

The “Mark Twain of jazz” dies at 89

Mose Allison: 1927-2016

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Four years after his last public performance, blues and jazz musician Mose Allison died November 15 at 89 years old at his home in Hilton Head, South Carolina. Until 2012, he maintained a rigorous touring schedule of more than 100 performances per year during his six-decade-long musical career.

In addition to being a tireless performer, Mose left behind a tremendous body of recorded work dating back to the mid-1950s. Tunes like “Parchman Farm,” “Cryin’ Mercy,” and “Your Mind is on Vacation” won him many fans and established him as one of the most iconoclastic young artists of the 1960s.

Mose had a catalog of over 50 albums, including some 30 studio albums. Yet his income from royalties was so minimal that by the 1990s he decided to stop making records. He had to devote his efforts to touring. In a 2010 interview with the WSWs, he said, “Traveling gets hard sometimes, but I enjoy the playing.” Allison added, “I’ve always enjoyed it. It’s always a challenge, just like the first night I played. It’s just the same after sixty years. You never know how it’s going to feel or what’s going to happen.”

Known informally as the “Mark Twain” and “William Faulkner of jazz,” Mose grew up in the town of Tippo, in northwestern Mississippi, where he was born in 1927, and sucked up the musical influences all around him—blues, jazz and boogie woogie. He played music on his family’s player piano and fell under the spell of musicians and performers such as Louis Jordan, Memphis Minnie, Big Bill Broonzy, Tampa Red and countless others on local juke boxes. He wrote his first song when he was 13.

Mose’s deep appreciation for the blues impelled him to ignore and cross color lines. As a youth, he managed to sneak into venues where white spectators weren’t supposed to be.

As a young man, he attended Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, where he came under the influence of the music of exiled Hungarian composer Belá Bartok. Allison described his first album, cut in the mid-1950s by the Prestige label, as being based on Bartok’s folk melodies.

By the time he arrived in New York City in 1956, he was an accomplished jazz pianist, having performed in various venues on the Gulf Coast and in Texas. Saxophonist Al Cohn invited Allison to come to the city and perform in the thriving jazz scene, where he played with greats Zoot Sims, Stan Getz and Gerry Mulligan—as well as Cohn himself. The motivated listener can still find CDs on which Mose performs in those days.

Mose describes how he came to record tunes with lyrics: “It’s just what I did. Later, in New York in the mid-fifties, that’s what the record companies wanted. They wanted songs with words.”

The words Mose wrote, however, often included acerbically sly observations about the world. Some were critiques of conventional thinking (“Your Mind Is on Vacation”), some attacked war and inequality (“Cryin’ Mercy,” “Parchman Farm”), and others expressed everyday feelings in unforgettable ways (“Your Molecular Structure”).

Allison was staunch in defending his musical integrity. He described his relationship with famed record producer Jerry Wexler during his years with Atlantic Records in the following fashion: “He wanted me to go down to Muscle Shoals [Alabama] and play with the bands that Atlantic Records had down there and play more popular stuff. I didn’t want to do it. There were a lot of suggestions I didn’t take.”

He told the WSWs that despite the almost certain boost to his popularity, “My position was, if it becomes

a hit then I'll have to do that all the time, over and over again. And if it was something that I didn't like playing the first time, well, I just didn't want to do that."

Even though Mose Allison was never a musical household name, he accumulated an intense and loyal following among well-known musicians such as Van Morrison, Ben Sidran and Georgie Fame. His tunes were copied by bands such as The Who, Bonny Raitt, Elvis Costello, Diana Krall, even punk bands like The Clash and indie-rockers The Pixies. In a video tribute that resulted in the album "Tell Me Something," Morrison, Sidran and Fame describe how they were influenced by Allison's music.

His later work lost none of its wit and, if anything, developed an enhanced sensitivity. In his 2010 album, *The Way of the World*, he recorded "This New Situation" with his singer-songwriter daughter Amy. A 2009 YouTube video of an intimate performance of "Was" from *My Backyard* (1990) is well worth watching for its poignancy. These are some of the lyrics:

*When I become was and we become were
Will there be any sign or a trace
of the lovely contours of your face
and will there be someone around
with essentially my kind of sound*

*When am becomes were
And now is back when
Will someone have moments like this
Moments of unspoken bliss
And will there be heroes and saints.
Or just a dark new age of complaints.*

Honestly, simply and touchingly, Mose poses questions about the future that we all ponder. The directness is disarming.

Summing up such a life and musical career, which embraces virtually the entire postwar period, is impossible in a short space. All that remains is his recorded legacy. From first to last, the albums are worth listening to. This writer will simply repeat his appeal to the reader to explore for him or herself.



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