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Derek Smith performs at the New Jersey Jazz Society jazz festival at The Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, June 1995. Photo by Mitchell Seidel.

REMEMBERING **Derek Smith** 1931 – 2016

“Derek always had a smile on his face and gave his all. He was a total musician...A ferocious swinger, he was the spark plug of any band he graced.”

— Randy Sandke

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Remembering Derek Smith

The London-born musician and longtime New Jersey resident played at many NJJS events.

By Sanford Josephson

Derek Smith emigrated to New York City in 1957, and he quickly became active playing in the New York recording studios, helped greatly by his friendship with the bassist Milt Hinton. When I interviewed Smith in 2008 for my book, *Jazz Notes: Interviews Across the Generations* (Praeger/ABC-CLIO), he recalled receiving a phone call from Hinton, who said, “Get yourself down to Columbia 30th (a legendary New York studio known for its natural acoustics).”

Then, Hinton added, “By the way, you do play the organ?” Smith’s response was: “Of course. It has keys, doesn’t it?” The gig was for a recording by the New Christy Minstrels, and Smith said Hinton helped him get through it, even though he had never played the organ.

Smith also reminisced about the studio era, which lasted roughly from the mid-’50s through the mid-’60s. “There’s nothing like it anymore,” he said. “There was a need for musicians; we were all really busy. I was doing *The Tonight Show*, and then in the morning you’d do some recordings with some singers, and you’d do jingles. But nothing stays the same. The business changed, and all of a sudden there were rock ‘n’ roll bands, and all the entertainers went out to California.”

Bucky Pizzarelli described Smith to *Jersey Jazz* as “a fantastic piano player” and recalled playing with him on *The Tonight Show*. He also pointed out that Smith spent some time playing with Benny Goodman, an experience Smith also related to me. “I had a great friend, the drummer, Mousey Alexander,” he said, “who called me one day and said, ‘I’m going to get you with Benny.’ Before I knew it, there I am rehearsing with this big band, scared stiff, because Benny had this reputation. But I could read, and he put up Fats Waller’s ‘Stealin’ Apples’. The piano chorus was in the key of D, so I passed the test.”

“I didn’t hear from Benny for years, but then, later on, when I’m really busy doing *The Tonight Show* and doing everybody’s record dates, he called me to do weekends. So I went out and played weekends with Benny all over the place. Then, he asked me to go to Australia, and *The Tonight Show* said they would get a sub for me so



Derek Smith, left, performs with saxophonist Arnett Cobb, trumpeter Red Rodney, bassist George Duvivier and drummer Billy Hart at 1979’s Progressive Records Jazz Festival at Waterloo Village, Byram Township. Photo by Mitchell Seidel.

I could go. It was a beautiful band — Zoot Sims on tenor saxophone, Joe Pass on guitar, Peter Appleyard on vibes — and we started out in Sydney, and Zoot got a great big hand, and I got a great big hand; and Benny got pissed about the whole thing. So, we cursed each other out, finished out the tour, and never saw each other again. But everybody’s got a similar story about Benny.”

Smith was a fixture at

the New Jersey Jazz Society festivals at Waterloo Village in Stanhope, NJ, during the 1980s. He usually performed in the “Piano Spectacular.” In 1986, for example, he was part of a group of pianists that also included Dick Hyman, Ray Bryant, Rio Clemente, Dick Wellstood, Joanne Brackeen, Art Hodes, and Jimmy Rowles. Hyman also remembers playing with Smith in duo piano settings. “He was my most frequent partner in duo-piano situations,” Hyman told *Jersey Jazz*. “We could read each other’s minds.”

At the 1988 Waterloo festival, Smith played in a trio consisting of Hinton on bass and Bobby Rosengarden on drums. That trio played together regularly in the ’70s every summer at Disney World. “All year,” Smith told me, “Disney World would go with a regular trio, and then, for the hottest two weeks of the year, they would import Bobby, Milt, and myself, and we would play for two weeks. It was good for us. We would get away for awhile, and I was a hero to my kids because we got this nice big villa, and they got all the rides for free.” Smith, Hinton, and Rosengarden made one album together, *The Trio* (Chiaroscuro: 1994). “We played all the things we had practiced in Disney World,” Smith said, “bossa novas and straight ahead things... We should have done another album, but we all got busy and went in different directions.”

Concert producer Bruce Gast recalled to *Jersey Jazz* that Smith “was one of my early successes with the jazz series at the Watchung Arts Center. His exuberant playing style allowed me to use the term ‘keyboard pyrotechnics’ in publicity, and his personal magnetism helped to build the audience for his work and other solo pianists.” In later years, Gast said, Smith introduced “a piano version of ‘Sing, Sing, Sing’ that was breathtaking, although he always showed

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REMEMBERING DEREK SMITH

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humility, saying it lacked the fullness of the band version... I'm sorry I don't have any funny Derek Smith stories to tell. He brought his own bag of humorous recollections to every outing, often reaching back to his time with the Goodman band. These tales spiced up each performance, leaving me and the audiences laughing." Al Kuehn, producer of the annual Chicken Fat Ball in Maplewood, said Smith's death, "hit me like a ton of bricks. I knew him well, and he played many times for various concerts I put on. Always cheerful, always pleasant, and always came to play. One of the greats."

Smith started playing piano professionally at the age of 14. While still in London, he joined a band led by saxophonist John Dankworth. He also recorded for the British Broadcasting Corporation before deciding to leave London for the United States. In New York, he met trumpeter Doc Severinsen at a society gig, and that led to his becoming a regular on *The Tonight Show* when Severinsen was named leader of the NBC Orchestra. His Progressive Records album, *Love For Sale*, was nominated for a Grammy Award in 1989.

His death notice, posted in *The New York Times* on August 21, 2016, said Smith's "immense talent earned the respect and admiration of everyone who knew him." That is borne out by some of the comments made to *Jersey Jazz* by those who played with him. "One thing you could say about Derek Smith — he always came to play and play 100 per cent, no matter what the circumstances were," said clarinetist/saxophonist Ken Peplowski. "My greatest joy," he added, "was introducing his playing to younger musicians who were soon in awe of his astonishing virtuosity, energy and musicality. He could lift an entire band with his playing and good humor, and he certainly did that for me countless times. Derek was a great inspiration to be with, and I'll miss him terribly." Trumpeter Randy Sandke pointed out that, "Derek always had a smile on his face and gave his all. He was a total musician, extremely versatile, but he shined most in small group and solo settings. A ferocious swinger, he was the spark plug of any band he graced. He'll be dearly missed."

Born in London on August 17, 1931, Smith died on August 19 at age 85. He was a resident of Washington Township, NJ.

Survivors include his wife, Shirley; daughter, Valerie Anderson, her husband, Brad, and grandchildren, Jared and Ryan of Emerson, NJ; and daughter, Helen Collins and husband, Matt, and grandchildren, Samantha and Trevor, of the Boston area. ■

Big Band in the Sky

By Sanford Josephson

■ Bobby Hutcherson, 75, vibraphonist, January 17, 1941, Los Angeles — August 15, 2016, Montara, CA.

Hutcherson took piano lessons as a child but changed to vibraphone after walking past a record store and hearing a recording by Milt Jackson. A schoolmate, Herbie Lewis, a bassist, encouraged him to switch instruments, and Hutcherson saved up and bought a vibraphone. His first gig was with Lewis's band. In a 2014 interview with *Jazz Times*, he recalled that performance. "Well, I hit the first note. From the second note on, it was complete chaos. You never heard people boo and laugh like that. I was completely humiliated."



Vibist Bobby Hutcherson performs at the Lush Life jazz club in Greenwich Village, circa 1983.

Photo by Mitchell Seidel.

He improved, however, helped by a chance meeting with alto saxophonist/flutist Eric Dolphy, who was his sister's boyfriend. In later years, one of Hutcherson's best known recordings was on Dolphy's classic album, *Out to Lunch* (Blue Note: 1964). In 1962, he received a big break when he was hired to play in a band led two Count Basie alumni, tenor saxophonist Billy Mitchell and trombonist Al Grey. That brought him to New York City for an appearance at Birdland. After the group disbanded, however, he drove a cab for a while until being reunited with his old classmate, Lewis, who introduced him to trombonist Grachan Moncur III, who then introduced him to alto saxophonist Jackie McLean. After he appeared on McLean's 1963 Blue Note album, *One Step Beyond*, his career took off.

Hutcherson recorded more than 40 albums as a leader and appeared on many more. According to Nate Chinen, writing in *The New York Times* (8/16/16), "He was part of a wave of young artists who defined the [Blue Note] label's forays in experimentalism, including the pianist Andrew Hill and the alto saxophonist Jackie McLean. But he also worked with hard-bop stalwarts like the tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon, and he later delved into jazz-funk and Afro-Latin grooves." His last recording was a 2014 Blue Note soul-jazz album called *Enjoy the View*, recorded with alto saxophonist David Sanborn, organist Joey DeFrancesco and drummer Billy Hart. Sanborn recalled that recording. "It was a great experience," he told *Jersey Jazz*. "The first time I heard Bobby Hutcherson was on the Eric Dolphy album, *Out to Lunch*. I followed him over the years and had been a great fan. To play with him was a great thrill."

Guitarist Bob DeVos first heard Hutcherson on Blue Note recordings featuring guitarist Grant Green. His two favorites were *Street of Dreams* (1964) and *Idle Moments* (1965). In a concert with his quartet on August 18

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