



D'Addario

D'ADDARIO WOODWIND ACCESSORIES



SHOP NOW >

SUBSCRIBE

News

Current Issue

Archives

Reviews

Jazz School

Store

Subscribers



New Documentary Chronicles Life, Death of Thomas Chapin

Posted 2/25/2016

Like Jaco Pastorius, alto saxophonist-flutist Thomas Chapin was a meteor streaking across the night sky. Both were astoundingly gifted, remarkably charismatic spirits who charmed people off stage and blew minds on stage with their transcendent talents and passionate intensity.

Both made a profound impact on musicians and fans alike—albeit Pastorius was operating in a larger arena with Weather Report and his Word of Mouth big band—and both left far too soon. Pastorius, who struggled with bipolar disease in his final years, was murdered in 1987 at age 35. Chapin lost his fight with leukemia in 1998 at age 40.

Night Bird Song, a new documentary on Chapin's life directed by Emmy Award-winning filmmaker Stephanie Castillo, tells the story of the saxophonist's ascendancy on New York's "downtown" scene, primarily focused around the old Knitting Factory on the Lower East Side. The film chronicles his emergence as a prominent figure on the European jazz scene, his triumphant appearance at the 1995 Newport Jazz Festival and his sad and sudden descent into the illness that ultimately took his life.

Four years in the making, *Night Bird Song* (named for a tune the Thomas Chapin Trio performed at Newport) traces Chapin's amazing journey from his Connecticut roots (he studied with saxophonist Jackie McLean at the University of Hartford's Hart School of Music) to his studies at Rutgers University in New Jersey with former Mingus saxophonist Paul Jeffrey, to his five-year stint with vibraphonist Lionel Hampton's touring band, where he ultimately served as lead saxophonist and musical director.

As he became an integral member of New York's downtown scene in the '80s and '90s, Chapin found himself pursuing a new muse. He played with a variety of groups during this time, including the hardcore punk-jazz group Machine Gun, his experimental Zasis ensemble, the Brazilian-flavored Spirits Rebellious group and a trio augmented by brass and strings. Though his playing could be characterized as distinctly avant-garde, he kept one foot firmly planted in jazz traditionalism by incorporating swing into much of his music.

In the film, respected jazz critics Bob Blumenthal, Larry Blumenfeld and Gene Seymour speak eloquently about Chapin's ability to comfortably straddle the inside-outside divide.

These critics' commentary is interspersed with

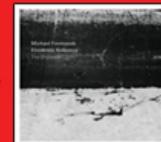


Thomas Chapin is the subject of the new documentary *Night Bird Song*, which chronicles the pioneering reedist's ascendant career and untimely death (Photo: Courtesy thomaschapinfilm.com)



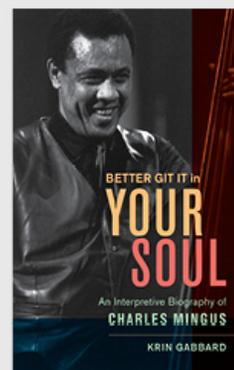
MICHAEL FORMANEK ENSEMBLE KOLOSSUS

The Distance



Click here to buy

ECM



UNIVERSITY of CALIFORNIA PRESS

SAVE 30%
W/DISCOUNT
CODE
16W9178 >>

All-Female Jazz Residency

Artistic Director: Geri Allen
July 10-16



Sign up by March 1 and save \$100!

arts education
NJPAC
NEW JERSEY PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

CLICK HERE FOR DETAILS

anecdotes from longstanding colleagues like bassist Arthur Kell, guitarist Saul Rubin, saxophonist Jerry Weldon, bassist Ray Drummond, and bassist Mario Pavone and drummer Michael Sarin of the Thomas Chapin Trio. Their stories help illuminate the man behind the fountain of music.

In one of the most touching scenes of the documentary, a visibly ailing Chapin (who discovered that he had leukemia while on a trip to Africa) plays flute to his wife, Terri Castillo, at their wedding ceremony. Nearly 20 years later, Castillo's sister, Stephanie, has brought this documentary film to fruition to remind jazz fans of what a potent force Chapin was on the '90s jazz scene.

Night Bird Song will be screened at **Real Art Ways** in Hartford, Connecticut, on March 6 at 2 p.m. and at the **SVA Theatre** in Manhattan on March 13.

(**Note:** To read an interview with Lionel Hampton from 1959, click [here](#).)

—Bill Milkowski

LISA HILTON
with ANTONIO SANCHEZ | J.D. ALLEN
GREGG AUGUST | TERELL STAFFORD

“Simply Phenomenal.”
-KVN

NOCTURNAL

20 YEARS
Cannonball
1996 - 2016

TICKETS ON SALE NOW
609-849-9202
AND EXITOJAZZFEST.COM

EXIT ZERO JAZZ FESTIVAL

APRIL 22-24, 2016 • CAPE MAY, NEW JERSEY

Roswell Rudd & Heather Masse

One of the most surprising & exciting jazz albums of the year!
Click to hear!

August Love Song
Roswell Rudd & Heather Masse

Available on Red House Records

Jody Jazz
Revitalize & Sustain Your Love For Music

SAXOPHONE & CLARINET MOUTHPIECES BY JODY JAZZ



[About](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact](#)

Copyright © 2015 Maher Publications. All rights reserved. DownBeat is an internationally registered trademark of Maher Publications.