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A Master's Passing

By Josef Woodard

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ETERNITY TIME: Joe Zawinul could cut a tough image with the best and worst of them. The great Vienna-born jazz keyboardist loved boxing, like his old boss Miles Davis, and was often putting up his dukes and perfecting his stern gaze (also like Davis). He seemed to rule his bands, especially Zawinul Syndicate, with pugilistic, killing stares — the better to guide the spontaneous flow of the music and avoid predictability. He had the braggadocio thing down, thumping his chest and issuing mantra-like statements such as “Weather Report is the best fucking band in the world, man.” And in some way, it was.

All that being said, though, Zawinul was also one of the sweetest, most deeply human and compassionate musicians who ever graced the planet. His music brimmed with optimism and an abiding sense of both affirmation and exploration — the very essence of jazz. He was extra alive, and in tune with his muse to the end. Critical bickering over his use of electronics and style-hybridizing aside, Zawinul was one of the greats, period.

Hearing of Zawinul's death of a rare skin cancer on September 11, in Vienna, was a shock to those who knew and loved him. Hearing that it came not long after the passing of his wife, Maxine, added some poetic coating, given his tight family life. (On the liner notes for Zawinul's 1970 solo album, Davis wrote that the keyboardist had "a black wife and three beige kids.")

This January, at his home in Malibu overlooking the Pacific — where he lived for much of the past 20 years — Zawinul looked hale and hearty. Post-holidays, his sons and grandchildren milled about the property. Ivan worked in his studio, the Music Room, on a compilation of live recordings from 20 years of the Zawinul Syndicate. Erich cooked up tasty soup. And Zawinul the elder seemed especially nostalgic in our interview. He spoke of life in Vienna before he headed to the U.S. and became a legendary émigré.

Listen to his tunes, including his famed classics "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy," "In a Silent Way," and "Birdland," or his poignant ballad "A Remark You Made," or a piece like "Brown Street" — improvised one afternoon with Weather Report at his old house in Pasadena and now the title track of the fascinating recent WDR big band project, released on Heads Up and deserving of heaping praises. With this album, the deep jazz cred of his writing and philosophy rings out. The presence of horns brings out the genetic-level swing of Zawinul's music.

In the interview, I mentioned having heard the Zawinul Syndicate at Catalina's recently, and that it was heady music, but also visceral, a real groove-fest. "It's entertainment," he said of his music. "That doesn't mean you have to be a clown or something and play down to people and make it cheap. You can make it highly sophisticated, because people are sophisticated. I like people coming from the streets. Those people who have that hard education, they know how to talk to a president and they know how to talk to a bum."

Zawinul spoke of wanting to play in Santa Barbara, where he hadn't performed since Weather Report's heyday in the '70s and '80s, when they appeared at the Santa Barbara Bowl, Campbell Hall, and the Arlington, where Jaco Pastorius seduced the crowd with his punk jazzy prowess.

Zawinul called up some recordings on his laptop of a solo work-in-progress, with his original instrument — the accordion — as well as acoustic guitar, piano, hand drums, and vocals. Hopefully, that will be one of many archival projects that will go public, to remind us of our luck in having had Zawinul pass through the history of music.

On this bright day in Malibu, at age 75, he was looking to the future, as was his wont. "I have a lot of songs left. That's for sure." There are lots of songs left, in boxes, on tapes and hard drives. What we'll greatly miss is the thrill of the live moment, which Zawinul commanded in a unique way.

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