

Jazz saxophonist Benny Golson, known for his remarkable compositions, dies at 95

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Tenor saxophonist Benny Golson, known for writing sophisticated songs, many of which have become jazz standards, died September 22 at his Manhattan home at the age of 95.

Golson was one of the few surviving jazz masters of the 1950s, a golden age during which the innovations of the 1940s, known as bebop, flowered into the swinging and accessible modern jazz that became both popular and influential, especially on music scores for films and the relatively new medium of television.

Golson began professionally in big bands before transitioning to smaller combos and eventually into a successful career composing for film and television, before returning to performing jazz as an elder statesman.

As testament to his longevity, Golson's death leaves fellow tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins, also age 95, as the only survivor among the 57 master jazz musicians who posed for Art Kane's famed August 12, 1958 photograph entitled "A Great Day in Harlem."

Golson was not an elite improviser on the level of Rollins, but he played with vigor and outstanding taste in the straight-ahead post-bop style of the late 1950s.

Charming and erudite, Golson continued performing until 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic shut down live venues. His strength and stamina obviously diminished over the years, but Golson compensated on stage by interposing highly entertaining anecdotes between songs about the many musicians and celebrities with whom he interacted over the years. Golson had the gift of gab.

Those stories, and many, many others, are collected in Golson's 2016 detailed memoir *Whisper Not*, co-authored by Jim Merod. The book is named after Golson's most elegant and famous composition, an intriguing minor melody written for the 1956 Dizzy

Gillespie Big Band. Recorded by dozens of instrumentalists, including trumpeter Miles Davis, guitarist Wes Montgomery and pianist Oscar Peterson, the tune was also performed by vocalists Anita O'Day, Ella Fitzgerald and Mel Tormé, among others, with lyrics added by jazz journalist Leonard Feather.

Golson composed the haunting ballad "I Remember Clifford," a personal favorite of this writer, to commemorate brilliant trumpeter Clifford Brown, who died at age 25 in a tragic automobile accident on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Although he wrote the song for Gillespie's band, the mercurial, and ultimately ill-fated trumpeter Lee Morgan heard it and recorded it first.

Golson personally avoided the substance abuse that afflicted Morgan and so many others among his peers, and at age 40 became a devout Jehovah's Witness. He makes clear in *Whisper Not* that those interested in learning about "the errant behavior of some jazz musicians" should read a different book. Nevertheless, the memoir is chock full of fascinating insights.

Born into a working class Philadelphia family, Golson's father worked for the National Biscuit Company and his mother was a seamstress. Golson started on the tenor saxophone at age 14, studying music with his close friend John Coltrane, who years later developed into an almost mythological figure of the 1960s jazz avant-garde. Delving into the complexities of bebop together, Golson described Coltrane's and his reaction to a 1945 Philadelphia concert featuring trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and alto saxophonist Charlie Parker, the founders of bebop, as "exuberant delirium." The music was, in his words, "completely new, innovative, and profound."

Philadelphia was a hotbed of similar young jazz talent embracing the new sounds. Besides Golson and Coltrane, drummer Philly Joe Jones, pianist Red

Garland and the three Heath Brothers—bassist Percy, saxophonist Jimmy and drummer Tootie—were on the scene. Clifford Brown was based in nearby Wilmington, Delaware.

Golson enrolled in Howard University but left before graduating to work in the saxophone sections of various big bands, most notably that of the swing-era vibraphonist Lionel Hampton. There, Golson became a lifelong friend of the trumpeter and aspiring arranger Quincy Jones.

Golson began writing and arranging more consistently after joining the Dizzy Gillespie Orchestra. In 1956, Golson composed a song for his old friend Coltrane, who had been asked to join a new group. The latter's first album, recorded as *The New Miles Davis Quintet*, featured Golson's "Stablemates," which remains a jazz classic.

After "Stablemates," Golson's career as a serious songwriter, as well as solid saxophonist, took off. He left Gillespie to join drummer Art Blakey's memorable Jazz Messengers, then the most outstanding exponent of what was becoming known as "hard bop," with trumpeter Morgan and pianist Bobby Timmons, both also from Philadelphia. Their performance of Timmons' "Moanin'" is a jazz classic.

In 1959, Golson formed his own group, the Jazztet, with trumpeter Art Farmer, featuring pianist McCoy Tyner, who would later become an essential member of Coltrane's classic quartet. While polished and engaging, the Jazztet lacked the edge and adventure of the unfolding jazz avant-garde, and by 1962 straight-ahead jazz was falling behind rock and roll, rhythm and blues, country and other forms of popular music.

Golson disbanded the Jazztet and relocated to Hollywood, where he joined with his old friend Quincy Jones, scoring music for hit television shows, including *The Mod Squad*, *Mannix* and *Mission: Impossible*. For several years, Golson was musical director for the television series *M*A*S*H*, although not the author of its haunting theme, which was written for Robert Altman's 1970 anti-war film by Johnny Mandel.

During this period, Quincy Jones' recording of "Killer Joe," written a decade earlier for the Jazztet, became a hit, attracting a new generation of fans to Golson's songwriting.

Golson moved to New York City during the mid-1970s to resume his performing career, reforming

the Jazztet with Farmer during the 1980s and recording several new albums.

Golson's outstanding contributions to jazz music were recognized by a 1996 Jazz Masters Award from the National Endowment for the Arts, a 1999 honorary doctorate of music from Berklee College of Music, and his 2009 induction into the International Academy of Jazz Hall of Fame, among others.

Golson was an outstanding figure of post-World War II American culture. His contributions, particularly as a songwriter, should live into the future.



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