

= Mulgrew Miller =

Mulgrew Miller (August 13 , 1955 ? May 29 , 2013) was an American jazz pianist , composer , and educator . As a child he played in churches and was influenced on piano by Ramsey Lewis and then Oscar Peterson . Aspects of their styles remained in his playing , but he added the greater harmonic freedom of McCoy Tyner and others in developing as a hard bop player and then in creating his own style , which influenced others from the 1980s on .

Miller 's style evolved through playing with a series of major jazz figures . After leaving university he was pianist with the Duke Ellington Orchestra for three years , then accompanied vocalist Betty Carter . Three @-@ year stints with trumpeter Woody Shaw and with drummer Art Blakey 's high profile Jazz Messengers followed , by the end of which Miller had formed his own bands and begun recording under his own name . He was then part of drummer Tony Williams ' quintet from its foundation , while continuing to play and record with numerous other leaders , mostly in small groups . Miller was Director of Jazz Studies at William Paterson University from 2005 , and continued to play and tour internationally with other high profile figures in the music until his death from a stroke at the age of 57 .

= = Early life = =

Mulgrew Miller was born in Greenwood , Mississippi , to parents who had been raised on plantations . He had three brothers and four sisters . His family was not musical , but they had a piano , which no @-@ one in the house could play . Miller , however , played tunes on the piano from the age of six , playing by ear . He had piano lessons from the age of eight . As a child , he played blues and rhythm and blues for dances , and gospel music in a church . His family was Methodist , but he played in churches of various denominations . His principal influence on piano at this stage was Ramsey Lewis .

While at high school , Miller formed a trio that played at cocktail parties . His elder brother recommended that he listen to pianist Oscar Peterson , but there was no way of doing this in Greenwood until Peterson appeared on The Joey Bishop Show on television when Miller was about 14 . After watching Peterson 's performance , Miller decided to become a pianist : " It was a life changing event . I knew right then that I would be a jazz pianist " . Miller later mentioned Art Tatum and Erroll Garner as piano influences during his teenage years . Miller reported years later that he always found that playing fast was easy , so playing slowly and with more control were what he had to work hardest on .

After graduating from Greenwood High School , Miller became a student at Memphis State University in 1973 , attending with a band scholarship . He played euphonium , but , during his two years at the university , Miller met pianists Donald Brown and James Williams , who introduced him to the music of well @-@ known players such as Wynton Kelly , Bud Powell , and McCoy Tyner . Still at Memphis State , Miller attended a jazz workshop , where one of the tutors was his future bandleader , Woody Shaw , who stated that they would meet again in two years . They did meet again two years later , and Shaw remembered the young pianist . After leaving university in 1975 , Miller took lessons privately in Boston with Madame Margaret Chaloff , who had taught many of the pianists that Miller admired . He later commented that , " I should have stayed with her longer , [...] but at that time I was so restless , constantly on the move . " Miller played with saxophonists Ricky Ford and Bill Pierce in Boston . That winter , Miller was invited to Los Angeles by a school friend and decided to go , to escape the northern cold . He stayed on the West Coast for a year , playing locally in clubs and a church .

= = Later life and career = =

= = = 1976 ? 86 = = =

Towards the end of 1976 Miller was invited to substitute for the regular pianist in the Duke Ellington Orchestra (led by the late bandleader 's son , Mercer Ellington) . Miller had performed the same role for one weekend around a year earlier , and the new work was to be for only three weeks , but he ultimately toured with the orchestra for almost three years . His membership of the orchestra helped him , in the words of a piano magazine , to get " respect as a powerful , two @-@ fisted pianist adept at delivering entrancingly lyrical and gracefully introspective runs as well as dazzling and buoyant passages . " He left in January 1980 , after being recruited by vocalist Betty Carter , with whom he toured for eight months that year . He was then part of Shaw 's band from 1981 to 1983 , thereby , in Miller 's view , fulfilling his destiny from their earlier meetings . In 1981 he made his studio recording debut , on Shaw 's United . During the early 1980s he also accompanied vocalist Carmen Lundy , and played and recorded with saxophonist Johnny Griffin .

Miller was recommended for Art Blakey 's Jazz Messengers by Blakey members Terence Blanchard and Donald Harrison , and he joined the drummer 's band in 1983 . Initially , he struggled to fit in with Blakey dominating the rhythm section , but Miller stated that , over his period with the band , " My playing just generally matured . I don 't think one single characteristic changed , but the experience certainly boosted my confidence " . At times during concert performances he was allotted a solo piano spot , which Miller used to play medleys . His presence in the Jazz Messengers cemented his reputation within jazz . His recording career as a leader began in 1985 , with Keys to the City , the first of Miller 's several recordings for Landmark Records . Jon Pareles ' review of a solo concert in 1986 noted that Miller 's playing showed the influence of Powell on some numbers and Kelly on others , but that , overall , he was developing " his own , authoritative style " .

= = = Later 1986 ? 94 = = =

After leaving Blakey in 1986 , Miller was pianist in drummer Tony Williams ' quintet from its foundation that year until it disbanded around 1993 . Miller remained busy between tours with Williams ' band , in part by touring with his own groups . The first of these was formed in 1987 and named Wingspan , as , Miller explained , " sort of a dedication to the legacy of Charlie Parker ? Bird , you know . " It became one of Miller 's main bands , enduring through changes of personnel , and featured a lot of his compositions in its performances . Another band was known as Trio Transition , which contained bassist Reggie Workman and drummer Freddie Waits .

Miller also played on Williams bandmate Wallace Roney 's first three recordings (1987 ? 89) , and a large number of albums recorded by other leaders in the late 1980s . These included an album with long @-@ term collaborator Steve Nelson , a recording by trumpeter Donald Byrd , comeback albums from alto saxophonist Frank Morgan , and the first of a series of releases with tenor saxophonist Benny Golson .

Miller and his family moved to Palmer Township , Lehigh Valley , Pennsylvania in 1989 . In that year he joined three other pianists in recording a CD tribute to Memphis pianist Phineas Newborn , Jr . This group , the Contemporary Piano Ensemble , performed intermittently until 1996 , often playing together on four separate pianos . In 1990 Miller traveled to the Soviet Union to appear as pianist in Golson 's band at the first Moscow International Jazz Festival . In 1992 Miller also toured domestically and internationally with the New York Jazz Giants , a septet containing Jon Faddis , Tom Harrell , Lew Tabackin , Bobby Watson , Ray Drummond , and Carl Allen . Miller continued to accompany vocalists , including on recordings with Dianne Reeves and Cassandra Wilson . Starting in 1993 , he also played and recorded with saxophonist Joe Lovano .

The influence of Williams continued into Miller 's own projects , including their compositions and arrangements : The Guardian reviewer of Miller 's 1992 Hand in Hand , his first for Novus Records , commented that " it 's his occasional boss , drummer Tony Williams , who has made the strongest impression on the way he organises the material . The opening " Grew 's Tune " and the bluesier numbers would slot unnoticed into the Williams library . "

= = = 1995 ? 2013 = = =

For several years after he had turned 40 , Miller concentrated on composing and playing his own music . He therefore reduced his recording and club appearances , as well as one @-@ day associations . The stimulus for this change had built gradually from Miller 's first studio recording in 1981 : " my recording activity increased and by the time that it got into 1986 ? 87 I was on so many records it was unbelievable until eventually it became rather overwhelming and stressful , so I had to cut back . " He did continue to record , often with musicians he had established relationships with : in 1996 he reunited with Williams to appear on what became the drummer 's final recording , *Young at Heart* ; further albums led by Kenny Garrett , Nelson , Reeves , and others were made in the period 1997 ? 99 .

In 1997 Miller went on tour in Japan with 100 Golden Fingers , a troupe of 10 pianists . He joined bassist Niels @-@ Henning Ørsted Pedersen in 1999 to record duets based on 1940s performances by Duke Ellington and Jimmy Blanton . The pair toured Europe the following year , with drummer Alvin Queen added for some concerts .

In 2002 Miller 's discography as leader began to expand again , as Maxjazz started to release recordings . A series of four concert recordings were released over the following years : *Live at The Kennedy Center Vol . 1* and *Live at The Kennedy Center Vol . 2* (recorded in 2002) , with Derrick Hodge (bass) and Rodney Green (drums) ; and *Live at Yoshi 's Vol . 1* and *Live at Yoshi 's Vol . 2* (recorded in 2003) , with Hodge and Karriem Riggins (drums) . In 2002 Miller joined bassist Ron Carter 's *Golden Striker Trio* , with guitarist Russell Malone . The trio occasionally toured internationally for the next decade . In 2003 Miller was commissioned to write a score for the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company ; after writing *The Clearing in the Woods* and having it choreographed by Ronald K. Brown , Miller and his band played the piece for performances by the company .

In the mid @-@ 2000s Miller joined bassist Dave Holland 's band , changing it from a quintet to a sextet , and adding gospel and soul elements to the group 's sound . Around this time , Miller had two regular bands of his own : a piano trio , and a quintet featuring saxophone and vibraphone . He also became heavily involved in music education : Miller was the Director of Jazz Studies at William Paterson University from 2005 , and was the Artist in Residence at Lafayette College in 2008 , which was two years after it had awarded him an honorary doctorate in Performing Arts .

Miller 's only solo album , a 2000 concert recording entitled *Solo* , was released in 2010 and was well received by critics for the imagination and harmonic development in Miller 's playing . Also in 2010 , Miller joined guitarist John Scofield 's new band . That year , Miller had a minor stroke . After this , he took medicine , changed his diet and lost weight ; he also reduced his touring and recording . In February 2012 he traveled to Denmark to play with Klüvers Big Band ; selections from one of the five concerts were released under Miller 's co @-@ leadership as *Grew 's Tune* . In autumn 2012 he performed as a piano duo with Kenny Barron , continuing an association that had begun some years earlier . In the winter of that year he toured Europe as part of a quintet led by reeds players Yusef Lateef and Archie Shepp .

On May 24 , 2013 , Miller was admitted to Lehigh Valley Hospital , near Allentown , Pennsylvania , having suffered another stroke . He died there on May 29 . Miller made more than 15 albums under his own name during his career , and appeared on more than 400 for other leaders . His last working trio consisted of Ivan Taylor on bass and Green on drums . Bassist Christian McBride commented on the loss to jazz on the day of Miller 's death : " I sincerely hope every self @-@ respecting jazz musician takes this day to reflect on all the music Mulgrew left us . "

= = Personal life and personality = =

Miller was survived by his wife , son , daughter , and grandson . Miller married on August 14 , 1982 . He was quiet and gentle , and was " a modest man , with a self @-@ deprecating sense of humour " . Miller described his own attitude towards music in a 2005 interview :

I worked hard to maintain a certain mental and emotional equilibrium . It 's mostly due to my faith in the Creator . I don 't put all my eggs in that basket of being a rich and famous jazz guy . That allows me a certain amount of freedom , because I don 't have to play music for money . I play music

because I love it .

= = Style and influence = =

Ben Ratliff , writing for The New York Times , commented that , " As a composer , Mr. Miller is difficult to peg ; like his piano playing , he 's a bit of everything . " Critic Ted Panken observed in 2004 that Miller the pianist " finds ways to conjure beauty from pentatonics and odd intervals , infusing his lines with church and blues strains and propelling them with a joyous , incessant beat . " John Fordham commented that Miller 's " melodic fluency and percussive chordwork [...] recalled Oscar Peterson [... but] with glimpses of the harmonically freer methods of McCoy Tyner " , and that Miller was much more than the hard bop player that he was often stereotyped as being . The obituary writer for Down Beat observed that " Miller could swing hard but maintained grace and precision with a touch and facility that influenced generations of musicians . "

Miller had a strong reputation with fellow musicians . Pianist Geoffrey Keezer was convinced that he wanted to be a pianist after attending a performance by Miller in 1986 . Vibraphonist Warren Wolf stated that Miller helped him early in his career , including by being a link to jazz history : " you 're getting that experience of playing with Art Blakey , that attitude of ' Yes , it 's my band , but you have to give other people a chance to shine . ' " Robert Glasper also cited Miller as an influence , and wrote and recorded " One for ' Grew " as a tribute .

Speaking in 2010 , Miller commented on his approach to playing standards , which was more conservative than that of many others : " I believe in giving due respect to the melody , playing it as true as possible , [...] a solo is a creative process that improves the melody . " He almost never transcribed recordings (something that jazz musicians are typically taught to do) ; Miller credited this with slowing his learning process , but also with allowing him to express himself more freely , as he reached his own understanding of the compositions he played .

Miller explained the lack of critical attention he received as follows : " Guys who do what I am doing are viewed as passé . " He also contrasted his own approach with that of performers who produced " interview music " : " something that 's obviously different , and you get the interviews and a certain amount of attention . "

= = Discography = =