

Jazz drummer Ed Thigpen dies at 79

By Jesse Werner
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On January 13, 2010, American jazz drummer Ed Thigpen died in Copenhagen at age 79. With a career spanning nearly six decades, he was an underrated master in his field. Although his finely crafted technique, artful subtlety and musicality at the drums made him a respected figure in the international jazz community, Thigpen received relatively limited recognition during his lifetime in the United States, his native country.

Acquiring through his career the nickname of “Mr. Taste,” Thigpen gained a reputation for having unparalleled technical skill and a remarkable sense of melody. On a National Public Radio (NPR) tribute page, drummer Matt Wilson recollects, “maestro Thigpen personified elegance. His posture sitting at the drums was regal. He was like a king, as he ruled the bandstand with a confident and empathetic hand. His ride cymbal sparkled with clarity. His magical touch could coax a myriad of sounds from the drums. He offered a song, a melody of time, that was the ultimate of swing and imaginative orchestration.”

It may be difficult to imagine the drums as a melodic instrument, but when one listens to Thigpen’s recordings one can easily hear how every tone, rhythm and accent of his part of a performance is closely shaped in relation to the musical contour of the song’s theme. His drumming was so purposeful that he would often sing while he played and, in some of his sessions as a bandleader, he would use drums with foot-pedal tuning systems, allowing him to play along with the band, literally, as another melodic instrument.

Thigpen was born December 28, 1930, in Chicago, but his family soon relocated to St. Louis. His father, Ben Thigpen, was also a jazz drummer. When Ed was five, his parents separated, and he and his mother moved to South Central Los Angeles, where he spent the remainder of his childhood and adolescence. The area in which he lived was, at the time, a racially mixed middle and working class neighborhood that housed a vibrant community rich in culture and education. The area was one of the few large districts in which blacks were able to buy property

and it was the center of the black community in southern California. It was also home to a vibrant jazz scene. This cultural environment produced many other significant artistic figures such as jazz saxophonist Dexter Gordon (with whom Thigpen went to high school), composer-jazz bassist Charles Mingus, and dancer-choreographer Alvin Ailey.

After majoring in sociology at Los Angeles City College, Thigpen returned to East St. Louis for one year to pursue music while living with his father who had been playing with Andy Kirk’s Clouds of Joy. It is rumored that during this time Ed Thigpen occasionally played with Miles Davis at jam sessions in the lively St. Louis scene. In 1951, Thigpen moved to New York City and began playing at the Savoy Ballroom with trumpeter Cootie Williams’s orchestra. His work with Williams, however, was interrupted when he was drafted during the Korean War. He served in the military until 1954.

When he returned to New York, Thigpen began to work as a sideman with some of the city’s premier musicians such as Dinah Washington, Jutta Hipp, Johnny Hodges, Lennie Tristano, Billy Taylor, and, eventually, the Oscar Peterson Trio. A testament to Thigpen’s instrumental versatility, he was hired by Peterson’s group not to replace a drummer, but a guitar player.

Prior to his joining it in January 1959, the group was comprised of Ray Brown on bass, Peterson on piano and guitarist Herb Ellis, who left the ensemble to tour with Ella Fitzgerald. In an interview with jazz critic Gene Lees, Thigpen remarked, “I always wanted to be with Oscar’s group, even when Herb was with that band. I told Ray in Japan, ‘The only thing wrong with this group is you need a drummer.’ Ray said, ‘Well, y’never know, kid.’ I said, ‘I need to play with this group. I love this group.’ And [Ellis, Brown and Peterson] went out and proceeded to swing so hard I thought, ‘Well, maybe I’ll miss it, but I still would like to play with the group.’ So it was four years later that I joined them.” [1]

Thigpen played and recorded with many of the top artists of his day, but much of his best work and musical

development occurred while playing with the Oscar Peterson Trio. Admirers of the trio cite the group, not unreasonably, as one of the greatest piano trios in jazz history. It is well known that Peterson was unusually rigorous in his demands on his musicians.

Along these lines, Thigpen once commented, “[Peterson] had a thing where he said, ‘On our worst night, we’ve got to sound better than most people on their best night.’ And so, consequently, every song was an opener and a closer, there was no skating, no nothin’—never. You never cheat, ever. When you come up under that kind of discipline, it stays with you, man.” [2]

Thigpen was a notoriously modest man. While there doesn’t appear to be much information available about Thigpen’s political views, the social atmosphere in the United States during the time in which he was active certainly had an impact on him. The hostility of the American music industry toward its laborers took its toll. In a business where musicians were grown, manufactured and spent according to market trends as capricious as the winds, Thigpen, like many other working artists, struggled for survival and recognition in a professional environment of indifference and exploitation.

In 1972, after having worked with Ella Fitzgerald for five years, Thigpen left the US and moved to Copenhagen, Denmark. While he relocated, in part, to be with his Danish wife Inga-Lisa, he also joined a cadre of American artists and intellectuals in Europe who emigrated to escape the difficult conditions. Among them were jazz musicians Thad Jones, Kenny Drew, Ernie Wilkins and Dexter Gordon.

On returning later to his native country, Thigpen described the fickle nature of the American music scene with an anecdote about an encounter he had with a younger drummer at a National Association of Music Manufacturers’ convention in Anaheim, California:

“I was with a very fine young drummer, doing a lot of recording, very visible, one of the people who are very strong. A young man came up to him and wanted to pay him a compliment and have his picture taken with him. And he said, ‘Do you know this gentleman here? This is Ed Thigpen.’ And the guy didn’t know me, and he wanted to almost push me out of the way to take the picture. It’s like watching the fighters, the new breed coming in. And you’re out here still trying to do your thing, too. But the music has evolved into another thing that is popular. And you can’t go into all the business of why it is, whatever it is. The point is: What is your worth

in this whole scene now? And how do you compete in it? Because you have to compete to make a living. What role do you play? You’re not as visible so everybody doesn’t know who you are at the moment. And you’re trying to get back on the magazine covers so people will know your presence. So it’s like starting over in some ways.” [3]

Unfortunately, Thigpen’s performing and recording career in the United States only infrequently brought him into the spotlight as a star drummer. In his years in Europe, however, his personality, passion and curiosity for music allowed him to become well known as a music educator. In addition to having a solid technical foundation, his constant desire to learn and incorporate new elements into his approach made him an invaluable teacher.

While any of his recordings with the Oscar Peterson Trio gives one a sense of Thigpen’s ability to hold his own among some of the world’s finest musicians, his first album as a band leader, entitled *Out of the Storm* (1966), is well worth listening to. He leads his ensemble with remarkable clarity through a colorful narrative, never once approaching garishness or intrusiveness. With his delicate touch and powerful lyricism, Ed Thigpen proved himself an artist of considerable depth and sensitivity.

Footnotes:

[1] Lees, Gene. *Waiting for Dizzy*. USA: Oxford University Press, 1991. p.187. [back]

[2] (Lees, p.188) [back]

[3] (Lees, p.192) [back]

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