

Jazz pianist, bebop legend Barry Harris dies of COVID at 91

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On December 8, jazz pianist Barry Harris died in Weehawken, New Jersey. He was 91 years old and died due to complications from COVID-19. A close friend of Harris reported that she suspected the artist might have contracted the virus at his last public performance, which took place in Queens, New York in November.

Like the vast majority of musicians around the country and the world, Harris had taken a nearly two-year hiatus from performing live during the lockdowns. He had continued to work remotely and was fully vaccinated at the time of his passing. Notwithstanding his age and underlying health conditions, the untimely and tragic character of his death from COVID should not be minimized. Harris is now among numerous prominent jazz musicians who have died from the virus over the past 21 months, often in personal and artistic isolation.

Harris' career spanned more than eight decades during which time he won respect and wide recognition on the international stage. He was an unusual figure in the jazz world in that his role outside the commercial music sphere as a teacher, pedagogue, mentor and musical community organizer may be as well remembered as his work as a performing and recording artist—and perhaps more so.

Harris' musical approach was rooted in the complex melodic improvisations of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Bud Powell, emerging in the World War II period. Harris developed a pedagogical system for relating the notoriously difficult techniques of bebop to musicians struggling to conquer and expand the intricate harmonic style. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not take to the later trends of “free jazz” or fusion, which were less systematic and specific in their harmonic and melodic approaches.

Harris' belief in the importance of widely available, high-level music education earned him a reputation as a deft and disciplined master, yet also as an uncompromisingly honest, egalitarian and accessible mentor to all who had an interest in learning the mechanics of music. He was known for having a sharp wit and an impatience for ignorance and intellectual laziness, yet also a dedication to his craft and its being passed on to younger generations. Thousands of students at different levels of musical achievement went through his “school.”

Like all great artists and individuals, Harris was the product of a remarkable time and place, including, generally speaking, the social upheavals of the 20th century. He was born in Detroit, a focal point of industrial and political struggle during the years of his growing up, two months after the Wall Street Crash. Harris assembled his musical foundation in both the formal and informal settings of the city's music scene in the 1930s and '40s.

While New York City was at the center of the bebop movement in the mid-1940s, various cities around the US heavily influenced its scene through exporting artists, ideas and creative approaches. Detroit during the 1940s and '50s was a particularly important “feeder” city to the artistic jazz movement that coalesced in New York at this time. [1]

Harris' colleagues from the Detroit area included Milt Jackson, Kenny Burrell, Tommy Flanagan, Paul Chambers, Betty Carter, Yusef Latif, Pepper Adams and Sheila Jordan, as well as brothers Elvin Jones, Thad Jones, and Hank Jones. Detroit was home to culturally vibrant working class communities animated by the militant labor struggles of the 1930s. The African American community of Paradise Valley, a substantial hub for jazz and nightlife on Detroit's east side [2], was particularly fertile soil for cultural developments.

While Harris learned to play piano at a young age from his mother, a church musician, public education was also an important factor in his artistic maturation. Detroit, like other major cities at the time, was home to several public schools with rigorous music curricula, which were entwined with the local professional music scene.

Despite the officially promoted segregation and racism, Detroit's jazz scene contained a strong and distinctly interracial, often left-wing current during this period. Several musicians have described the atmosphere within the city's African American cultural community as offering a sharp contrast to the intense racial pressures exerted by the police and more conservative, authoritarian elements. Jazz bands made frequent stops in Detroit for engagements, as well as lodging. The city's atmosphere provided an alternative to more hostile environments.

By the mid-1940s, Harris had converted his mother's home into a meeting spot for many of the city's young musicians to

rehearse and workshop ideas, while Detroit's nightclubs and music venues provided them with the opportunity to test their technique in a cosmopolitan atmosphere. Jam sessions and informal, after-hours performances brought together international, regional and local-level musicians to inspire, interact with and educate one another. It was in this environment that Harris began his work as a professional musician, as well as a leader to young musicians hungry to absorb everything they could of musical culture.

By the end of the 1950s, Harris had played with a host of influential jazz figures, including Parker, Miles Davis, Max Roach, Gene Ammons, Sonny Stitt, Art Farmer, Benny Golson and Hank Mobley. He briefly replaced Richie Powell (Bud Powell's younger brother) in the Max Roach and Clifford Brown quintet after the Richie's death in a tragic car accident in 1956.

The 1960s saw many musicians move from Detroit to New York, including Harris. Economic conditions for musicians had become more difficult in the former city. Most of the record labels producing bebop and bebop-inspired jazz were concentrated in New York. As evidenced by his continued work in education, Harris struggled to maintain a deep connection with the unique social atmosphere in which he and so many other gifted musicians of his era developed.

While in New York, Harris performed, recorded and toured continuously with jazz artists such as Dexter Gordon, Coleman Hawkins, Illinois Jacquet, Lee Morgan and Cannonball Adderley. By the 1970s, he had befriended pianist Thelonious Monk, as well as famed jazz patron and Rothschild heiress Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter. Monk and Harris both lived together in de Koenigswarter's estate in Weehawken, until their respective deaths.

In the mid-1970s, Harris founded a series of weekly music workshops in Manhattan available to the public at large for a reasonable cost. He continued such sessions in various incarnations until his death. In 1982, he was one of the founders of the Jazz Cultural Theater, an educational, rehearsal and performance space in New York, which inspired the establishment of a similar institution in Bilbao, Spain. Harris would frequently organize masterclasses after his various performances across the US and abroad.

In the latter portion of his career, Harris was awarded the National Endowment of the Arts Jazz Master title (1989), won Lifetime Achievement and Contributions to the World of Jazz awards from the American Jazz Hall of Fame (2000), was issued an honorary Doctor of Arts degree from Northwestern University (1995), and was personally congratulated by the White House for his work as a jazz musician and educator. He has appeared in several documentary films on the history of jazz.

While Harris insisted that the contributions of Parker, Gillespie and Bud Powell represented the pinnacle of jazz improvisation, he did not exclude the influence of traditional

and classical styles from the language of bebop. Rather, he viewed the development of new and fresh forms of music as being built upon the foundations of previously perfected content. In his later years, Harris continued developing his skills while studying with virtuoso classical pianist and master educator Sofia Rosoff.

Harris disparaged the academic atmosphere of jazz conservatories that began to emerge in the late 1970s as a response to the dwindling market for traditional jazz. He told an interviewer in 2007, "I try to make [my students] do things right. That's why I don't generally go back to these [jazz] schools because these schools really don't know ... I consider [improvisation] as the classical [tradition] ... I'm a jazz musician, and I'm not ashamed of being a jazz musician, but I know we're the continuation of classical music ... [Composers] learned how to improvise—Bach, Liszt, Chopin, Beethoven ... So there had to be a system to improvisation ... You have to know where [the theory] comes from ... what is it composed of, what does it give us?"

Harris' life and work will serve as an inspiration for generations of musicians and audiences to come. His career stands as a particularly stark example of the conflict between the arts, education and the indifference of the marketplace. One can only speculate as to what musical developments he and his contemporaries might have been capable freed from the vagaries of the art and entertainment industries. His death due to COVID-19 also places him among the millions whose lives have been deemed inconsequential by the rulers of the global profit system.

Endnotes:

[1] Marciás, Anthony. "‘Detroit Was Heavy’: Modern Jazz Bebop, and African American Expressive Culture." *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (Winter 2010), pp. 44-70. The University of Chicago Press on behalf of Association for the Study of African American Life and History

[2] Ibid.



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