



MICHAEL MOSS

FLAGRANT MUSIC LIBERATION

BY JOHN PIETARO

Within NYC's Downtown jazz annals, the name Michael Moss—reeds master, pianist, composer, producer—holds importance not only as part of the Loft era scene, but as one who has since extended his influence in avant garde iterations, particularly in what has become known as “Fourth Stream.” Coming of age in the '60s, he was forever changed by the musical, spiritual and revolutionary expansion of John Coltrane, guided too, by the music of Eric Dolphy and Max Roach. A tenacious conceptualist, Moss has traversed musical barriers on countless stages in the company of Sam Rivers, Paul Bley, Badal Roy, Gunter Hampel, Jeanne Lee, Rashid Bakr (Charles Downs) and others within periods of formidable transition.

Born March 24, 1944, in the Chicago suburb of Highland Park, IL, his family home flowed with creativity: Moss' mother was a pianist and accomplished visual artist, and his father a concert pianist schooled at Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY, and NYC's famed Juilliard School. The elder Moss served as the younger's piano instructor, with expansive tutelage through the works of Bach and Rachmaninov; but a major turn occurred when he began playing B-flat clarinet. At the age of ten, young Moss, with the help of his father, formed a quintet that performed at children's parties. And while his father was a classical artist, he introduced his son to improvisation, with Rodgers and Hart's “Blue Moon” as the jazz Petri dish.

At the University of Wisconsin he majored in Clinical Psychology, in which he went on to earn a Ph.D. Simultaneously, Moss began writing music arrangements, leading to prolific endeavors into composition. Joining an ensemble led by pianist Ben Sidran, Moss became an in-demand player while also creating long-form works featuring high levels of improvisation. “I followed bebop, hard bop, free bop, all the way into the beginning of free jazz, as people were scrambling to name it different things,” Moss recalls. “Once the bonds of 32-bar solos were smashed,

we were ALL going out.” With the sonic universe widely expanding, possibilities were endless. “Jazz for me was becoming another form of folk music, especially when I heard both Trane and The Beatles copping licks from East Indian music.”

Moss made a temporary foray into Manhattan for several graduate classes at New York University, a journey that also offered an immersion into the developing Lower East Side free jazz scene. Following graduation from the University of Wisconsin, a return to NYC saw the saxophonist blossom within the avant circle while pursuing doctoral studies at The New School. “The times influenced the music in so many ways,” he recalls. “And the anger in free jazz was fueled by the (Vietnam) war, the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of Black Power.” In NYC, Moss' cultural fire blazed through historic concerts he attended, including one of Coltrane's last at the Olatunji Center of African Culture in East Harlem. By 1970, at the behest of Dave Liebman, Moss joined the musicians' cooperative Free Life Communications, whose reach was far, with a link to the jazz lofts of the day. Moss' own band, Four Rivers, played Sam Rivers' Studio RivBea, and the leader was asked to join Rivers' all-reed ensemble, the Winds of Manhattan. Concurrently, Moss began composing for extended ensembles of woods, brass, strings and rhythm, crossing into the “Third Stream” (the launch-point for “Fourth Stream,” Moss' integration of folk and world music into jazz), while embracing improvisation at its most emotive.

Moss founded the Fourth Stream record label and ERG Publishing in 1972 to produce and release the vast array of experimental East Village music. Paul Bley arranged distribution via the Jazz Composers Orchestra Association's New Music Distribution Service. “JCOA also commissioned a new work in which I conducted 100 stellar musicians at NYU,” says Moss. “For this I developed my own technique of composition, a technique similar to latter day composers, but 40 years before them. I soon led a similar group of incredible free jazz musicians that was commissioned by WBAI-FM and broadcast live out of their studios.” In 1974 Moss traveled to Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka with his wife, dancer Judith Moss, on a Dan Wagoner Company State Department tour. He not only performed on radio with Sri Lanka's premiere violinist, vocalist and composer W. D. Amaradeva, but expanded his world music vision, inspired by Coltrane's own. Polyrhythmic explorations followed, with wildly augmented improvisation. In the

ensuing years, he not only incorporated South Asian forms, but concepts from African traditions. Among his most important global allies was celebrated tabla player Badal Roy. Their collaboration began with Moss' first album in 1976, and was maintained over the next four decades.

Moss' career also led to Richie Beirach (who passed away this January), as well as Michael Urbaniak, Dave Burrell, Ra Kalam Bob Moses, Jackson Krall, Larry Roland, William Parker and Bakr (Downs), with whom Moss performed at the now legendary downtown iteration of the Knitting Factory, really the stuff of legend. Downs recruited Moss into his band Centipede and Krall is currently in the driver's seat of Moss' ROOTS to SHOOTs band. Roland (who died in 2023) was another colleague holding lasting impact. Moss recalls: “Larry and I started playing together when pianist Steve Cohn and I organized the New York Free Quartet, with Chuck Fertal on drums. We put out four albums and played many venues together. Larry invited me into Vision Festival gigs with drummer-percussionist Michael Wimberly and trumpeter Waldron Mahdi Ricks. He had that old school style and was a big influence on ROOTS to SHOOTs' performances of Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*. We really miss him.”

Though it's easy to see the loss of vital comrades deeply moves him, Moss is a survivor and fittingly, he's now preparing to release a boxed set of live recordings by ROOTS to SHOOTs, Ensemble Bows and *Quantum Butterfly*, a spectacular electro-acoustic volume. The selections almost combust in trying to contain such flagrant liberation.

For more info visit michaelmoss.bandcamp.com and m2-theory.com.

Recommended Listening:

- Annette Peacock—*I'm The One* (RCA Victor, 1972)
- Michael Moss Four Rivers—*Cross Current* (Fourth Stream, 1978)
- Collective 4tet—*Dreamcatcher* (Stork Music, 1992)
- New York Free Quartet (Michael Moss, Steve Cohn, Larry Roland, Chuck Fertal)—*Dream Time* (Fourth Stream, 2016)
- Michael Moss Accidental Orchestra—*Helix* (Fourth Stream, 2016)
- Michael Moss—*Quantum Butterfly* (Fourth Stream, 2022-25)

LEST WE FORGET



LOREZ ALEXANDRIA

GIVE ME THE SIMPLE LIFE

BY ORI DAGAN

Twenty-five years ago, on May 22, 2001, vocalist Lorez Alexandria, often cited as one of the most underrated jazz singers of her time, passed away in Los Angeles at age 71. She never scored a hit song but she did record 25 albums over five decades for labels such as Impulse!, King, Argo, Pzazz, Discovery, CBS/Sony, Trend and Muse, and in 1984 she was GRAMMY-nominated for *Harlem Butterfly* (Discovery), losing out to Joe Williams. Alexandria's authentic style is at once earthy and elegant, horn-like yet grounded by the lyric. She selected her repertoire with great care, intentionally dressing each story with crisp diction and surprising musical choices. Her discography dazzles

with infectious swing, a keen sense of harmony, and at the peak of her powers, a luscious tone impeccably controlled.

Two drummers with whom Alexandria worked remember her well. Kenny Washington, who appeared with on her *May I Come In* (Muse, 1991) relates: “She was pleasant and a real pro with no drama—a great vocalist who could swing, had good time and a clear, beautiful voice.” Michael Carvin, who met Alexandria in 1964 shortly after he moved to Los Angeles as a teenager, formed a special relationship with the singer. Alexandria was the first-ever jazz singer he remembers hearing; he also appeared on her final recording, *Star Eyes* (Muse, 1993). “She had a beautiful, beautiful feeling. She was a real jazz singer, like Carmen McRae and Dakota Staton. For a drummer these are real jazz singers, as far as their cadences and rhythms. She really knew how to phrase and go in and out.”

Dolores Turner Alexandria was born into a religious family on August 14, 1929 in Chicago, IL. She began singing in an *a cappella* church choir, which was the bedrock of her flawless intonation: “You have no instruments to cover up any mistakes,” she told

Terry Gross on a 1978 NPR interview. In her late teens she became deeply inspired by Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, Carmen McRae and Billie Holiday, and set out to be a jazz singer. Her well-received debut *This is Lorez* (King, 1957), with pianist King Fleming, featured a brilliant, Afro-Cuban take on “Baltimore Oriole”, the Hoagy Carmichael tune, which she would record twice more in her career. Following a string of releases for King and Argo—including an excellent *Early in the Morning* (1960) with Ramsey Lewis—Alexandria opted to move to L.A., and was signed to Creed Taylor's Impulse! label. The Bob Thiele-produced *Alexandria the Great* (1964) is often praised as a masterpiece, featuring Wynton Kelly, Victor Feldman, Al McKibbon, Jimmy Cobb, Bud Shank, Ray Crawford and Paul Horn. The session yielded a stunning version of “Over the Rainbow”, which referenced Arthur Hamilton's “Sing a Rainbow” as an introductory verse. *More of the Great Lorez Alexandria* followed (also 1964), but soon thereafter, Beatlemania struck, and the label dropped jazz singers altogether.

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traversed in and out of “April in Paris”—like he was having conversations with absent friends, with the chosen repertoire and the room’s generosity. “It’s so special that you can walk into a space that is so giving,” he said afterward, a line that could have described the festival itself. Blue Reality closed the night with a dense, forward-moving set led by multi-reedist **Michael Marcus** alongside Trio X collaborators Joe McPhee (tenor) and Jay Rosen (drums), plus Ted Daniel (trumpet) and two bassists: Lonnie Plaxico and Tyler Mitchell. Arrayed in a semi-circle, the ensemble balanced solemnity and propulsion; the interplay between dual basses and the multiple horn voices creating a layered, communal sound.

Night two began with the **Jazz and Poetry Choir Collective**, an intergenerational chorus that used spoken word and music to stake a civic claim. Poet laureates of Yonkers and Westchester, respectively, Golda Solomon and Phylisha Villanueva, interlaced with vocalist Andrea Wolper and instrumentalists—Michael TA Thompson (djembe, also music conductor), Jason Kao Hwang (violin, waterphone, plus a tube swung over his head, shifting its pitch based on the orbit of its arc), JD Parran (flute) and Christopher Dean Sullivan (bass)—until the group coalesced around the repeated line, “I will not be silenced.”

Alfredo Colón’s quartet, drawn from trumpeter Ryan Easter’s Trap Music Orchestra, married Latin inflections to free improvisation. Though the set was spontaneous, it sounded composed, balancing minimal gestures with maximal density. A former mentee of William Parker, Colón now occupies a similar role for younger players; when he brought out saxophonist Ben Sherman, the leader watched, grinning, as Sherman

pushed forward. The music balanced risk with an evident pursuit of beauty, never collapsing into abstraction for its own sake.

Improvising collective, **Geometry**—Tomeka Reid (cello), Joe Morris (ring-modulated guitar), Taylor Ho Bynum (cornet), Kyoko Kitamura (voice)—provided the most intimate sonic study of the night. The players extended their instruments with preparation, objects and effects, especially Bynum’s cornet, muted with found objects (hat, funnel, rubber stopper, CD) and Kitamura’s vocal transformations and electronics. They occupied liminal quiet as comfortably as they did dense timbral textures, producing a handful of the festival’s most fragile, exacting moments.

William Parker’s Pocketwatch closed night two with a large ensemble vignette. Parker, wearing a clock and alternating instruments, led a 15-person group through a groove that quickly asserted itself as both political lament and affirmation. Nicholson-Parker’s spoken text framed the band’s gradual build into a gospel-like uplift, a refrain insisting that mistakes repeat unless countered by communal wisdom.

Day three opened with trumpeter **Ahmed Abdullah’s** *Diaspora*, in which the Sun Ra lineage was honored and resituated into something more personal, alongside original material. Abdullah, and Monique Ngozi Nri’s intertwined singing, delivered solace and joy, ending tradition-ward with Ra’s “Enlightenment”. **Matthew Shipp** followed with a 35-minute solo that was austere and expansive; his pianism resisted tidy labels, ranging from blues-rooted gestures to stark contrapuntal inventions. His intensely-focused set was an excavation, both of silence and overlooked melodic possibilities. **Radical Reversal** fused sermon-like poetry from Randall Horton with Amma Islam’s R&B-inflected vocals and Brandan Regan’s riff-driven guitar, a hybrid that made political storytelling feel immediate and soulful, with Melanie Dyer’s viola adding dense color.

The festival’s closing set—**Cooper-Moore, William Parker** and **DoYeon Kim**—offered an elemental conclusion: handcrafted instruments, cross-cultural strings (gayageum, donso ngoni) and wooden flutes. Their interplay moved from intimate blues to ecstatic vocalizations; Kim’s song rose into a cry that linked traditions across continents. Cooper-Moore’s defiant humor and Parker’s soft, searching proclamations (“Death has died today”) left the audience with a sense of ritual completion. Nicholson-Parker’s quip at the end: “They need a whole night!”, and Cooper-Moore’s rejoinder: “I need a whole life!”—felt exactly right.

Out Fest’s programming underscored a simple insistence: improvisation isn’t just a musical method—it’s a social practice. In a city forever on the move, this festival argued for temporary belonging, with a heart aching toward something more permanent.

For more info visit artsforart.org/out-fest

(LABEL SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

Anna Frey, a Zurich-based rapper, poet and spoken-word performer, has had three releases on Wide Ear since 2019, two with guitarist Florian Stoffner and one, this year, with drummer Camille Émaille. Knowing Meier and Zimmermann personally, she figured her music and lyrics would be in good hands. “My first EP was released in 2006 back when CD stores still existed and you could still earn money with music,” she notes. “Since then, everything has changed completely. It’s no longer clear what exactly are the tasks of a label and what belongs to the band. But what’s special about Wide Ear is it’s a label by musicians for musicians on fair terms. When they publish something, you can assume that they like the music. They don’t put any pressure on you or anything, but are supportive and offer advice. It’s a partnership-based collaboration.”

Additionally, it’s the artists who decide in what form their work should be released, whether on CD, LP and/or digital. However Huber does say that: “We do streaming, but that doesn’t do anything, I guess. The whole streaming-money business is a joke and killed physical sales.” The average number of copies pressed (for either LP or CD) ranges from 200-300, and so far no album has been re-pressed, giving an inherent collectability factor for each album. For this year’s releases, there’s OMNIVORE’s *Yber Hybris*, the debut recording of Émaille with Anna Frey and a Meret Siebenhaar/Pascal Sontag duo, in addition to forthcoming records by Kimmig-Henkel-Weber, the Der Verboten quartet and the Hunter-Gatherer septet.

Substantiating Wide Ear’s mission statement that it’s a non-profit platform from musicians for musicians, Huber states: “We think that labels like ours are very important for emerging as well as for established artists. We try to make releasing music as straightforward as possible, in the best interest of the music—and the artists themselves.”

For more info visit widearerecords.ch

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Frustrated with the music business, she took a personal hiatus of over a decade, returning to music in the late ’70s. A comeback concert at the 1980 Chicago Jazz Festival (available on YouTube) includes an interview with record producer Michael Cuscuna. Revealingly, she says, “I got a lot of flak from a lot of people who said ‘Lorez, if you just sing one song straight, if you just sing one song without laggin’ behind the beat, you’d probably have a hit record,’ and I said, ‘I’d have a hit record, but would I be happy?’”

Musicians considered her a consummate professional. Reeds player Charles Owens played oboe and flute on *How Will I Remember You?* (Discovery, 1978), recalling how it all came to be: “I got her that record date, as she was working at the Parisian Room and I told Albert Marx about her and to go hear her and he quickly signed her to his Discovery label...She was a very serious jazz singer; not flashy and never overwhelming; she just needed a good groove and she did her thing.” Tenor saxophone legend and record producer Houston Person met Alexandria in California in the ’60s. “When my first wife passed away,” he recalls, “Lorez called me and gave me her condolences. I said, ‘Wait a minute, are you recording for anybody?’ She said nope. She wasn’t working that much...until I introduced her to [Muse Records founder] Joe Fields. We soon recorded three albums on Muse. I really enjoyed working with her. Everyone, all the musicians, were delighted... She knows how to pick tunes and always had a surprise.”

In all likelihood, if Lorez Alexandria had lived to witness the growth of digital music and streaming, she would have been surprised to discover over 30 million hits on one platform alone for her version of “Give Me the Simple Life”. Her work is well-worth discovering, celebrating and sharing, as we gear for her centenary just a few years away.

For more info visit discogs.com/artist/5666-Lorez-Alexandria

Recommended Listening:

- Lorez Alexandria—*Lorez Sings Pres* (King, 1957)
- Lorez Alexandria—*Early in the Morning (with Ramsey Lewis Trio)* (Argo, 1960)
- Lorez Alexandria—*Alexandria The Great* (Impulse!, 1964)
- Lorez Alexandria—*How Will I Remember You* (Discovery, 1978)
- Lorez Alexandria—*My One and Only Love* (CBS/Sony, 1986)
- Lorez Alexandria—*Star Eyes* (Muse, 1993)

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