

= Wynton Kelly =

Wynton Charles Kelly ( December 2 , 1931 ? April 12 , 1971 ) was a Jamaican American jazz pianist and composer . He is known for his lively , blues @-@ based playing and as one of the finest accompanists in jazz . He began playing professionally at the age of 12 , and was pianist on a No. 1 R & B hit at the age of 16 . His recording debut as leader occurred three years later , around the time he started to become better known as accompanist to singer Dinah Washington , and as a member of trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie 's band . This progress was interrupted by two years in the army , after which Kelly returned to Washington and Gillespie , and played with other leaders . Over the next few years , these included instrumentalists Julian " Cannonball " Adderley , John Coltrane , Roland Kirk , Wes Montgomery , and Sonny Rollins , and vocalists Betty Carter , Billie Holiday , and Abbey Lincoln .

Kelly attracted the most attention as part of Miles Davis ' band from 1959 , including an appearance on the trumpeter 's Kind of Blue , often mentioned as the best @-@ selling jazz album ever . After leaving Davis in 1963 , Kelly played with his own trio , which recorded for several labels and toured the United States and internationally . His career did not develop much further , and he had difficulty finding enough work late in his career . Kelly , who was prone to epilepsy , died in a hotel room in Canada following a seizure , aged 39 .

= = Early life = =

The son of Jamaican immigrants , Kelly was born in Brooklyn , New York , on December 2 , 1931 . He began playing the piano at the age of four , but did not receive much formal training in music . He attended The High School of Music & Art and the Metropolitan Vocational High School in New York , but " They wouldn 't give us piano , so I fooled around with the bass and studied theory . "

Kelly started his professional career in 1943 , initially as a member of R & B groups . Through this , he improved his playing ? the bands ' " music had to be accessible , entertaining and easy to dance to " ; this influenced his later playing . Around this time he also played organ in local churches . In his local area , he played with brothers Lee and Ray Abrams , as well as Ahmed Abdul @-@ Malik , Ernie Henry , and Cecil Payne , who went on to have careers in jazz .

= = Main career = =

= = = 1946 ? 58 = = =

At the age of 15 , Kelly toured the Caribbean as part of Ray Abrams ' R & B band . Kelly made his recording debut aged 16 , playing on saxophonist Hal Singer 's 1948 " Cornbread " , which became a Billboard R & B chart @-@ topping hit . In the following year , Kelly recorded with vocalist Babs Gonzales ; these tracks included his first recorded solos . Other R & B bands that Kelly played with included those led by Hot Lips Page ( 1948 or earlier ) , Eddie " Cleanhead " Vinson ( 1949 ) , and Eddie " Lockjaw " Davis ( 1950 ) . Material from sessions on July 25 and August 1 , 1951 formed Piano Interpretations , a trio album that was Kelly 's recording debut as leader , released by Blue Note Records later that year . Critic Scott Yanow indicates that , at this stage of his career , Kelly 's main influence was Bud Powell , but that his playing " displayed some of the joy of Teddy Wilson 's style along with his own chord voicings " . Kelly became better known after joining vocalist Dinah Washington 's band in 1951 . After this , he played in bands led by Lester Young in the spring of 1952 , and Dizzy Gillespie , recording with the latter later in 1952 . In September of that year , just as Kelly was beginning to build a reputation , he was drafted into the army .

After a period at Fort McClellan in Alabama , Kelly was part of a Third Army traveling show . He recruited fellow draftee and future jazz pianist Duke Pearson into the show ; together they were able to convince their unit to involve more black musicians , as they were initially the only two out of around two dozen performers . By April 1954 Kelly was " Private First Class Wynton Kelly " , musical

director of the show . He ended his military service with a music performance for an audience of 10 @, @ 000 in the Chastain Memorial Park Amphitheater in Atlanta .

Kelly was released from the military after two years , following which he worked on and off with Washington and Gillespie again . Kelly was also part of Charles Mingus ' group for a tour of Washington , D.C. , California , and Vancouver in late 1956 to early 1957 . He left Mingus to rejoin Gillespie , who led a big band that toured Canada and the southern United States . Commenting on Kelly 's ability to move from a small group to a big band setting , saxophonist Benny Golson , also from Gillespie 's band , said that " He kept his identity ; yet he was able to add something to the band , not only melodically ( which he was known for ) but rhythmically . He would set up patterns ? never interfering with the arrangement , but he was able to get into the cracks and he would always be adding something , giving it impetus , more energy . " In 1956 , Kelly recorded with vocalist Billie Holiday , including for the original version of her song " Lady Sings the Blues " , as well as for the Blue Note debuts of saxophonists Johnny Griffin and Sonny Rollins . After leaving Gillespie again , Kelly formed his own trio .

Kelly was much in demand as a sideman for recordings , and appeared on albums by most of the major jazz leaders in the late 1950s and early 1960s . In April 1957 , for instance , he appeared as a guest in an enlarged version of Art Blakey 's Jazz Messengers , for an album later released as Theory of Art ; this band included trumpeter Lee Morgan , with whom Kelly had recorded a few weeks earlier . The recording sessions continued four days later , with Kelly joining Blakey , Morgan and others on Griffin 's A Blowin ' Session ; this was followed by three studio days for Gillespie , and another for trumpeter Clark Terry , before the end of the month . Later that year , Kelly made a rare appearance playing bass , for one track of vocalist Abbey Lincoln 's That 's Him ! , after the regular bassist , Paul Chambers , became drunk and fell asleep in the studio .

Early in 1958 , Kelly recorded his second album as leader , the quartet Piano , more than six years after his first . In the same year , he played for recordings led by , among others , vocalist Betty Carter , and made the first of several appearances on albums led by Julian " Cannonball " Adderley , Blue Mitchell , and Hank Mobley . Kelly also played organ on one track of Pepper Adams and Jimmy Knepper 's The Pepper @-@ Knepper Quintet , an unusual departure from his usual instrument .

= = = 1959 ? 71 = = =

In January 1959 , Kelly joined the musician with whom he became most associated ? Miles Davis . Adderley , the alto saxophonist in the band , related how Kelly came to replace Red Garland on piano : Davis had admired Kelly 's playing as part of Gillespie 's band , and Garland was invariably late to arrive for their club performances ; " One night , Wynton was there when we started and Miles asked him to sit in . When Red came , Wynton was playing . Miles told Red , ' Wynton 's got the gig . ' Just like that . " Kelly stayed with the trumpeter until March 1963 , appearing on the studio albums Kind of Blue and Someday My Prince Will Come , as well as on numerous concert recordings . On 1959 's Kind of Blue , often mentioned as the best @-@ selling jazz album ever , Kelly replaced Bill Evans on the track " Freddie Freeloader " . Even though Kelly was Davis ' regular pianist , the trumpeter had planned his album with Evans in mind , so this was the only piece that Kelly played . Kelly toured 22 cities in Europe as part of Davis ' quintet in the spring of 1960 . Fellow pianist McCoy Tyner commented on Kelly 's playing with Davis : " His harmonic colorations were very beautiful . But I think above all it was his ability to swing . John [ Coltrane ] used to mention that . Miles used to get off the bandstand and just look at Wynton with admiration , because he really held the group together . "

Davis often left considerable time between band engagements , which allowed the musicians to do other work , so Kelly continued to record with other leaders , including with other members of the Davis band . In February 1959 , when in Chicago for performances with Davis , Kelly was pianist on Cannonball Adderley Quintet in Chicago , and bassist Chambers ' Go . Later that year , Kelly made his first album for Vee @-@ Jay Records , in a quintet containing Wayne Shorter ; Kelly returned the favor a few months later by playing on the saxophonist 's debut as leader , Introducing Wayne Shorter . Kelly also recorded with Coltrane , including for one track , " Naima " , from the

saxophonist 's Giant Steps . When Adderley left Davis , he attempted to recruit Kelly ; although the pianist declined , he did participate in more recording sessions led by his former bandmate , as well as more with Griffin , Mobley , Morgan , and numerous others . Kelly made his first recording with guitarist Wes Montgomery in 1961 ; they then made Full House the next year ; the pairing was described by The Penguin Guide to Jazz as " an association that promised a lot and delivered more " .

When he left Davis , Kelly formed his own trio with two others leaving the trumpeter ? Chambers and drummer Jimmy Cobb . They soon embarked on a national tour and had recording dates with Verve Records , Kelly having left Vee @-@ Jay after four albums . In May 1964 , the calypso track " Little Tracy " from Kelly 's Verve album Comin ' in the Back Door reached number 38 on Billboard 's R & B chart . A few months later , the trio toured Japan for George Wein @-@ organized concerts . In the summer of 1965 they joined Montgomery on a tour of the US that included an appearance at the Newport Jazz Festival , and a club recording released as the Kelly co @-@ led Smokin ' at the Half Note . The trio also played together on albums for Joe Henderson and others after leaving Davis . According to Cobb , he took charge of the financial side of the trio , as well as its recruiting of additional members , while Kelly primarily was pianist and responsible for dealing with interviewers . The trio stayed together until 1969 , when Chambers died .

Towards the end of his career , Kelly had problems finding work , but played with Ray Nance , and as a soloist in New York . Kelly 's final recording session appears to have been in the autumn of 1970 , accompanying saxophonist Dexter Gordon .

= = Death = =

Kelly died in Toronto , Canada , following an epileptic seizure , on April 12 , 1971 . He had travelled there from New York to play in a club with drummer George Reed and vocalist Herb Marshall . Kelly had a longstanding epilepsy problem , and had to monitor his condition carefully . An account of his death was given by his friend , Cobb : " Wynton called his girlfriend in New York and said , ' You know , I don 't feel good . ' She said , ' Why don 't you go downstairs to the bar and if something happens somebody could tend to you . ' We don 't know if he did that , because when they found him he was in the room . " Kelly was found in his room in the Westminster Hotel on Jarvis Street by Marshall . He was reported to have had almost no money at the time of his death . A memorial concert was held on June 28 in New York and featured numerous well @-@ known musicians of the period .

= = Personal life and personality = =

Kelly was survived by a daughter , Tracy . Bassist Marcus Miller is a cousin of Kelly 's , as are rapper Foxy Brown , and pianist Randy Weston .

Kelly drank a lot ; saxophonist Jimmy Heath described him as " an alcoholic " who " could control his drinking " and not let his playing be affected by it . Kelly was known " for being a very warm , generous human being " . Bassist Bill Crow reported that Kelly was " full of fun " : " He was often the center of backstage laughing sessions as we told stories on each other . Wynton had a removable upper front denture . While on stage , if he saw some of us standing in the wings listening , he would turn around so the audience couldn 't see , give us a stern look , and drop his upper plate forward onto his lower lip , creating a grotesquely comical effect . Sometimes he heightened it by sticking his tongue out at us over his upper teeth . "

= = Playing style = =

Kelly played " with a crisp , leaping rhythmic blues approach that generated intense excitement " , wrote The Washington Post 's obituarist . The happiness conveyed in his playing was described by Cobb : " It 's happy sounding all the time . It 's got a West Indian kind of hop to it . Always sparkling " . The Rough Guide to Jazz stated that Kelly " combined boppish lines and bluesy interpolations , but

with a taut sense of timing quite unlike anyone else except his many imitators " , and highlighted the effectiveness of his block chords in contributing to a " dynamic and driving accompanying style " .

Kelly was an excellent sight reader , and could remember parts very quickly , as well as play pieces he had heard but not read before .

Several commentators have rated Kelly the best accompanist in jazz , including critic Ray Comiskey and music educator Mark Levine . Drummer Philly Joe Jones said that , as an accompanist , Kelly " puts down flowers behind a soloist . He never wanted to steal in . He just put together the right things . " Pianist Bruce Barth pointed out that part of Kelly 's success as an accompanist came from " occasional and compelling use of ' blues licks ' and melodic phrases in place of chords . "

= = Legacy and influence = =

In critic Gary Giddins ' view ,

Kelly was never able to exploit his gifts when he went out on his own . His quartet with Wes Montgomery should have developed into a major force , but the same commercial interests that shanghaied Montgomery saddled Kelly with the fashionable soul @-@ funk of the mid- ' 60s . Unlike Montgomery , his career went nowhere , and he didn 't live long enough to find himself again .

Writer David Rosenthal commented that " Kelly seemed unable to escape being typecast as a sideman " .

Kelly 's style of playing has been an influence on numerous pianists , beginning in the 1960s . Among those to cite him directly as an influence are Monty Alexander , Chick Corea , Brad Mehldau , and Chucho Valdés . Pianists Dan Nimmer and Willie Pickens have recorded tribute albums to Kelly .

Trumpeter Wynton Marsalis ( born 1961 ) was named after Kelly .

= = Discography = =