

Jazz trombonist and maestro Slide Hampton dies at age 89

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On November 15, jazz trombonist, bandleader, arranger and composer Locksley Wellington Hampton, universally known as “Slide” Hampton, died at his home in central New Jersey. Hampton was a celebrated figure in jazz, with a rich musical career spanning the 1940s until his death. His life and work bridged a generations-wide gap between the earliest pioneers of jazz and musicians around the world.

Unfortunately, Hampton did not receive the acclaim due him during his prime. The heyday of the “traditional” jazz genre with which he was associated had passed years before. The dominance of vocal pop music in the 1960s, along with the emergence of less-structured forms of jazz improvisation denied him the possibility of widespread popularity.

In comparison with the monumental celebrity achieved by a few of his jazz peers, Hampton remained something of an anomaly or outsider, staunchly refusing to give in to musical trends with which he did not agree. In later life, however, he was welcomed by both audiences and cultural institutions in the US as a resurgence of interest in his type of jazz took place.

Like other influential figures in the history of American jazz, Hampton felt obliged at one point in his career to move to Europe—in his case, for the better part of a decade, from the late 1960s to the late 1970s. He has spoken favorably of the pervasiveness of state funding for the arts in European countries, which allowed him more freedom of musical exploration than did the competitive, high-pressure commercial atmosphere in the US.

Whereas many jazz expatriates remained in Europe, Hampton eventually returned, seeing an opportunity in the shifting attitudes toward jazz. During this period, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) began honoring and subsidizing jazz music and musicians.

Between his return to the US and 2005, Hampton won two Grammy awards and was awarded a NEA Jazz Masters Fellowship. He was also involved in several projects for cultural divisions of the United Nations in the later portion of his career.

Hampton was born in Jeannette, in southwestern Pennsylvania near Pittsburgh, in 1932 to a large, musical family. As was not uncommon in the early history of jazz, his parents operated a family band that earned income by touring Eastern and Midwestern states. His 12 siblings included Dawn Hampton, who later became a notable cabaret singer in New York, Virtue Hampton Whitted, a jazz singer, and Aletra Hampton, a jazz pianist and singer. (Famed jazz vibraphonist and bandleader Lionel Hampton was a distant cousin.)

In the late 1930s, the Hampton family moved to Indianapolis in search of opportunity. The city had developed into a hub of African American cultural and musical life. Locksley took up the trombone out of necessity as there were no other trombonists in his family, and the instrument had been sought after for the act. During World War II, the ensemble took a hiatus. In 1945, Clarke “Deacon” Hampton, the father of the family, retired and transferred responsibility for the operation to his son Duke.

By the early 1950s, the Hampton family band was booking engagements at Carnegie Hall, the Apollo Theatre and the Savoy Ballroom. Inspired by hearing bebop pioneer and pianist Bud Powell perform at Birdland on 52nd street, Slide made the decision to settle in New York permanently. He played in Lionel Hampton’s orchestra for a short period and subsequently in Buddy Johnson’s and then Maynard Ferguson’s ensembles for several years. While in New York, he started to find work with a host of major

figures in the history of jazz, including J.J. Johnson, Curtis Fuller, Barry Harris, Thad Jones, Charles Mingus, Art Blakey and Melba Liston.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Hampton led an octet whose roster included trumpeters Freddie Hubbard and Booker Little, tenor saxophonist George Coleman and drummer Pete La Roca, among others. His debut record as a band leader was released on Strand records in 1959 and was entitled “Slide Hampton and His Horn of Plenty.” He had a penchant for arrangements that utilized big spaces between voices in the wind instruments and a type of uniform harmony that created the sonic illusion of an ensemble larger than it actually was.

“In Art Blakey’s band, they wrote things in a more open harmony, so it sounded bigger,” Hampton said in a 2000 interview. “The trumpet may be an octave above the tenor, and the trombone might be an interval of a sixth away from the tenor, so you’ve got these wide intervals. When you have that kind of open harmony, you get overtones and that makes it sound full. It sounds big ... And I remember some of the things that used to be written in some of the big bands ... It would sound full and big and it was not even half of the ensemble ... So if you take six horns and use that same kind of concept, you get a real big sound.”

The bulk of Hampton’s discography as a bandleader was recorded while in Europe, where he worked closely with the community of expat jazz musicians centered largely in Paris, Copenhagen and Amsterdam. During this period, he collaborated with Dexter Gordon, Kenny Clarke, Art Farmer, Don Byas, Johnny Griffin, Kenny Drew, Benny Bailey and Ben Webster, to name a few. His work from this period refines and expands upon the orchestrational concepts he had developed earlier in New York.

When he returned to the US, he continued to perform and record as both a leader and a sideman, although his work as a leader remained primarily on European record labels. He also began to teach at Harvard, DePaul University, University of Massachusetts and Indiana State University. He also made connections with a younger generation of musicians, as well as peers with whom he had not yet worked closely. The latter included Dee Dee Bridgewater, Jimmy Heath, McCoy Tyner and Dizzy Gillespie.

In later life, Hampton became a close mentor to

young, aspiring jazz musicians. His reputation as a serious artist and human being inspired those close to him. His colleagues knew that he diligently practiced several hours each day and sensed he had little tolerance for musicians who did not demonstrate similar discipline. As an arranger, he was deeply aware of the history and traditions of his instrument. As an instrumentalist, his technique was extraordinarily refined to suit each musical situation that he encountered. As an improviser, his overall concept was precise, systematic and thorough—never adventurist or overly-confident.

Hampton admitted that he never had the ability to successfully balance “commerce” with his artistic and musical concerns. This admirable deficiency, which certainly put him at a disadvantage as far as making a living (at least in the American market), helped him prioritize the crafting of good music over business considerations. While he never eschewed commercialism or popularity, he was vocal in his belief that the music factors should always come first in the artistic process. Young musicians of the future will do well to immerse themselves in his life and work.



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