

JOE ZAWINUL

profile

In a business where the word “legend” is tossed around all too often, the tag is not an overstatement when referring to keyboardist/composer/bandleader Joe Zawinul. This titan of the jazz world – whose innovative and genre-bending sensibilities gave rise to such visionary musical entities as Weather Report and the Zawinul Syndicate – took his final bow on September 11, 2007, at age 75 after a battle with cancer. Equally tragic was the loss of his wife, Maxine, who died less than two months earlier on July 26, 2007. Nevertheless, Zawinul has left behind a body of work and an enduring legacy that will inspire jazz musicians and fans for generations to come.

Although physically compromised by terminal illness in his final months, the quality of Zawinul’s music remained unparalleled to the very end. “In a Silent Way,” a track from *Brown Street* – released on Heads Up International in February 2007 – won a GRAMMY Award in February 2008 for Best Instrumental Arrangement (the track was arranged by Vince Mendoza).

But *Brown Street* was by no means the last word from this brilliant and dedicated road warrior of jazz. The aptly titled *75* is scheduled for posthumous release on Heads Up on February 24, 2009. The two-disc set was recorded in concert at a festival date in Lugano, Switzerland, on July 7, 2007 – the last birthday Zawinul would celebrate before his death two months later. In addition to stellar, high-energy performances with the Syndicate, *75* also includes a track recorded on a Hungary stage in August 2007, where Zawinul is joined by saxophonist and Weather Report co-founder Wayne Shorter. *75* is unwavering proof that Zawinul, like so many great artists, clearly saved some of his best work for last.

Born in Vienna, Austria, in 1932, Zawinul emigrated in 1959 to the United States, where he played with Maynard Ferguson and the great Dinah Washington before joining alto saxophonist Cannonball Adderley’s band in 1961 and staying for almost ten years. With Adderley, Zawinul wrote several important songs, most notably the slow, funky often-covered hit “Mercy, Mercy, Mercy,” which reached the top of the *Billboard* pop Charts in 1967. Other songs from the Zawinul pen during his tenure with Adderley include “The Country Preacher,” “Walk Tall” and “Seventy Miles Away.”

Zawinul then moved on to a brief but fateful encounter and collaboration with Miles Davis, just as Miles was moving into the electric sound. It was Zawinul’s “In a Silent Way,” which served as the title track of Miles’ first electric foray, and Zawinul had a potent impact on Miles’ classic *Bitches Brew* as well.

Zawinul was one of a rare handful of synthesizer players who made the instrument an expressive, swinging part of his arsenal. Prior to the invention of the portable synthesizer, his approach to the keyboard helped bring the Wurlitzer and Fender-Rhodes electric pianos into the jazz mainstream.

After releasing his self-titled solo debut album on Atlantic in 1970, Zawinul and saxophonist Wayne Shorter founded Weather Report, a progressive ensemble that would become the most important jazz group of the 1970s and beyond. Drawing on the power and theatricality of rock and R&B, while maintaining allegiance to jazz and the pure spirit of improvisation, they tapped into the so-called “fusion” movement of the decade while carving out their own unique niche. Despite frequent personnel changes – including Miroslav Vitous, Alphonso Johnson, Jaco Pastorius, Victor Bailey, Peter Erskine and Omar Hakim – the band’s innovative spirit remained intact over the course of 17 albums, including the ground-breaking *Black Market* (1976) and the massively popular *Heavy Weather* (1977), which featured Zawinul’s infectious “Birdland.” That song, in versions by Weather Report, Manhattan Transfer and Quincy Jones, won separate GRAMMY awards in three successive decades. Weather Report itself won a GRAMMY for their

brilliant 1979 live album, 8:30.

In 1985, after he and Shorter parted company and Weather Report disbanded, Zawinul continued to pursue adventurous new grooves with the short-lived Weather Update, followed by the Zawinul Syndicate, whose albums included the GRAMMY-nominated *My People* in 1996 and the GRAMMY-nominated *World Tour* two years later. GRAMMY-nominated *Faces and Places* was released in 2002, followed by *Vienna Nights*, the 2005 double-live Syndicate CD recorded at Zawinul's own Birdland jazz club in Vienna. Other special projects included an adventurous solo album, *Dialects* (1986), and work as producer and arranger on Salif Keita's landmark album *Amen* (1991).

Separate from his jazz pursuits, Zawinul also proved himself to be a skilled classical composer with his ambitious *Stories of the Danube* in 1993 and his collaboration with renowned classical pianist Friedrich Gulda. His special solo project, *Mauthausen*, a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, was released in Europe in 2000 and was performed on the site of the Austrian concentration camp from which the project takes its name.

Among his prizes and awards, Zawinul was named Best Keyboardist by *Downbeat* thirty times. During its fifteen-year trajectory, Weather Report was a perennial winner in the Best Band category in *Downbeat*, *Swing Journal* and other music publications around the world. Zawinul is also a recipient of the Charlie Parker and Miles Davis Awards, and holds honorary doctorates from Berklee School of Music, Three Town College in New York and the Academy of Music in Graz, Austria. He was also the official Austrian goodwill ambassador to seventeen African nations. In January 2002, he received the first International Jazz Award, co-presented by the International Jazz Festival Organization and the International Association of Jazz Educators.

Brown Street, Zawinul's maiden voyage on Heads Up, is a triumphant two-disc live recording that unites the veteran jazzman with the Cologne-based WDR Big Band. Recorded in the Zawinul Birdland club in Vienna, the two-disc set features big-band arrangements of classic Weather Report material, and includes percussionist Alex Acuna, bassist Vistor Bailey and drummer Nathaniel Townsley.

75, the bittersweet followup to *Brown Street*, is a reminder that the Zawinul legacy is still very much alive. "My dad raised the bar in the music world as a true artist to his profession," says filmmaker Anthony Zawinul, Joe's son who has recorded many of the senior Zawinul's performances. "He never compromised his art. You either liked it or you didn't. One thing is for sure though, you always knew it was Joe Zawinul. As a bandleader, he was able to pull out performances from his bandmates and take them to heights they never knew existed."

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