

# Jazz pianist Chick Corea dead at 79

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The celebrated jazz pianist Chick Corea died February 9 at the age of 79. A statement posted on Corea's official website revealed that the virtuoso performer had recently been diagnosed with a rare form of cancer.

During his six decades in jazz, Corea achieved an unusual level of recognition, gaining a much larger audience for himself than the genre typically allows. He won 23 Grammy awards during his career and was nominated for two more last November. In 2006, the National Endowment for the Arts named him a Jazz Master. A few of Corea's compositions, above all his 1973 classic "Spain," have become standards performed and recorded numerous times by other musicians.

If Corea's overall musical contribution is ultimately more uneven than these accomplishments would indicate, he nevertheless leaves behind a significant body of work with some truly exceptional moments scattered throughout.

Chick Corea (born Armando Anthony Corea in 1941 in Chelsea, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston) got his start in the early 1960s, performing as a sideman with Latin Jazz icons Mongo Santamaria and Willie Bobo. Other significant collaborations followed, including stints with Stan Getz, Blue Mitchell and Herbie Mann, but it was Corea's work with legendary trumpeter Miles Davis that put him on the musical map.

By the time Corea joined his band, Davis had embarked on his controversial "fusion" period. Blending jazz, rock and funk music, and switching from acoustic to electrified instruments, the new form of music that Davis pioneered alienated many fans of his earlier work but would come to dominate jazz throughout the 1970s. Corea was there for most of it, including Davis's landmark recordings *In A Silent Way* (1969) and *Bitches Brew* (1970).

Along with groups such as Weather Report and

Mahavishnu Orchestra, Corea's own band Return to Forever came to define the music that Davis had pioneered. The most striking feature of the early Return to Forever albums was the light and airy quality of the music. There was a dancing elegance to songs like "Spain," "Captain Marvel" and "500 Miles High," all of which appeared on the album *Light as a Feather* (1973). Corea's playing was at its most delicate and lyrical during this period.

Subsequent Return to Forever albums were both more popular and less satisfying than the early ones. The band's most popular lineup of Corea on keyboards, Stanley Clarke on bass, Lenny White on drums and Al Di Meola on guitar took the music in harder-hitting, rock-influenced directions. "Captain Señor Mouse," featuring Bill Connors rather than Di Meola on guitar, is representative of the shift in style.

It is understandable that jazz listeners continue to be divided over the fusion subgenre, even to the point of doubting whether or not it should be called jazz at all. But the music should not be dismissed out of hand. Some of it was very good, and whether one can properly call it "jazz" or not is somewhat beside the point in the face of that. That less of the music holds up today than one would like is not so much the fault of any individual musician, or even of the genre itself, but is instead bound up with more fundamental social problems.

Fusion took hold just as the radicalism of the 1960s and early 1970s had begun to subside. It became popular at about the same time that "blockbuster" filmmaking began to dominate in Hollywood. Like those blockbusters, fusion could be big and brash, and it was no less obsessed with fantasy and science fiction. Among the many songs recorded by Return to Forever could be found titles such as "Theme to the Mothership," "Space Circus," "Medieval Overture," "Duel of the Jester and the Tyrant" and "The Romantic

Warrior.”

There was something of an artistic-intellectual retreat underway. A one-sided devotion to technical mastery, both in terms of musicianship and the use of new technology available to musicians, characterized much of the fusion genre, as it did the progressive rock genre that coincided with it. Much that was subtle, subversive, flexible—or cool—in modern jazz seemed to fall away.

Heard today, those later Return to Forever albums, and those of Corea’s Elektric Band of the 1980s, feel dated in ways that the earlier Return to Forever records do not. They transcend their times while the later works feel stuck in the fashions and fads of the 1970s and 80s.

None of this should be taken as a dismissal of Corea’s work. Even on the less successful albums, there are noteworthy performances. Corea’s catalogue is uneven but still distinguished. In addition to the works already mentioned, *My Spanish Heart* (1976) was an especially inspired collection of songs and performances. Some of the most enjoyable, and loveliest, music of Corea’s career is found in his many duo recordings with vibraphonist Gary Burton, especially *Crystal Silence* (1973) and *Native Sense: The New Duets* (1997).

Some of Corea’s lesser-known music, when compared to the more famous recordings of the 1970s, is well worth exploring. In the late 1990s, Corea formed an excellent sextet called Origin, and more recently there was an exciting trio featuring Christian McBride on bass and Brian Blade on drums. In last year’s album of solo piano performances, *Chick Corea Plays*, Corea brought a striking originality to well-worn standards such as “Blue Monk” and “Desafinado.”

Corea was a talented composer and performer working at a difficult time for artistic creation, and not just in jazz. That he was able to contribute so much that was meaningful despite this is to his credit. His best work will endure.



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