Prominent jazz musicians die in COVID-19 pandemic

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Numerous prominent musicians may be counted among the more than 1.2 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 recorded globally and the nearly 70,000 lives that have now been lost.

Cameroonian saxophonist Manu Dibango, of "Soul Makossa" fame, died March 24 at the age of 86. Pianist Mike Longo, a longtime collaborator of Dizzy Gillespie's, died March 22 at 83. Songwriter Adam Schlesinger died April 1 at 52.

The 73-year-old British singer Marianne Faithfull was recently hospitalized in London. Beloved country singer John Prine, also 73, has now spent more than a week in an ICU, where he has needed the assistance of a ventilator. Guitarist Larry Campbell, 65, has also been fighting the disease. "For the past two weeks, I've been struggling to stay alive," he told *Rolling Stone* magazine in an interview published April 2.

In the last week alone, three significant jazz musicians in the US lost their lives: Ellis Marsalis, Bucky Pizzarelli and Wallace Roney. Their deaths are the result, not only of a terrible virus, but of the criminal inaction and deliberate neglect of the US government in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pianist **Ellis Marsalis, Jr.** died April 1 at the age of 85. In addition to his achievements as a pianist and music educator, Marsalis also founded his own musical dynasty. His sons include trumpeter Wynton, saxophonist Branford, trombonist Delfeayo and drummer Jason.

In his capacity as an instructor with the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts and, later, with the University of New Orleans, Marsalis taught trumpeters Terence Blanchard and Nicholas Payton, saxophonist Donald Harrison and singer Harry Connick, Jr.

As a performer and recording artist, Marsalis's playing was always sophisticated and exact, but the blues was never far from his reach. There was often a touch of the saloon in his otherwise elegant style. Despite the years he spent in academia, somewhat out of the jazz spotlight, which has more often been focused on his sons Wynton and Branford, Ellis Marsalis was a weekly fixture at the Snug Harbor Jazz Bistro in New Orleans for more than three decades. There he retained the connection to live audiences so important to this music.

Readers are encouraged to seek out Marsalis's excellent 2017 album *The Ellis Marsalis Quintet Plays the Music of Ellis Marsalis*, which showcases the vitality his playing, his talents as a composer and his leadership of musicians much younger than himself.

The wonderful guitarist **Bucky Pizzarelli** was 94 when he died, also on April 1. Like Ellis Marsalis, he, too, raised a family of jazz musicians. One son, Mike, is a bassist and another, John, is a noted guitarist and singer.

Bucky Pizzarelli played with impeccable taste. Having paid his dues in a variety of dance bands at the end of the swing era, Pizzarelli knew how to move audiences. His thumping, driving swing guitar provided the pulse in a variety of settings, from guitar duets to so-called "Gypsy Jazz" combos and big bands.

While Pizzarelli is famous for his sense of rhythm and guitar solos that weaved together dense layers of chords, he also had a lovely touch with ballads and could play the most lyrical single-note runs. His use of an additional, seventh string on the guitar allowed him to dig low into the range of a bass violin.

Pizzarelli contributed many fine recordings during his career. Since the news of his death was announced, this writer has returned most frequently to *Nirvana* (1974), recorded in collaboration with saxophonist Zoot Sims, and *Just Friends*, a 1984 collaboration between

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Pizzarelli's trio and vibraphonist Red Norvo.

Trumpeter **Wallace Roney** was only 59 when he died on March 31. As one of the so-called "Young Lions" of jazz to emerge in the 1980s, Roney aimed to restore some of the traditions of 1940s' bebop and the modern jazz of the 1950s after decades in which the music had been fused with rock and R&B.

As a young musician, he benefited from the mentorship of the great drummer Art Blakey, and even more importantly, that of legendary trumpeter Miles Davis. Roney became Davis's protégé in what was reportedly the only such relationship Davis ever developed.

For many years, Davis seemed to haunt Roney's tone and phrasing. The latter was often criticized for sounding too much like his mentor. Despite this, he developed into a significant performer in his own right, displaying a stunning virtuosity informed by some of the music's best traditions. He leaves behind a catalogue of gutsy, hard-bop albums. His 1999 recording *No Job Too Big or Small* is a highlight. His most recent album, *Blue Dawn-Blue Nights*, released in 2019, should also be heard.

Marsalis and Pizzarelli, it needs to be pointed out, were both in the age range considered expendable by American capitalism. As they succumbed to COVID-19, Trump administration officials, right-wing commentators such as Glenn Beck and more "reasonable" figures like *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman all publicly debated whether it would not be better for the economy to let such people die.

The cold calculations of these spokesmen for profit stand in stark contrast to the warmth and humanity exhibited by the large numbers of ordinary people now grieving the loss of these artists. Well into their 80s and 90s, Marsalis and Pizzarelli, continued to give something meaningful to the world they lived in, just as they always had, and just as many countless others do, in large and small ways, most of whose names will never be widely known. In the context of the homicidal debates raging among the various mouthpieces for governments and corporations, the lives of these veteran artists somehow come to represent the humanity of an entire generation.

The deaths of these musicians, moreover, are a further reminder of the devastating cultural dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic. We go forward with the confidence that the murderous inhumanity of the ruling elite will not go unanswered by the working class.

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