

# Frank Wess, Chico Hamilton, Yusef Lateef: A tribute to three important jazz musicians

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8 January 2014

The last few months of 2013 saw the passing away of three musicians who, although not household names outside the jazz community, made memorable contributions. Although each of them—Frank Wess, Chico Hamilton and Yusef Lateef—was stylistically highly individual, one instrument, the flute, ties the three together.

The flute did not play a prominent role in jazz's early history, most likely due to its lower volume compared to trumpets, trombones, clarinets and saxophones, and because of the usually raucous sounds of the ensembles of the 1920s. In addition, the primitive state of early recording technology could not achieve the adequate balance needed to give the flute its due.

With improvements in recording technology, a few jazz flutists logged in some recordings in the late 1920s and into the 1930s. However, according to Peter Guidi in his 1997 essay, "A Short History of the Jazz Flute," "While acknowledging the contributions made by the early pioneers, jazz historians generally credit saxophonist Wayman Carver as being the first true jazz flutist." Carver performed and recorded with such bandleaders as Benny Carter and Chick Webb.

Wayman Carver was a music teacher as well. One of his students was a youthful Frank Wess.

Wess was born January 4, 1922, in Kansas City, Missouri, and later moved with his family to Washington, D.C., where he first played in public on tenor and alto saxes, adding the clarinet while in the US Army during World War II. He played with a number of well-known bands after the war and in 1949 deepened his knowledge of and facility on the flute under the tutelage of classical flutists.

Wess joined the Count Basie Orchestra in 1953 as a tenor man, but after the Count discovered his excellence as a flutist, he was featured fluting away on many tunes. He solos on a 1960 video of "Cute" with the Basie band here.

Frank Wess would later go on to perform in a variety of contexts including big bands, combos and partnerships with former Basie band mate Frank Foster. He recorded numerous albums—a particular favorite of this reviewer

being *Opus in Swing* —and was in demand for studio work and television shows, including the "Dick Cavett Show" and "Saturday Night Live."

In 2007, he received the American Jazz Masters Fellowship award from the National Endowment for the Arts. He died of a heart attack related to kidney failure on October 30, 2013.

Chico Hamilton was a drummer and bandleader, not a flutist, but his musical efforts were instrumental in the careers of several multi-instrumentalists who helped spread the jazz flute message.

When Foreststorn Hamilton, born in Los Angeles on September 20, 1921, came of age, he was fortunate and talented enough to become part of a vibrant jazz scene—on Los Angeles' famed Central Avenue during and after World War II—and eventually gigged with the likes of Charles Mingus, Illinois Jacquet, Dexter Gordon, Lionel Hampton, blues great T-Bone Walker, Lester Young, Basie, Ellington, Gerry Mulligan and a host of others.

In 1955, Hamilton formed a quintet featuring guitar, cello, woodwinds, bass and drums. It was an unusual combination, considering that the order of the day was more an orientation to the high-energy development of bebop ignited by geniuses like Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell and other boppers.

Although Hamilton's recordings of that era and later are often lumped together with so-called cool and West Coast jazz, and sometimes dismissively labeled as "chamber jazz," they defy pigeonholing. Whatever the heat level of the song, Hamilton's drumming was subtle yet propulsive.

Two very different woodwind players to pass through the Hamilton bands of the 1950s were the saxophonists/clarinetists/flutists Buddy Collette, heard here on a 1955 recording of "Blue Sands", and Eric Dolphy, in a 1958 rendition of "In A Mellow Tone".

Collette would not only forge a career in studio, television and recording work, but he—along with Mingus—was instrumental in breaking the color line in the L.A. musicians' union. And he was a beloved teacher of

fledgling artists. Dolphy later went on to prominence with Mingus and on his own. He brought the previously rare bass clarinet into the jazz instrument roster as well, before his sad death in 1964 at the age of 36.

Chico Hamilton was a talent scout as well as a bandleader. In addition to Paul Horn and Charles Lloyd, two other well-known woodwind players, Hamilton alumni include guitarists John Pisano, Jim Hall, Larry Coryell, Dennis Budimir and the unjustly neglected Gábor Szabó.

Hamilton's later career was mostly centered on television work and commercials, but "he continued leading various groups, playing music that ranged from the avant-garde to erratic fusion and advanced hard bop," according to allmusic.com's Scott Yanow.

A comment from Chico Hamilton seems worth repeating: "I'm happy to say that I'm able to find people wherever I go that are not black, not white—they're just human beings. That's where I am, where I've been and where I intend to stay." Hamilton died on November 25 in Manhattan.

William Emanuel Huddleston was born on October 9, 1920, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, eventually ending up with his family in Detroit, another hotbed of jazz activity. He would change his name to Yusef Abdul Lateef in the 1950s when he converted to Islam.

Lateef began playing professionally on tenor sax after graduating from high school, performing with Motor City up-and-comers like Milt Jackson, Paul Chambers, Elvin Jones and Kenny Burrell. He joined Dizzy Gillespie's orchestra in 1949, but returned to Detroit to continue his musical studies at Wayne State University. He would continue his musical education throughout his life, earning a number of degrees and holding teaching positions at the Manhattan School of Music, Amherst College and other institutions.

In 1957, Lateef began recording as a leader, and by the early 1960s, he added not only the flute and oboe to his accompaniment, but such non-Western instruments as the rebab and koto (string instruments), along with Chinese wooden flutes, and played the shanai (a double-reed instrument) himself. In view of the political and cultural changes taking place in the US during the 1960s, one can sense two impulses at work. On the one hand, his use of nonstandard instruments in jazz bespoke a desire to break free from "Eurocentric" musical strictures; on the other, the danger of falling into exoticism for its own sake was ever present.

Be that as it may, Yusef Lateef's ceaseless quest to expand his musical horizons would place him as a forerunner in what would come to be called "world music."

Later, his mystical bent would manifest itself in forays into "new age" music (in fact, he won a Grammy for "Best

New Age Album" in 1987) and development of a musical philosophy he called "audiophysiopsychic," described as "music from one's physical, mental, and spiritual self, and also from the heart."

In any event, Lateef was a fluid, soulful flutist. He plays a transverse flute on this recording of "Lateef Minor 7th," from a 1962 album.

His tenor playing always kept its robust tone and heartfelt attack, with deep roots in blues, soul and gospel. At times, he would blend the "Eastern" and "spiritual" influences (here played on Chinese flute) with a gutsy tenor approach, as in one of his most famous songs, "Like It Is".

Whatever his spiritual aspirations, Yusef Lateef was in demand as a solid sideman both live and on a host of recordings, most notably with Cannonball Adderley in the early 1960s, but also with Art Blakey, Donald Byrd, Les McCann, Mingus and many others. His discography is extensive.

He continued to record prolifically, teach, write and perform commissioned works and rack up accolades, including a National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master Fellowship Award and a Distinguished Alumni Award from the Manhattan School of Music. On December 23, Yusef Lateef succumbed to prostate cancer.

These three skilled and dedicated musicians who played or featured the flute among other instruments had long and creative lives, escaping the pitfalls to which many of their contemporaries fell prey in a field and era known for untimely deaths. The beauty of their music, it is to be hoped, will be enjoyed for years to come.

For those readers interested in the history of jazz flute, Guidi's "A Short History of the Jazz Flute" provides a brief but informative overview of the most significant figures.

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