

CHICO FREEMAN

TO KNOW THE HISTORY

BY SHEILA ANDERSON

MARCEL MEIER



When the acclaimed saxophonist and improviser Chico Freeman steps on stage, it's not just the sound of the instrument he's playing you hear—it's also the echo of a movement that began 60 years ago on Chicago's South Side and still continues to shape the future of creative music. The raw, bluesy tradition of Chicago jazz is in his DNA, an inherent part of Freeman's authentic, powerful, musical feel.

Born into a legendary musical family, his grandparents were musicians; Freeman's pianist grandfather played with Louis Armstrong (the trumpeter also stayed with Freeman's grandparents, having just arrived from New Orleans) and his grandmother sang with gospel great Mahalia Jackson. All three of their sons became musicians: saxophonist and NEA Jazz Master Von (1923-2012), legendary Chicago guitarist George (who passed away this April, less than two weeks shy of turning 98) and drummer Bruz (1921-2006). Needless to say, music filled the Freeman home. Freeman remembers "growing up listening to my dad (Von) rehearse at home with my Uncle George, as well as Uncle Bruz who played with Sarah Vaughan and Bobby Bradford. And everyone would come over." Jazz greats who passed through included Nat "King" Cole, Ahmad Jamal, Willie Pickens, Sonny Rollins and Miles Davis. Freeman fondly recalls "hearing my father at Chicago's Regal Theater with Miles, John Coltrane and Cannonball Adderley...Von was featured with them on a couple of numbers. That was the first time I remember hearing my father play, at age five."

The young Freeman began playing piano in kindergarten, but when his teacher passed away lessons ended. He recollects going down into the basement at home with his brother: "It was like going on a treasure hunt, and we found two instruments. My brother got the alto and me the trumpet. And that's how I ended up on trumpet, prior to playing saxophone." He joined his high school band, and then in 1967, another interest emerged: he won a mathematics scholarship and headed to Northwestern University. But music re-emerged when, as he puts it, he saw saxophone titans Gene Ammons and Sonny Stitt together: "Ultimately the music bug really bit me, and I graduated with a major in music and minor in mathematics."

It was during school breaks that he'd go home to jam with his dad who hosted sessions at Betty Lou's on Chicago's South Side. On one break the young Freeman brought home a tenor, the result of taking a woodwind class in which students had to learn other instruments; he was hooked and, on his return to school, announced the switch to his band instructor (Fred Hemke, the highly-influential classical saxophonist and professor at Northwestern for a half century, author of instructional books and designer of saxophone mouthpieces and reeds). "Hemke said 'how long have you been playing saxophone?' I said 'on alto, a quarter, and then the tenor only two weeks...You do have the right to not let me in, but you don't have the right to not let me try.' After the audition, he let me switch instruments!" The rest, as they say, is history.

While attending Northwestern, Freeman met renowned Windy City tenor saxophonist Fred Anderson. Along with fellow student, pianist Adegoke Steve Colson, the two were taken under Anderson's wing. An early member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative

Musicians (AACM), Anderson connected Freeman with pianist and AACM co-founder Muhal Richard Abrams, with whom Freeman studied composition (in addition to taking composition courses at Northwestern). It was during this time that Freeman became an AACM member. Always one with a keen interest in original music, the saxophonist has always recognized and appreciated the influence and significance of Abrams on him personally and on music overall. "Original music was Muhal's thing. But he was not only an original. Before we got to original, contemporary music, he took me back to folks like pianist Willie "The Lion" Smith, tenor saxophonist Chu Berry, drummer "Big Sid" Catlett. He introduced me to older players and made sure I knew what they did—to know the history before I got there and to know the rules before I thought about breaking any rules! He is one of the best things that ever happened in my life."

Abrams encouraged Freeman to get as much experience as he could. So, after graduating from Northwestern, the saxophonist began to amass a diverse résumé of performing everything from R&B, blues, funk and gospel to hard bop, Latin jazz and avant garde: from Earth, Wind & Fire and The Temptations to Buddy Guy, Junior Wells and fusion bands. "That's how I got eclectic. It was because of Muhal, who always taught me to accept music and to be yourself in your expression. 'If you deny any part of yourself, you deny yourself,' is what he used to say."

Founded in 1965, the AACM sought to build and sustain a creative community and new platforms for experimentation and innovation in music. It expanded out of Abrams' experimental big bands and small groups. Drummer Jack DeJohnette (who passed away last month at age 83) and woodwind players Roscoe Mitchell and Henry Threadgill were also deeply involved from the outset, presenting concerts and contributing to each other's work under the AACM umbrella. Threadgill, an original member of Abrams' Experimental Band and who worked under the guidance of Abrams says, "We all came together because we all had different ideas of what music could be, not what was the going presentation of it...We were considered (musical) outlaws because the music was not accepted. That was the motivation for us to do what we did and gave us the strength and wherewithal for us to do what we had to do." Freeman, too, would eventually be incorporated into Abrams' big bands, and as one of his early mentors, Abrams taught the saxophonist to be independent. Says Freeman, "He taught me to not to be afraid of who I am, to know myself. Because of the pressures of the music industry, we are often faced with the cost of oneself trying to be popular, to be playing for people or the public, not for yourself. Abrams meant and still means the world to me."

In 1972, for his graduate studies, Freeman attended Governors State University. That choice proved to be significant because it led him to NYC where several AACM members had already moved, including Abrams and Threadgill. The loft jazz scene was growing—from Ornette Coleman's Artist House to Sam Rivers' Studio RivBea—and Freeman became immediately embraced by its community. Vibraphonist Jay Hoggard, a longtime collaborator, observed, "he was bringing the AACM thing and also bringing his knowledge of playing the changes

with his father and strength of his own personality." Performance opportunities came swiftly with luminaries, from McCoy Tyner and Dizzy Gillespie to DeJohnette, the latter with whom Freeman gained invaluable experience and exposure as a member of the drummer's Special Edition group. DeJohnette reflected on Freeman's ability to bridge the gap between hard bop traditions and the experimental: "He wrote challenging music, so you had to be prepared!"

Freeman's auspicious leader debut was 1976's *Morning Prayer* (originally released on Japan's Whynot label, then domestically on India Navigation), comprising all original tunes by Freeman (tenor, soprano, flute, percussion) with Threadgill (alto, baritone, flute), Douglas Ewart (flutes), Abrams (piano), Cecil McBee (bass, cello), Ben Montgomery and Steve McCall (drums, percussion). Since then, he has recorded over 40 highly-regarded albums as leader or co-leader on labels such as Enja, Columbia, Elektra Musician, Black Hawk, Black Saint, In+Out and Intakt to go along with almost 200 albums as sideman. Next year he plans to release his first album in a decade on Rerelease, the new label out of Switzerland, which is where he partially resides when not in the US.

As the AACM enters its seventh decade, artists such as Freeman ensure that its sound remains not only alive, but *fearlessly* alive, thriving with the possibilities of the future. It was 60 years ago Abrams and AACM's other co-founders (Jodie Christian, Kelan Phil Cohran and McCall) successfully planted seeds and nurtured the human heart, soul and spirit of creativity. Abrams' music and lessons have since inspired countless influential jazz musicians, from Freeman to pianist-organist-vocalist Amina Claudine Myers, drummer-percussionist Thurman Barker, multi-instrumentalist Roscoe Mitchell, trombonist-electronicist George Lewis, pianist Adegoke Steve Colson and vocalist Iqua Colson—all of whom will participate and perform this month as part of the special, two-night "AACM NYC Chapter's 60th Anniversary: Celebrating the Legacy of Co-Founder Dr. Muhal Richard Abrams." Freeman is vocal in his appreciation of the efforts of Abrams' widow, Peggy, and daughter Richarda Abrams for their helping to carry on the AACM tradition, and acknowledges that he hopes to continue to play an integral part of the organization's mission.

For more info visit chicofreeman.com. Freeman participates in an AACM Panel Discussion and the Chico Freeman Quartet performs at Roulette Nov. 14 (both part of AACM NYC Chapter's "Celebrating the Legacy of Co-Founder Dr. Muhal Richard Abrams"). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Chico Freeman — *Chico* (India Navigation, 1977)
- Jack DeJohnette Special Edition — *Tin Can Alley* (ECM, 1980)
- The Leaders — *Out Here Like This...* (Black Saint, 1987)
- Roots — *Saying Something* (In+Out, 1995)
- Chico Freeman & The Elvin Jones Project — *Elvin (A Tribute to Elvin Jones)* (Jive Music, 2011)
- Chico Freeman 4-Tet — *Spoken Into Existence* (Jive Music, 2015)



AACM



The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, AACM New York City Chapter, Inc.
60th Anniversary Celebrating The Legacy of Co-Founder Dr. Muhal Richard Abrams
This Event is presented by AACM New York City Chapter, Inc. in Partnership with Roulette



Noah Barker



Thurman Barker



Lester Helmar Lashley



Dr. Muhal Richard Abrams



Leonard E. Jones



Amina Claudine Myers



Richarda Abrams
Mistress of Ceremonies



George E. Lewis



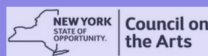
Chico Freeman



Roscoe Mitchell

Roscoe Mitchell's
paintings (for purchase).

Roulette Intermedium
509 Atlantic Avenue,
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Tix: <https://roulette.org>



Adegoke Steve Colson



Iqua Colson

Friday, November 14, 2025, 8pm

Panel Discussion/Listening Session: **AACM New York City Chapter, Inc. Members: Amina Claudine Myers, Chico Freeman, Roscoe Mitchell, Adegoke Steve Colson, Iqua Colson, Thurman Barker.** Moderator: **George E. Lewis**

The Chico Freeman Quintet featuring **Chico Freeman**, saxophone, **Amina Claudine Myers**, piano, **Kenny Davis**, bass, **Yoron Israel**, drums, and **Reto Weber**, exotic percussions, djembe, hang, ghatam

Amina Claudine Myers Gospel Musical Tribute to AACM members **Leonard E. Jones** and **Lester Helmar Lashley**.

Saturday, November 15, 2025, 8pm

Thurman Barker Quintet "TIME FACTOR" featuring: **Thurman Barker**, drums, percussion and bells, **Noah Barker** (AACM New York City Chapter Inc.'s **Emerging Artists Series**), piano, **Patience Higgins**, tenor saxophone and clarinet, **Asher Kurtz**, guitar, **Nate Zaur**, organ

Adegoke Steve Colson & Iqua Colson featuring **Adegoke Steve Colson**, piano, compositions, **Iqua Colson** vocals, compositions, **Andrew Cyrille**, drums, **J.D. Parran** - woodwinds, and **Andy McKee**, bass

This Event is made possible by New York State Council On The Arts with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature, additional funds made possible by Individual Donors.

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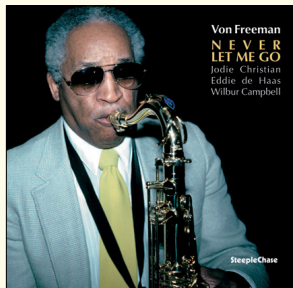
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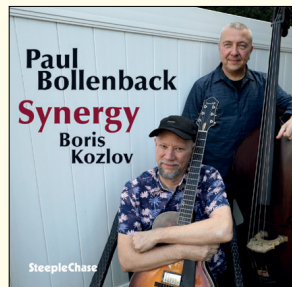
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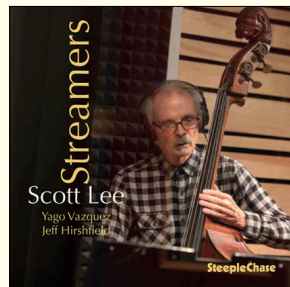
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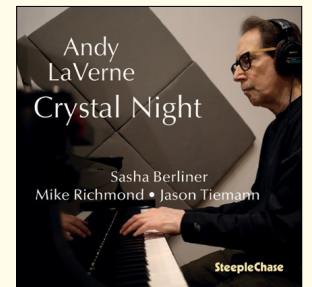
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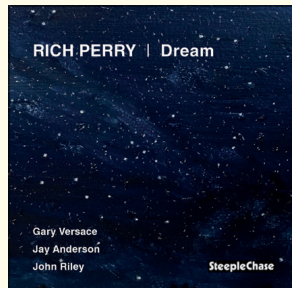
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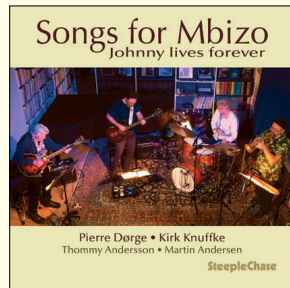
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