

Jazz great Freddie Hubbard dies at 70

By John Andrews
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With his big, brassy sound, astounding technique and lyrical improvisation, trumpeter Freddie Hubbard exploded onto the 1958 New York jazz scene at the age of 20. Over the next decade, he blew fiery "hard bop" with virtually all the greatest East Coast musicians and appeared on innumerable classic albums.

By the end of the 1960s however, jazz had encountered increasing social and artistic roadblocks, as rock audiences overwhelmed the popular music scene and the limitations of the jazz form itself began frustrating players. Hubbard was among several great jazz musicians who, when faced with tough choices, elected to migrate to more popular music forms.

Although his career slowed after his Grammy-winning album "First Light" in 1972, Hubbard remained active, albeit in failing health, until he suffered a severe heart attack on November 26, 2008. Hubbard passed away on December 29 at Sherman Oaks Hospital in Sherman Oaks, California.

Freddie Hubbard was among the wave of virtuoso jazz musicians who emerged in the 1950s and early 1960s, building on the innovations of be-bop masters such as Charlie Parker and Bud Powell. Centered in New York City, these players focused both on powerful, tight, "straight ahead" improvisation over standard chord patterns, as well as more avant-garde approaches, including "free jazz" that abandoned traditional harmony and a steady rhythmic pulse altogether.

These intensely creative years, layered below the stifling conformity of much of US culture during that period, coincided with the post-war economic boom, the rapidly rising standard of living for wide layers of workers and the deepening struggle for civil rights.

Hubbard was born April 7, 1938, in Indianapolis, Indiana. His early influences were the great be-bop trumpeters Dizzy Gillespie and Fats Navarro, and their brilliant protégé Clifford Brown, who died in a 1956

automobile accident at the age of 25. Shortly before leaving his hometown, Hubbard made his first commercial recording with fellow Hoosier, Wes Montgomery, on guitar.

Hubbard was accepted immediately into the creative cauldron of the New York jazz scene. Underscoring the significance of his arrival, Hubbard had his first New York City record date on the day after Christmas, 1958, in a quintet led by saxophonist John Coltrane, then on the cusp of his years as the most significant musician in jazz. Hubbard's next recording date was with the very popular alto saxophonist Julian "Cannonball" Adderly.

During the first half of the 1960s, Hubbard seemed to be everywhere. He became a regular leader and sideman for Alfred Lion's Blue Note record label, which was then in its most creative period, appearing on dozens of well produced and recorded hard bop albums with musicians such as pianist, Herbie Hancock (appearing on both "Watermelon Man" and "Maiden Voyage"), vibraphonist, Bobby Hutcherson and saxophonists Dexter Gordon, Jackie McLean and Hank Mobley.

In 1961, Hubbard replaced the soulful Lee Morgan as trumpeter for drummer Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers then in the midst of its most active and artistically fulfilling period, featuring a youthful Wayne Shorter on tenor saxophone.

At the same time, Hubbard appeared on Oliver Nelson's classic, "Blues and the Abstract Truth" with woodwind virtuoso Eric Dolphy. Throughout the decade Hubbard recorded with a variety of luminaries, including pianist Bill Evans, saxophonist Sonny Rollins, drummer Max Roach and bandleader Quincy Jones.

Although known for his propulsive swing as well as his ability to improvise beautiful melodies over rapid and complex chord changes, Hubbard found himself on three of the most important avant-garde sessions in jazz

history: "Free Jazz" with Ornette Coleman, "Out to Lunch" with Dolphy and Coltrane's "Ascension."

By the end of the decade—with American society in tumult over the Vietnam War, urban riots and a deepening economic crisis—jazz music found itself at a crossroads. Jazz players were losing much of their already too meager audience to rock and roll, and the economics of the music industry were squeezing out less commercially viable performers.

At the same time, the foremost jazz players were arriving at an artistic impasse: where were they to go with the be-bop legacy? With Coltrane's death in 1967, atonal "free jazz" lost its most significant voice. Efforts were made to fuse jazz with rock—notably by Miles Davis—and tremendous pressure was placed on jazz musicians to adapt to popular tastes. There were difficult decisions to be made.

After appearing on the landmark "Walking in Space" jazz fusion album orchestrated by Quincy Jones in 1970, Hubbard switched to the CTI record label, which released "Red Clay," followed by "Straight Life" and the award-winning "First Light." These highly produced and slickly packaged albums brought Hubbard broader commercial success, but also mixed critical responses and outright condemnation from jazz purists.

Hubbard moved to Los Angeles and changed to Columbia Records, more openly adapting to commercial interests through "funk" and "fusion" albums, with titles like "High Energy" and "Liquid Love." Also, perhaps not coincidentally, his substance abuse problems began affecting his performances and recording output, which were increasingly erratic and less satisfying.

At the same time, however, Hubbard continued to play in his classic manner, most notably at concerts and on recordings with "VSOP." The balance of the group was made up of four members of Miles Davis' great early 1960s quintet—Hancock, Shorter, bassist Ron Carter and drummer Tony Williams.

By the mid-1980s, Hubbard had become openly critical of his foray into popular music and returned to his jazz roots, recording among other things, a particularly successful album with fellow trumpeter Woody Shaw. He was critical of many younger players, who lacked the experience of Hubbard's New York years.

"Young players only get the exposure to the greats like Miles, Trane and Monk through records," Hubbard said in a 1995 interview with *Downbeat* magazine. "They've had no real experience with the real essence of those guys—the way they held their instruments, the way they acted, what really caused this music. Most of the cats trying to play hardcore contemporary jazz don't have their own style. Or there are some people like Wynton [Marsalis] who play the horn, but don't play no hip jazz. They're just into playing the instrument good. They're not creating ideas."

Always a ferocious player physically, the wheels came off in 1992 when Hubbard split his lip trying to play too aggressively without proper warm-up and then continued to play without allowing time for recovery. The lip wound became infected and never healed properly.

Hubbard commented about his injury in the *Downbeat* interview: "It happened to Louis Armstrong. Miles quit for five years. Eventually you just say, 'damn, let me put this thing down and give my chops a rest.' I've always played with a lot of energy—maybe too much. So, I had to change my embouchure by going back to the basics and learning to warm up and play soft. I used to just pick up the trumpet and blow hard. I had to go back, get some books and consult with classical trumpet teachers. I couldn't play a note for a while because it was so tender. It's so frustrating not being able to blow the way I blew."

Hubbard's playing never fully recovered its original brilliance and in his later years notably lacked the stamina for which he was so well known. Nevertheless, he continued to perform, often switching to the more forgiving flugelhorn, making his final appearances in Los Angeles earlier this year with The New Jazz Composers Octet.

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