprised of one to three horns backed by an acoustical piano-bass-drums rhythm section.

The repertoire generally included standard American popular songs, original tunes based on dynamic harmonic movement and the seemingly endless variety of songs based on the 12-measure blues progression. Typically, minimally arranged or unison passages, known as “heads,” framed a succession of improvised solos by the horns and piano moving logically through the tune’s underlying structure.

Byrd’s performances throughout this period demonstrate astounding consistency for an improvisational artist. Like Clifford Brown, Byrd based his approach on the buttery sound and clear melodic articulation of bebop legend Fats Navarro (1923-1950) rather than the more pyrotechnical style of Gillespie, or the linear, moody playing of Miles Davis.

By the late 1950s, Blue Note Records, founded by Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff, two friends from childhood who fled Nazi Germany together twenty years

earlier, had grown into the foremost outlet for New York-based, post-bop jazz.

Unlike some others in the recording industry, Lion and Wolff always treated the musicians—many of whom were addicted to narcotics and desperate for money—with respect. Lion, who produced the sessions, insisted on and paid for rehearsals, and always used the top sound engineer at that time, Rudy Van Gelder, and his excellent Hackensack, New Jersey, studio. Records were pressed on the highest quality vinyl, with tasteful covers usually featuring photographs of the musicians taken during sessions by Wolff, and informative liner notes.

Byrd signed with Blue Note in 1958, releasing the excellent "Off to the Races," featuring fellow Detroit native Pepper Adams on baritone saxophone. He followed with "Byrd in Hand" the next year.

The 1960s brought changes to the New York jazz scene. Rock and roll, folk and rhythm and blues—forms which required less musical technique to perform—were capturing the younger audiences and generating larger sales than jazz artists.

Jazz musicians responded in different ways. Many simply continued to play bop and post-bop. Others led by tenor saxophonist John Coltrane, alto saxophonist Ornette Coleman and pianist Cecil Taylor abandoned song structures, with their set harmonies, altogether to play "free jazz."

Byrd was among the many Blue Note artists who following a third path. They sought, with both commercial and aesthetic success, to appeal to wider tastes through simplifying the harmonic structure and intensifying the rhythmic pulse.

The new, more "funky" hard bop style was epitomized by Byrd's 1961 album "Royal Flush," featuring 21-year-old Herbie Hancock on piano. In 1963, Byrd scored a minor hit with "A New Perspective," featuring voices, and an attractive original, "Cristo Redentor," inspired by Byrd's visit to Rio de Janeiro.

Blue Note albums recorded prior to Lion's 1967 retirement, many of which feature Byrd, remain today a distinctive body of work, both accessible and sophisticated. It is perhaps the clearest instance of an entire school of jazz music being associated with a record label. Originals in good condition are prized by collectors throughout the world.

By 1970, a few established jazz musicians, most notably Miles Davis, embraced electronic instruments, abandoned harmonic movement and melody in favor of simple vamps and musical "hooks," and performed at large rock venues.

Byrd embraced this turn to popular music. His breakthrough album, 1972's "Black Byrd," featured electrified funk rhythms over which Byrd played simple, repetitive figures, greatly increasing his audience, if not necessarily his standing with jazz purists. Regular pop-funk "fusion" performances with his group "The Blackbyrds" followed. These recordings became a widely used source for "sampling" by hip-hop artists.

By the late 1970s, despite his commercial success, Byrd virtually ceased recording. He had earned two masters degrees from Columbia University in addition to his degree from the Manhattan School of Music, as well as a law degree. In 1982, he earned a doctorate from Columbia University Teacher's College.

For the last 30 years, "Dr. Byrd," as he wished to be called, taught music at Rutgers University, the Hampton Institute, New York University, Howard University, Queens College, Oberlin College, Cornell University, North Carolina Central University and Delaware State University.

What does one say about such a career? Taste in music is, of course, individual, but there are certain objective criteria. Byrd's 1950s recordings are exemplary, his slightly compromised efforts of the next decade perhaps less so. Commercial and related pressures are intense, and some might view Byrd's later recordings as his cashing in before departing the jazz life for academia.

But life is more complicated than that. Whatever the specifics of jazz's development, there is a historical context to Byrd's career as well. His finest works coincided with the rising tide of the postwar years, increasing standards of living for the working class and the struggle for civil rights, accompanied by growing cultural and personal self-confidence. His later efforts reflected in part the growing discouragement and disappointment experienced by many, as conditions deteriorated, dreams were crushed and American capitalist society began coming apart at the seams.