

Joe Henderson: Another jazz great dies

By Philip Sprake
9 August 2001

Jazz saxophonist Joe Henderson, who died on June 30 after a long battle with emphysema, has been described by one music writer as the “supreme melodist”. A fellow musician referred to him as a “musical astronaut” following the 25-year-old’s impromptu performance in 1962 at New York’s Birdland—a concert which also left a deep impression on bebop veteran Dexter Gordon. Notwithstanding these accolades Henderson was an unassuming man, a quiet achiever, who in an era dominated by giants of the saxophone, John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins, worked hard to become one of the great tenor saxophone improvisers of the modern jazz era.

Born in Lima, Ohio on April 24, 1937, into a family of 15 children, Henderson was exposed at an early age to a wide variety of musical influences—from classical composers Béla Bartók and Igor Stravinsky to jazz musicians such as Lester Young and Illinois Jacquet. But it was as a high school student that Henderson’s first music teacher introduced him to a deeper understanding of the saxophone and the young musician began composing for the school band and local jazz groups.

Henderson studied music at Kentucky State College and Wayne State University and played in local Detroit jazz clubs before serving in the US Army and playing in an army band from 1960-62. After being discharged from the army, Henderson made his way to New York and formed a musical partnership with veteran trumpeter Kenny Dorham, to co-lead the jazz group that first brought him into prominence.

Kenny Dorham engineered the signing of Henderson to the famous jazz recording company Blue Note Records where he recorded a total of 34 albums both as a bandleader and a sideman, appearing with artists such as Horace Silver, McCoy Tyner and Lee Morgan. Henderson co-led the “Jazz Communicators” with trumpeter Freddie Hubbard from 1967-68 and played in

pianist Herbie Hancock’s sextet from 1969-70.

From 1970 onwards Henderson led his own groups before moving to California where he became active in music teaching. Such was his versatility and interest in other musical forms that Henderson spent four months playing with rock and rhythm-and-blues group “Blood, Sweat and Tears” in 1971, enhancing their music with his solo and backing work and introducing their fans to the wider musical domain of jazz.

Referring to his broad musical tastes Henderson said: “I heard a lot of country and western music on the radio. A lot of rhythm and blues, a lot of Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley and all those real deep blues players. ... When I went to college (Wayne State University), I got just a bit more esoteric—Indian music, Balinese music.”

While Henderson embraced these differing influences, his music was rooted in post-bebop jazz and in particular the genre that became known as hard bop. Emerging in the late 1950s, hard bop was a more complex rhythmic and harmonic elaboration of the bebop style pioneered by alto saxophonist Charlie Parker, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, pianist Thelonius Monk and other jazz musicians in the early 1940s. The best representatives of this jazz genre were associated with the Blue Note recording label in the late 1950s and 60s.

One of the finest example of Henderson’s playing in this hard bop style is on the McCoy Tyner album *The Real McCoy*, which provides several examples of the saxophonist’s extraordinary lyrical solos and musical imagination. Another wonderful illustration of Henderson’s improvisational skills can be heard on *The State of the Tenor—Live at the Village Vanguard*, recorded for Blue Note in 1985. Appearing with Ron Carter on bass and Al Foster on drums, Henderson is in exceptional form, the trio format allowing him the space to build long and intricate solos.

Wider recognition outside US jazz circles came to Henderson when he was 55-years-old and after he switched to Verve Records in the early 1990s. He made a clean sweep of the jazz magazine *Down Beat* music awards in 1992, winning the international critics and readers polls, named jazz musician of the year, top tenor saxophonist and his *Lush Life: The Music of Billy Strayhorn*, named album of the year.

This album went on to sell more than 100,000 copies that year in the United States and 450,000 worldwide. Verve helped launch his international career and he performed at many festivals and concert halls throughout the world. The award winning *Lush Life* was followed by other Verve albums, including, *So Near So Far: Musings for Miles*, his tribute to trumpeter Miles Davis, which also won a Grammy Award for best jazz performance.

The quiet spoken Henderson was somewhat ambivalent about broader recognition and “fame” telling one interviewer before his death: “I haven’t spent a lot of time regretting not being (widely) acknowledged all this time, I’m just saying I can’t get too excited about finally being acknowledged ... Perhaps if this had happened when I was 40, it would have been different. So maybe you could say I feel bittersweet, though more sweet than bitter.”

Henderson, who had not played in public for more than a year after suffering a stroke, had been in poor health since 1998.

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