

Prolific composer and master jazz pianist Horace Silver dies at 85

John Andrews
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Jazz emerged in the 1920s to the clarion call of Louis Armstrong's trumpet, whose musical ideas dominated until the "young Turks" of the 1940s, led by alto saxophonist Charlie Parker, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and pianist Bud Powell, broadened the harmonic and rhythmic vocabulary of jazz, creating the new musical language of bebop.

Much as the conventions of early jazz were consolidated, polished and expanded by the swing bands of the 1930s—the only period when jazz dominated popular music in the US—so the innovations of modern jazz were explored and developed into sundry forms during the 1950s, the aesthetically most diverse and richest decade in jazz history.

During the second half of the 1950s, a split emerged between adherents of so-called cool jazz, largely centered on the West Coast, and hard bop out of New York City. In retrospect, the dispute—often presented in crude and largely inaccurate racial terms—appears grossly oversimplified and even somewhat quaint, as excellent jazz was being played in many different styles and places to broad, appreciative and well-informed audiences.

In any event, no musician was more central to the rise of hard bop, particularly in its "funky" incarnation, than pianist Horace Silver, a masterful jazz composer, who passed away last Wednesday at the age of 85.

Silver will be most remembered as the writer of earthy jazz tunes that stick in the head, built on melodies and rhythms reflecting their titles: "The Preacher," "Opus de Funk," "Strollin'," "Doodlin'," "Sister Sadie," "Señor Blues," "Filthy McNasty," and his masterpiece, "Song for My Father," among many others.

Horace Ward Martin Tavares Silva was born on September 2, 1928, in Norwalk, Connecticut, to a father who emigrated from the Cape Verde archipelago west of Africa, a former Portuguese colony, and a mother of Irish-African descent born in Connecticut. One can't help but

hear in Silver's oeuvre the fruits of his exposure as a youth to a multitude of musical traditions, including African-American gospel and Portuguese-African folk music.

Silver became known after rising tenor saxophone star Stan Getz heard the 21-year-old in a Hartford, Connecticut, nightclub and hired him on the spot. As the pianist in Getz's bebop quartet, Silver made his first records in late 1950 and early 1951, displaying solid technique backing the fine, light-toned saxophonist at the lightning-fast, yet somehow also relaxed, tempi Getz favored.

Silver contributed several compositions, including "Split Kick," a catchy minor riff suggesting the style for which Silver later became well known.

Getz, ironically, became an icon of "cool jazz," the style against which Silver's later work was often contrasted.

Relocating to New York, where he became the house pianist for the Monday night jam sessions at Birdland (the nightclub named after Charlie Parker), Silver soon became affiliated with Blue Note Records, a relationship that would last almost 30 years.

As discussed in last year's obituary of trumpeter Donald Byrd, Blue Note became the epicenter for many of the finest New York jazz musicians of the 1950s and 1960s, and became virtually synonymous with the cutting edge of hard bop.

Owner and producer Alfred Lion insisted that musicians rehearse and work out tight arrangements before recording. His partner Francis Wolff photographed the musicians at work in Rudy van Gelder's Hackensack and Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, studios. Blue Note's albums were pressed on top-quality vinyl, adorned with Wolff's excellent portraits and released with informative, intelligent liner notes.

Silver made his first records as a leader in October

1952, a trio session for Blue Note featuring the aggressive bebop drummer Art Blakey. Mostly playing his own compositions, including “Opus de Funk,” which would become a jazz standard, Silver combined the rhythmic and harmonic sophistication of bebop with a wry sense of fun sometimes overlooked in the piano jazz of the period, dominated by the pensive virtuosity of Bud Powell and the angular rhythms and harmonic dissonances of Thelonious Monk.

Silver and Blakey added trumpet and saxophone to the trio, forming a quintet they called “The Jazz Messengers.” In February 1954, Blue Note recorded The Jazz Messengers live at Birdland—then an unusual practice—with saxophonist Lou Donaldson (still active today at 87), and the young trumpet star Clifford Brown, tragically killed in an automobile accident two years and four months later.

For the three years he performed and recorded with The Jazz Messengers, Silver also recorded prolifically as a sideman for other performers, including several notable sessions with Miles Davis, one of which produced the classic album “Walkin’ ” for Prestige Records.

Silver left The Jazz Messengers in 1956 to lead his own group. With the release of “Six Pieces of Silver” on Blue Note, and its hit single “Señor Blues”, Silver became the leading voice of a different approach to hard bop—fun and easy to appreciate, yet still sophisticated.

The term “funky,” which previously had not been used publicly because of its sexual connotations, became associated with Silver’s gospel-tinged, hard bop.

Silver’s string of outstanding Blue Note albums, from which several hit jazz singles were taken, peaked with 1964’s “Song for My Father,” whose title tune, a simple pentatonic riff over a bossa nova, became Silver’s signature piece.

Because Silver emphasized making his music accessible to a wider audience without comprising its jazz essentials, he seemed to be in a better position than some others to accommodate the impact of soul music and rock during the 1960s. Yet by 1970, his music too revealed an aesthetic decline, despite Silver’s continuing association with the finest jazz players available.

With the release of “That Healin’ Feelin’ ” on Blue Note in 1970 (by then Alfred Lion had sold the label to Liberty Records and retired), Silver laid vocals consisting of preachy, cosmic pseudo-philosophy over electrified funk rhythms, pretentiously titling his new sounds the “United States of Mind.”

In a 1974 radio interview, Silver tediously explained

that he had become “interested in metaphysics and Indian philosophies, and Yoga philosophies.... I was doing a lot of reading, a lot of soul-searching, a lot of meditation; and I put it altogether and came up with ‘The United States of Mind,’ which deals with all of that which I just mentioned; dealing with the physical, the mental and the spiritual things.”

While never returning to his earlier brilliance or popularity, Silver stayed active in music until retiring in the late 1990s. Whether his reasons for leaving music were based on health or loss of inspiration is not clear.

Silver’s career trajectory paralleled those of many, but not all, of the first post-bebop generation, who seemed to have become disoriented and discouraged by the exploding popularity of different popular music forms, especially rock and soul, during the 1960s.

The pianist’s brilliant early career corresponded with the postwar economic boom, the rise in power of the industrial unions and the mass struggles for civil rights. For the first time, a layer of African American young people were able to express themselves and their feelings about life in a relatively unrestricted fashion.

Silver’s infectious, happy compositions certainly reverberated among wide layers of the population, whose hopes would later be dashed by the imperialist quagmire of Vietnam and the deepening economic crisis of US capitalism. The dead end of identity politics no doubt played a major role as well in the crisis in jazz from the mid- or late 1960s.

Regardless, Silver’s prodigious recordings will continue to bring pleasure and inspiration to jazz fans for years to come.



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