

= Jaki Byard =

John Arthur " Jaki " Byard (June 15 , 1922 ? February 11 , 1999) was an American jazz pianist , composer and arranger who also played tenor and alto saxophones , among several other instruments . He was known for his eclectic style , incorporating everything from ragtime and stride to free jazz .

Byard played with Maynard Ferguson in the late 1950s and early 1960s , and was a member of bands led by Charles Mingus for several years , including on several studio and concert recordings . The first of his recordings as a leader was in 1960 , but , despite being praised by critics , his albums and performances did not gain him much wider attention . In his 60 @-@ year career , Byard recorded at least 35 albums as leader , and more than 50 as a sideman . Byard 's influence on the music comes from his combining of musical styles during performance , and his parallel career in teaching .

From 1969 Byard was heavily involved in jazz education : he began teaching at the New England Conservatory and went on to work at several other music institutions , as well as having private students . He continued performing and recording , mainly in solo and small group settings , but he also led two big bands ? one made up of some of his students , and the other of professional musicians . His death , from a single gunshot while in his home , remains an unsolved mystery .

= = Early life = =

Byard was born in Worcester , Massachusetts . At that time , his parents ? John Sr and Geraldine Garr ? were living at 47 Clayton Street . Both of his parents played musical instruments ; his mother played the piano , as did his uncles and grandmother , the last playing in cinemas during the silent film era . He began piano lessons at the age of six , but they ended when his family was affected by the Great Depression . He was also given a trumpet that belonged to his father , and attempted to copy the popular players of the time , Roy Eldridge and Walter Fuller . As a boy he often walked to Lake Quinsigamond to listen to bands performing there . He heard Benny Goodman , Lucky Millinder , Fats Waller , and Chick Webb , and listened to other bands of the era on the radio . " Those were the things that inspired me ? I guess it stuck with me " , he commented decades later .

Byard began playing professionally on piano at the age of 16 , in bands led by Doc Kentross and Freddy Bates . His early lessons had involved mostly playing by rote , so his development of knowledge of theory and further piano technique occurred from the late 1930s until 1941 , including studying harmony at Commerce High School . In that year he was drafted into the army , where he continued with piano lessons and was influenced by pianist Ernie Washington , with whom he was barracked , although Byard also took up trombone at this time . He also studied Stravinsky and Chopin , and continued studying classical composers into the 1960s . Part of his military service was in Florida , where he was a mentor to the young saxophonist Cannonball Adderley and his brother , Nat . After leaving the army in 1946 , Byard 's musical education continued , through discussions with others , and using library materials combined with music school syllabuses .

= = Career as musician = =

Byard played with bands from the Boston area , including for two years with violinist Ray Perry , who encouraged Byard to add tenor saxophone to his array of instruments . He then joined Earl Bostic 's band as pianist in 1947 and they toured for around a year . Byard then formed a bebop band with Joe Gordon and Sam Rivers in Boston , before touring for a year with a stage show band . Back once more in Boston , he had a regular job for three years with Charlie Mariano in a club in nearby Lynn . They recorded together in 1953 . Byard was a member of Herb Pomeroy 's band as a tenor saxophonist from 1952 to 1955 , and recorded with him in 1957 . Byard also played solo piano in Boston in the early to mid @-@ 1950s and freelanced in that area later in the same decade . He joined Maynard Ferguson in 1959 , and stayed until 1962 . As one of Ferguson 's players and arrangers , Byard found that his own preference for experimentation in time signatures , harmony

and freer improvisation was restricted by the preferences of other band members .

Byard moved to New York in the early 1960s . His first recording as a leader , the solo piano Blues for Smoke , was recorded there on December 16 , 1960 (but not released in the United States until 1988) Also in 1960 , Byard first played with the bassist Charles Mingus . He recorded extensively with Mingus in the period 1962 ? 64 (including on the important albums on Impulse ! Records ? Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus and The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady) , and toured Europe with him in 1964 . Byard also made recordings as a sideman between 1960 and 1966 with Eric Dolphy , Booker Ervin , Roland Kirk , and Rivers . His performance on Dolphy 's Outward Bound put Byard at the forefront of modern jazz .

As a leader , Byard recorded a string of albums for the Prestige label during the 1960s . Some of these albums included Richard Davis on bass and Alan Dawson on drums , a trio combination described by critic Gary Giddins as " the most commanding rhythm section of the ' 60s , excepting the Hancock @-@ Carter @-@ Williams trio in Miles Davis 's band " , although it existed only for recordings . One such album was Jaki Byard with Strings ! , a sextet recording that featured Byard 's composing and arranging : on " Cat 's Cradle Conference Rag " , each of five musicians " play five standards based on similar harmonies simultaneously " . A further example of Byard 's sometimes unusual approach to composition is the title track from Out Front ! , which he created by thinking of fellow pianist Herbie Nichols ' touch at the keyboard . Popularity with jazz critics did not translate into wider success : a Washington Post review of his final Prestige album , Solo Piano from 1969 , remarked that it was by " a man who has been largely ignored outside the inner circles " . Giddins also commented in the 1970s on the lack of attention that Byard had received , and stated that the pianist 's recordings from 1960 to 1972 " are dazzling in scope , and for his ability to make the most of limited situations " .

Byard also continued to play and record with other leaders . While in Europe in 1965 , he joined Art Blakey 's band for a series of concerts there . In 1967 Byard played in a small group with drummer Elvin Jones . Between 1966 and 1969 Byard recorded three albums with the saxophonist Eric Kloss , then , in 1970 , returned to Mingus ' band , including for performances in Europe . Byard occasionally substituted on piano in Duke Ellington 's orchestra in 1974 when the leader was unwell . In 1974 ? 75 Byard had a residency at Bradley ? s in New York . He also fronted a big band , the Apollo Stompers , which was formed in the late 1970s . There were two versions of the band : one made up of musicians in New York , and the other using students from the New England Conservatory , where Byard had taught from 1969 .

In 1980 Byard was the subject of a short documentary film , Anything for Jazz , which featured him playing , teaching and with his family . By the 1980s his main instrument remained the piano , and he still played both alto and tenor saxophones , but he had stopped playing the other instruments that he used to use professionally ? bass , drums , guitar , trombone , and trumpet , although he still taught all of them . In the same period , he was often heard in New York playing solo , in duos , or in trios . In 1988 he played with a band founded by Mingus ' widow to perform the bassist 's compositions ? the Mingus Big Band . Byard played and recorded with a former student of his , Ricky Ford , from 1989 to 1991 , and continued to play and teach during the 1990s .

= = Career as teacher = =

Byard was a charter faculty member at the New England Conservatory , helping to establish its jazz studies program , initially named ' Afro @-@ American Music ' ; he stayed for more than 15 years . He also taught at the Hartt School of Music from 1975 , the Manhattan School of Music from 1989 to 1999 , the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music , and lectured for three years at Harvard University .

As teacher and player , Byard was renowned for his knowledge of the history of jazz piano . This meant that some aspiring young musicians sought him out as a teacher . One of these was pianist Jason Moran , who described their first meeting , at a performance by the Apollo Stompers :

Jaki had all these toys and whistles and bells and things that he was playing from the piano , and also screaming and yelling from the piano in joy . I remember thinking , ' This guy 's out of his mind .

' After the set , I went up to him , introduced myself , and said that I would be studying with him . He said something to the effect of , ' get ready ' .

Moran studied with Byard for four years , and credits the older man with developing his skills , building his awareness of jazz history , and creating his willingness to experiment with different styles . Another student , Fred Hersch , reported that Byard was both organized and chaotic as a teacher : giving his students worksheets and having them study early stride piano , but also behaving eccentrically and missing lessons .

Jazz flautist Jamie Baum also studied with Byard , and after his death organized a tribute band consisting mainly of his students : Baum , Adam Kolker , Jerome Harris , George Schuller and Ugonna Okegwo , called Yard Byard or The Jaki Byard Project , using compositions Byard had left with Baum but never performed .

= = Death = =

Byard died in his home in Hollis , Queens , New York City , of a gunshot wound on February 11 , 1999 . He was shot once in the head . The police reported that Byard 's family , with whom he shared the house , last saw him at 6 pm , that he was killed around 10 pm , that there " were no signs of robbery , forced entry or a struggle " , and that no weapon was found . The death was soon declared to be a homicide , but the circumstances surrounding it have not been determined , and the case remains unsolved .

Byard was survived by two daughters , a son , four grandchildren , and six greatgrandchildren . His wife of four decades had died five years earlier .

= = Playing style and influence = =

Giddins described the nature of Byard 's piano playing : " His tone [...] is unfailingly bright . His middle @-@ register improvisations are evenly articulated with a strong touch and rhythmic elan [... he] likes ringing tremolos and portentous fifths [... and] barely articulated keyboard washes that float beyond the harmonic bounds but are ultimately anchored by the blues " . Byard played in a variety of styles , often mixed together in one performance : John S. Wilson commented that Byard " progresses from a basic melodic statement to nimble Art Tatum fingering to Fats Waller stride , to prickly Thelonious Monk phrases , to Cecil Taylor dissonances " . This could have deliberately comic , surrealistic effects .

Byard pointed out that the use of humor did not mean that his music was not serious : " I might do it with humor , but it 's still serious because I mean what I 'm doing " . He stated that his choice to play in a variety of styles was not imitatory or superficial : " I can 't play one way all night ; I wouldn 't want to and I wouldn 't want the public to hear me that way " . One obituary writer noted that , " Nobody thinks it odd if a pianist underpins melody with stride patterns or a boogie bass . When Byard did that 30 years ago , distinctions were drawn more tightly " . Music writer Dan Lander also stated that Byard 's playing was ahead of its time , and added that it has influenced 21st @-@ century pianists :

Byard 's grasp and integration of historical forms , his ability to embrace tradition and risk taking , was visionary , impacting on a new generation of jazz musicians who understood the history of jazz as a material to build on and work with , at the service of creating something new , rather than as an unmovable weight , fixing them to the past .

A 1968 review of a Byard concert reported that his alto saxophone playing was " in a manner rooted in the bop era " , and that he occasionally accompanied himself , " saxophone with his left hand , piano with his right " . His playing on tenor saxophone was influenced by Lester Young ; Byard himself cited Ben Webster as an influence on his tenor ballad playing .

= = Discography = =

= = = As leader / co @-@ leader = = =

Byard plays only piano , unless otherwise noted .

= = = As sideman = = =

An asterisk (*) indicates that the year is that of release .

Sources :