

# Jackie McLean

May 17, 1931 - March 31, 2006



By Greg Banaszak

This past spring the music community lost yet another bright light with the passing of John Lenwood (Jackie McLean), on the morning of Friday March 31, 2006. His funeral was held in the church he knew as a youth, the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York. There was an additional memorial service in Hartford, Connecticut, the city he called home for so many years. The service was held at the Artists' Collective, a Fine Arts Institution that he and his wife, Dollie McLean, founded in 1971 in the north end of Hartford. A heart wrenching rendition of Thelonious Monk's *Round Midnight* was performed by Jimmy Heath on soprano saxophone. Other musical tributes included a performance of *Amazing Grace* by vocalist Eunice Newkirk, who often sings with the Abyssinian choir. The service concluded with McLean's recording of Bud Powell's *I'll keep Loving You*. Jackie McLean was laid to rest at the Woodlawn cemetery in the Bronx.

Mr. McLean was born in the Sugar Hill section of Harlem in New York City, where he and many of our country's famous writers, artists, and jazz musicians grew up together. Sonny Rollins was one of his childhood friends. Jackie's development as a saxophonist is nothing short of amazing, to say the least. He began studying the instrument at age of fifteen. After only a few years of study, by nineteen years of age, he was performing and recording with the top jazz artists of the time, including Miles Davis. I myself sometimes take that for granted when I listen to those early recordings, especially *The Miles Davis Sextet - Live at Birdland* on the Fresh Sound record label (FSCD-1000). The recording features such standards as *Confirmation*, *Wee Dot*, and *Out Of The Blue*, among others. I once asked Jackie, as I pondered years after studying with

him, how he developed so quickly. He stated that his "musical garden was so fertile as a youngster." Jackie had mentors like Bud and Richie Powell, Thelonious Monk, and of course, his idol Charlie Parker, taking him under their wing.

Jackie's Godfather, Chief Norman Cobbs, was a saxophonist in Adam Clayton Powell's Abyssinian Church. He gave Jackie his first instrument, a silver soprano saxophone, at the age of fourteen. Furthering his development was his part time job working in his stepfather's record store, where he would constantly listen to records of such greats as Lester Young and Dexter Gordon. His daily absorption of this great American art form, called jazz, permeated his life.

Jackie's appetite to constantly practice and listen was enormous. He was too young, as a kid, to enter the jazz clubs in New York, so he would sit outside by the kitchen entrance to hear the masters play, hoping he could catch the subway in time to avoid getting punished for being out too late at such a young age.

Jackie's apprenticeship with Charlie Parker soon began to blossom, and he became a substitute for Parker when he couldn't be there for a job. The amount of support he received from Charlie Parker was pivotal in his early years as a young rising star in the New York jazz community.

Mr. McLean soon began to work with the Miles Davis Quintet and Sextet during the early 1950s. Miles was adamant that the young McLean not only be able to possess the fluidity he all ready commanded on the repertoire of Charlie Parker, but also learn the standards prior to Parker. Miles was a hard task master, to say the least, both on and off stage. He demanded a great deal from all of the musicians he shared the

bandstand with. Jackie's tenure with Miles Davis allowed him to develop an original musical extension of the Parker influence.

Shortly after his departure from the Davis group Jackie began to work with bassist and composer Charlie Mingus. Mingus was constantly prodding him to be stylistically and tonally different from Miles Davis. I believe this is where Jackie began to not only explore new harmonies and textures, but more so to separate his tone from Parker's and develop the distinct, raw, urgent tone he cultivated to his very last recording. Early examples of this evolution can be heard on the Charlie Mingus CD *Pithecanthropus Erectus* (Atlantic Jazz 8809-2).

Jackie would always tell his students to play like "who you are." He allowed his students to cultivate their own unique sound while still possessing the fundamentals of jazz. One of his most profound philosophies toward music was, "You've got to play and give everything you have, as if it was your last solo." Realizing that I, as well as all of his students and fans, will no longer feel that anticipation of purchasing and hearing his next CD, that message takes on a new meaning. So many of us had the good fortune to be exposed to his teaching

that included an organic natural approach to playing music, that comes from your heart and soul, and the essence of who you are as an individual.

Upon completing his touring and recording with Mingus, Jackie left the group to be with yet another master, Art Blakey, for three years. During the Blakey tenure he began to develop his compositional skills, which originated with Mingus. Jackie would always state that he received degrees from the Universities of Miles, Mingus, and Blakey.

Jackie began to record and tour as a leader, recording for both the Blue Note and Prestige labels. Some of my personal favorites are the recordings with trumpeters Lee Morgan and Donald Byrd. Jackie told me they used to have so much fun together writing out some of the harmonies on napkins.

In 1959 he added to his artistic skills, becoming a member of the avant-garde Living Theater. He was cast in Jack Gebler's *The Connection*, performing both in this country and in Europe. Both the film version of the play as well as the CD titled *The Connection* under Freddie Redd, as the leaders are still available and well worth investigating.

Jackie was also sighted for introducing many young stylists at the time to the jazz scene, including Charles Tolliver, Tony Williams, Jack Dejonette, Larry Willis, and his son Rene Mclean. It was at this time that he started a Sunday afternoon series that eventually became one of the world's most celebrated jazz clubs, Slug's Saloon.

Mr. Mclean would continue to record both as a leader and side man for many years, producing a discography that includes well over one hundred recordings to his name; an accomplishment few can state in any style of music. A more concise listing of this discography can be found when I first interviewed Mr. McLean in 1989 for the feature cover of the July/August issue of *Saxophone Journal*.

Jackie began teaching at the Hartt School of Music at the University of Hartford in 1971, where he developed a jazz degree program. He became a full Professor and Creative Director of the African American Music Department, which was renamed the Jackie McLean Institute in 2000. The successful students that have graduated from this program are too numerous to list, and in an attempt to try to list their names in this article I would unfortunately miss several individuals' names. His constant support of young musicians is evident in his later recordings, such as *Rites of Passage* and *Dynasty*. Employing Hartt alumni, such as trombonist extraordinaire Steve Davis and pianist Alan Palmer within his ensembles, enabled these fine musicians to not only record alongside their mentor but also to tour and perform worldwide.

Among his numerous awards and accolades, Jackie, along with saxophonists Phil Woods and Stan Getz, was invited in 1989 under the patronage of Danielle Mitterrand, wife of the President of France, to perform in Paris on the occasion of the commemoration of the bicentennial of the French Revolution. Alongside his friends he received the medal of "Officer de L'Ordre des Arts des Letters" from the Minister of Culture, Monsieur Jack Lang. He also was honored by New York City's Lincoln Center's Classical Jazz Series with a special evening in concert, "The Music of Jackie McLean," which garnered rave reviews. Additionally, Jackie, along with his wife Dollie, received Honorary Doctorate degrees from Trinity College. In 2001, Jackie was honored by the National Endowment for the Arts as an American Jazz Master. He received the Whitney M. Young Award for lifetime achievement in 2005, from the Connecticut Rivers Boy Scouts of America. Ironically, it was Chief Norman Daddy Cobbs that was instrumental in Jackie's early development in the Boy Scouts, at the Abyssinian Baptist Church and the YMCA on 135<sup>th</sup> Street.

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## MY TEACHER, MENTOR, AND FRIEND

I was far from being one of Mr. McLean's best students. Although I was not formally allowed into the jazz program, both myself and pianist Mrs. Mary Davis were the first to formally graduate from the Hartt School of Music with honors as undergraduate students of both jazz and classical repertoire. It was truly dedication and hard work that allowed us to progress.

The atmosphere, which I now nurture in my saxophone studios and jazz program, is that all of the students have something to offer and should basically "help each other out!" I tried to constantly be around Mr. McLean observing his saxophone seminars, master classes, and of course, all of his students from all over the world.

When Jackie found out that I, as a student, was sitting in clubs with the best rhythm sections of the time, unable to even "blow my nose," he actually took pity on me because he knew I was really trying where others much more capable were not suffering the same. Mr. McLean took me seriously and had me come to his home on Saturday afternoons. This was far from the norm at that time, for Mr. McLean was very private about his home life.

It would be an injustice to *Saxophone Journal* readers to describe lessons with him for once again he treated everybody uniquely based on their individual needs. Some saxophonists were great sight readers but needed to improve on their tone and fundamentals of jazz, others were great improvisers and yet had difficulty sight reading. Mr. McLean's motto was to develop what you do well, but first strengthen your weaknesses.

I had the honor of learning from Jackie McLean on a weekly basis for awhile. This was daunting, to say the least. I would always tape my lessons, and to this day cannot believe I was allowed to trade "fours" on tunes like *Dig* or *Yardbird Suite* with him. Mr. McLean was quick to point out what you needed to work on, but in a subtle way. He would ask all of his students "Do you know the difference between the first and second endings of this tune?"

Mr. McLean's assistant was Kris Jensen, the great saxophonist and composer from Binghamton, New York. Kris would help out with the weaker students such as myself. He understood both the jazz and classical side of the saxophone, and had studied with some of those great Upstate New York saxophonists, as well as attending Sigurd Rascher's summer saxophone festivals.

Upon graduation I spent two years studying and subsequently performing abroad, in both Communist controlled Poland, and Paris with Daniel Deffayet prior to his retirement. I returned to the United States after touring, performing, and even recording the Glazounov *Concerto* "live" on record and cassette, and still had a very difficult time finding musical employment similar to the teaching and performing I had abroad. I remember going to Mr. McLean's home and asking "Is it supposed to be so difficult?" He simply stated the answer, which I pass on to my students, which is: "If you don't like it give up because twenty other saxophonists will try to take your place." That one sentence rings through my ears every day. I have heard the exact same words stated verbatim from my classical professor, Mr. Vincent J. Abato.

When I came back from Europe my relationship with Mr. McLean began to develop and grow in a direction I never would have expected. I spent a week re-acclimating myself to the United States before I went to see him. He enjoyed seeing his name alongside Bach's and Vivaldi's from posters and programs I brought back from concerts in Vienna, Paris and Warsaw. When he saw the Ibert *Concertino* followed by *Bird With Strings* he was really happy. Jackie said, "Bird would be happy to have seen this." He stated, as many jazz historians do, that Mr. Charles Parker was at his best behavior rehearsing and practicing *Bird With Strings*. The orchestra was provided by Mr. Norman Granz, and Bird felt he was reaching the most artistic aspect of his life yet. When the strings were "taken away" from him, it was an enormous musical and emotional loss to Charlie Parker.

Soon after I returned from overseas, my friendship with Jackie grew. I remember taking him several times to Mr. Ed Diefes, a great repair technician in Pleasant Valley, New York. It was over a two hour drive one way and we would always start out early, around 7:00 a.m. and arrive at by 9:00 a.m. when he would open. We would drop off our saxophones and go for a big breakfast. The first couple of

times driving around with Jackie I wasn't sure what to say, and I was sort of quiet. We began to take these various trips quite often, and it was really fantastic. Jackie would sometimes just call and say "Meet me at my place in a half hour," and that was it. We would end up in New York City. On occasion he would want to go to New York City to see Roberto's or to Boston to check out Emilio Lyons and have him look at some of his altos. One particular road trip really stands out in my mind; the morning I was to pick up Jackie to go to New York City, the muffler on my car blew out so I called him up and he said "just come on over and we'll use my car." When I got to his house I assumed he was going to drive his own car, but that wasn't the case that particular morning. Instead, he tossed me the keys to his mile long, mint condition, "Lemon Yellow" Cadillac. Lemon Yellow was Jackie's favorite color. I told him, "Mr. McLean I can't drive your car, this thing is huge!" he just smiled and said, "take your time and you better not even put a scratch in it." At first I tapped the breaks, and he was jolted in the passenger seat. He said, "Take your time with this car, learn how to use your

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senses better!" I was sweating the whole trip there and back. We finally got back to Hartford, after a long trip to New York City. We stopped at Piggys, one of our favorite places in Hartford that had the best fried chicken dinners. We feasted and played some pool. Jackie was a great pool player, as many jazz musicians seem to be. He started to miss his shots a little, on purpose, to help me out. I said, "Just give me your best game and that way I can learn."

He smiled, and then proceeded to run the table with only the eight-ball left! OUCH! Spending time with Jackie was really great and most of our conversations were hardly ever about music. The topics varied from history (especially World War II), to good movies, science, religion, and boxing, you name it. He would sometimes bring up something about the music industry or other jazz legends such as Miles or Charlie Parker, and only then would I ask him a question. I think that is why I was allowed to get close to my mentor, because I never would want or ask something of him as so many people did. His house phone never stopped ringing with requests, favors, advice, etc. He once stated, "Man, I can't get a minute to myself on a Saturday afternoon." That one statement really opened up my eyes as to how many people were always soliciting his advice and assistance, and I never wanted to be one of them.

I had the pleasure of being on the guest list at Dizzy Gillespie's month long concert at the Blue Note in New York City, courtesy of J. Mac. To this day I will never figure it out how I was chosen to be at this special presentation as a guest with everyone in the audience being a jazz legend! Mr. Gillespie was in his final stages of pancreatic cancer yet he was playing so incredibly strong, like he was burning a hole deep into the asphalt of the city. The tribute lasted one month, and every night Dizzy burned the house down. Mr. Gillespie past on shortly after that concert series.

One time Mr. McLean took me to the "Sugar Hill" section of Harlem, New York, where he was born. He showed me where he not only grew up, but where he had to run from neighborhood bullies, and where he played with green model toy soldiers with tenor-giant and boyhood friend Sonny Rollins. He took me to a restaurant in Harlem that he used to love to go to with Lee Morgan before and after gigs, that had the "best bacon in the World," according to Jackie.

As a young man in Hartford I was playing jazz and classical gigs with my close friends, like current Hartt faculty pianist and composer Chris Casey, and guitarist Rich Goldstein. I had the privilege of watching all this new young talent emerge, like Mike DiRubbo, Julius Tolentino, Abe Burton, Kris Allen, and Jimmy Greene. There were so many talented saxophonists and musicians that the list of names would take pages of this article. I apologize to so many other wonderful musicians that were not mentioned in this homage to Mr. McLean.

When it was time for me to leave Hartford and move to Cleveland, where I currently reside, I said goodbye to Jackie. Before I left he gave me a number of a drummer to call that lived in Cleveland, the great Greg Bandy. He said, "First, build your program at this new school you're going to be working at, like I did when I first came up to the Hartt School in the 70s; then worry about getting gigs. Make your house a home first, because the gigs will always be there." I did exactly what he advised me to do. Once everything was running smoothly I started playing with Greg Bandy at the Cleveland Bop Stop, and had a blast. Greg Bandy knew all the tunes I liked, and I

felt home again on the East Coast.

About five weeks or so before Jackie passed away he left a message on my answering machine to remind me of a big fight on HBO that Saturday night. He said "Don't miss HBO Boxing tonight, Winky Wright is gonna come out swingin'!"

It is hard for all of us that knew Jackie McLean to think of him as gone. He had a unique ability to bring out the best in everyone, not only musicians, but anyone that he came in contact with him, be it a fan, a waitress, or someone walking down the street that might have asked him for a few dollars. Jackie used to love to make people laugh as well. His appetite for living life to the fullest was contagious. He was truly a positive beacon of light, and anyone who had the pleasure of meeting and getting to know him really miss him. Few people like Jackie McLean come into your life and give so much of themselves to so many people. §


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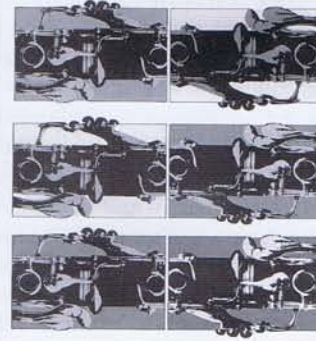
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