





# Geri Allen

## ENTERS **THE DOWNBEAT** **HALL OF FAME**

*By Allen Morrison*

*Photo by Michael Jackson*

Everybody wanted to play with Geri Allen — Ornette Coleman, Betty Carter, Ron Carter and Tony Williams, Charlie Haden and Paul Motian, Dave Holland and Jack DeJohnette, Esperanza Spalding, David Murray, Terri Lyne Carrington, and on and on.

**T**he serious-minded, soft-spoken pianist and composer, who died of cancer in 2017 at age 60, was humble enough that she might have been surprised at her induction into the DownBeat Hall of Fame.

“Geri didn’t really know how people felt about her,” said drummer/composer Carrington, a frequent collaborator. “That’s why we have to acknowledge our genius players while they’re here.” Friends and fellow musicians interviewed for this article said she would have been overjoyed by the honor, however.

“She was, like Betty Carter, a musician’s musician,” said Ora Harris, Allen’s long-time manager, who also managed Carter. “Musicians adored Geri. She never knew how much she was loved. I would tell her all the time how revered she was.”

Allen long ago secured her reputation as a piano powerhouse with dazzling technique, a post-bop composer who, while steeped in jazz tradition, was also a restless, profoundly creative experimentalist. One of the more eclectic pianists in jazz history, she blurred distinctions between jazz and what has come to be called creative or serious music (with a poverty of expression). She could groove, or not; swing, or not; play any style, from classical to bop to free and atonal. Her original investigations of rhythm — for example, “Drummer’s Song,” or “The Dancer” (featuring tap dancer Maurice Chestnut) — were wildly inventive. She could take diverse source material, even a Christmas carol like “Angels We Have Heard On High,” and make something startlingly new from it. And when she played standards, Allen never sounded more like her own unique self, and no one else.

"In this music, there was before Geri Allen and after Geri Allen. She's that important," wrote pianist Ethan Iverson in 2017. Just two weeks before her death, Iverson elaborated on his *Do The Math* blog in honor of Allen's 60th birthday: "Kenny Kirkland took the virtuosic McCoy Tyner/Herbie Hancock/Chick Corea axis to its logical endpoint. Around the time of Kirkland's greatest prominence, Geri Allen broke something open by offering a radically different approach, bringing back the surrealism of Thelonious Monk and Eric Dolphy. Allen's solution would

school system. By the time she was a young teen she knew she wanted to be a jazz musician. At Cass Technical High School in Detroit, which produced bassist Paul Chambers and trumpeter Donald Byrd, she studied with trumpeter and educator Marcus Belgrave. Later, at Howard University, she became one of the first students to graduate with a degree in jazz studies, in a program directed by Byrd.

She went on to earn a master's degree in ethnomusicology from the University of Pittsburgh in 1982. Teaching stints followed

whom she dedicated the song "In Appreciation."

Her commitment to others manifested itself in her devotion to teaching and, in particular, to inspiring the next generation of women. Some of today's most accomplished female jazz artists, like the composers/bassist Spalding and Linda May Han Oh, have cited her as a major influence on both their art and their sense of what was possible. Allen served as program director for the annual All-Female Jazz Residency of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC). She was all about "ensuring that women had a sense of place and agency and power," as pianist Jason Moran told journalist Shaun Brady shortly after her death.

"She always wanted to do big projects," Harris recalled. "In 2006, she wanted to celebrate women in jazz, and she wanted to do it at The Apollo Theater. My job was to make it happen. Dianne Reeves, Terri Lyne, Lizz Wright were all part of it. It was a dramatic production called 'Great Apollo Women,' and it was beautiful." After the tragedy of 9/11, Allen conceived *For the Healing of the Nations*, a sacred jazz work, in tribute to the victims and survivors. "It featured AfroBlue, the choral ensemble from Howard University. She just woke up one day, and it was all in her head," Harris said.

Allen had three children with her husband, the late trumpeter Wallace Roney. Asked by jazz writer John Murph about her secret to balancing a career and a family, Allen replied with a laugh, "I don't want to talk about it, because as soon as you talk about it, everything falls apart. I just pray a lot." The marriage ended in divorce.

When the children were young, Allen would frequently bring them with her to gigs. "There is a photo in which Geri is performing at the piano, and she has a child on her back in a papoose," Harris said. "Sometimes one or two of them would be under her piano bench, very quiet. But she wouldn't leave them in the dressing room."

She was deeply spiritual. Herzen said, "Geri used to tell me that her favorite Bible quote is from Luke 1:37, 'For nothing will be impossible with God.'" Her life seemed to embody that maxim.

Allen was a lifelong churchgoer. "We used to go to Bethany Baptist Church, near her home in Upper Montclair," Harris said. "It was Saturday night at the Vanguard, Sunday morning in church, no matter how late we had been out. And I had to go; it wasn't optional.

"I think it began with her family," she added. "Her father and mother were jazz lovers but embedded in the church. She grew up in the church, and it stuck with her all her life. Her spiritual view was her North Star. There was always a spiritual component in her thoughts. I'm a believer, too, like Geri, an old Southern Baptist. [She needed] something to believe in beyond herself."

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## 'EVERYBODY HAS A BIT OF THEIR OWN LANGUAGE, BUT SOME ARE MORE INDIVIDUAL THAN OTHERS.'

—Terri Lyne Carrington

go on to be vastly influential. There were other avatars from the late '80s and early '90s, perhaps most notably Marcus Roberts and Brad Mehldau. Many of the celebrated younger pianists of the current moment — a recent poll has names like Jason Moran, Vijay Iyer, Craig Taborn, David Virelles, Kris Davis, Matt Mitchell, Aruán Ortiz — don't play like Kirkland, Roberts or Mehldau. They play like Allen."

Allen told critic Ted Panken in 2010 that she was comfortable crossing stylistic lines and incorporating both inside and outside approaches. "I don't see this as a conflict," she said. "All artists have the right to make a statement, and it's my right to interject all my influences, to walk through different points of view, to give respect to all these musics I love while remaining grounded in jazz as my core expression and embracing the rigors of that choice."

Allen had her own harmonic and melodic identity. According to Carrington, "Everybody has a bit of their own language, but some are more individual than others. Some have said playing Geri's pieces made them a better pianist. They are so unique to her that it can be hard to hear other people play her music. And some of the pieces she wrote only she could play."

Allen's wide-ranging approach was the product of a lifelong immersion in the jazz repertoire, a strong work ethic, and rigorous academic training. Born in Pontiac, Michigan, in 1957, she grew up in Detroit, the daughter of a defense-contract administrator for the federal government and a principal in the Detroit

at Howard, New England Conservatory, Montclair State University, the New School and the University of Michigan, where she taught for 10 years. At the time of her death, she was director of jazz studies at the University of Pittsburgh.

Allen began her recording career in 1984 with *The Printmakers*, a striking trio recording with bassist Anthony Cox and drummer Andrew Cyrille that emphasized Allen's hard-charging, polyrhythmic approach and advanced piano technique. About 20 more albums followed as a leader and many more as a sidewoman, on labels including Blue Note, Polygram, Telarc and finally Motéma.

"I gave her complete freedom," said Jana Herzen, Motéma's founder. "She called me 'The enabler.' And as a woman running a label, there was no effort involved for me to respect her."

She recorded a trilogy of extraordinary solo piano albums with Herzen: *Flying Towards The Sound*, *A Child Is Born* and the Detroit-themed *Grand River Crossings*. "The way she explored Motown and Detroit was so creative, and her swing was so deep," Herzen said. "That left hand — it never faltered."

Allen championed the work of Mary Lou Williams, a lifelong inspiration, in her 2006 album *Zodiac Suite: Revisited*, an interpretation of Williams' celebrated long-form work.

"She always felt strongly that she stood on the shoulders of giants," Harris said. "She was dedicated to the spirit of honoring them, whether it was Mary Lou Williams or Rosa Parks," to