

# Von Freeman, a mighty torrent of sound

BY MICHAEL JACKSON

**V**on is gone! Long Live Von! One of the last original hipsters and an icon of old-school values who embraced the concept of stentorian individual expression, tenor saxist Earle Von Freeman left us Aug. 12 for the cosmic-jam session beyond the clouds.

Born into a musical family on Oct. 3, 1923, Von started early. One of his first gigs was with bluesman Sunnyland Slim. Another storied Chicago tenorman, Gene Ammons, was Freeman's Du Sable classmate under feared and revered bandleader Capt. Walter Dwyett.

Freeman's recording career has been much less prolific than his regular appearances at South Side haunts the Enterprise, El Matador and the New Apartment Lounge might warrant, not to mention occasional jaunts to Paris, New York and Berlin. But thanks to the attention of such faithful local labels as Nessa, Southport, Premonition and Delmark, his voice lives on.

His last live appearance playing the saxophone was at Andy's, 11 E. Hubbard, last November. In September 2011, he presided over six sets of music at the Green Mill.

For the final set, rather than play, he embarked on an episodic narrative, almost as long as one of his herculean saxophone solos, about, among other things, his rivalry with the better-known Ammons.

"I could play all these super-fat notes and thought I had it," he recalled, "and then Jug [Ammons] would play just one note, and the room would be silent."

To those won over time and again by spectacular, wildly unpredictable, hyper-expressive pronouncements from Freeman, including some nonpareil balladry, the point was moot, and the hole now left by his departure is too huge to quantify.

The following are selections from more than a score of recordings Freeman made as a leader, plus commentary, specific and general, from those in the know. Though nothing can replace witnessing Vonki at his Tuesday night jams at the New Apartment Lounge, pin back your ears for the torrents of feeling available here:



Von Freeman blows out the candles during a birthday celebration in 2010. PHOTO BY MICHAEL JACKSON

**"Walkin' Tuff"** (Southport, 1988) Urban hollers don't get more historic than the mountainous mowls that herald this CD's eponymous track.

Joanie Fulfatta, co-producer: "I was talking to a woman about the upcoming release, and she insisted that the word 'tuff' was much too formal, so 'tuff' it was."

Michael Hayes, longtime Freeman drummer: "I heard several stories of Von throwing troublemakers out of the club with one hand, sax in the other. For such a sensitive balladeer, he was a bad-ass! I think that raised his stock with a lot of the men that hung around the Apartment Lounge — myself included."

**Strata Institute, "Transmigration"** (DIW, 1991)

Steve Coleman, a fervent Freeman devotee, invited his mentor to join him on this quixotic M-base meets swing release, featuring Greg Osby, guitarist Marcus Gilmore and drummer "Smokey" Smith. The unique, stacked refrains of Freeman's lines are part of his legacy further distilled in the music of Coleman and Osby; see how he adapts to the demands of

Coleman's rhythmical strategies on "Minor Step," generating great tension and excitement.

**"Never Let Me Go"** (Steeplechase, 1992)

With his gorgeous tone and poignant rendering of the title track, Von is at his most accessible in the company of late greats Jodie Christian and Wilbur Campbell — but then listen to extraordinary moments of belligerence in his solo on "I Could Happen to You."

**"Vonki Speaks"** (Nessa, 2009)

Recorded at Berlin Jazz Festival in 2002 at the behest of artistic director John Corbett, this captures Freeman's then regular New Apartment Lounge band. As fun as the recorded music is, including Von's then-popular extrapolations on "Summertime" and "Darn That Dream," Premonition Records producer Michael Friedman claims that Freeman's hourlong sound check was at the highest level he ever heard him. "Vonki was in top form in Berlin in 2002, utterly relaxed and commanding," Corbett recalled. "I congratulated him after the gig, asked how long he

was staying. 'Oh, I gotta go right back, I have a gig out west,' he told me. I figured he was playing somewhere in western Germany or France. Later I discovered he had a concert the following night on the West Side of Chicago. Hilarious, totally Von. Every gig a blessing."

**"Good Forever"** (Premonition Records, 2006)

Freeman's last recording, after a successful run with Premonition, and his third record date with venerable drummer Jimmy Cobb. I accompanied Freeman to the session at New York's legendary Avatar studio and can attest that he barely ate a banana the whole day. Such legends of Freeman's stamina were substantiated by Friedman during the sessions that yielded "The Great Divide" (Premonition, 2004): "We had an early slot at 8 a.m. for Von to put down a solo cut in the studio. It seemed unlikely he would comply but immediately said yes and played 'Violets for Your Pure' with incredible tone, technique and feeling — first thing in the morning!"

Michael Jackson is a locally based free-lance writer and critic.

## 'I OWE HIM MY VOCATION IN LIFE'

Von Freeman was renowned as an influence on his peers and unofficial mentor to countless Chicago musicians. Here his contemporaries remember him:

**Kurt Elling:** "Von Freeman was a Chicago original, an American master. He taught [us] everything, from what kinds of tunes to play, how to play them, how to dress, how to stand, how to know when you'd had enough to drink, how to lead a band and a crowd in the experience of jazz joyfulness — essentially everything it takes to be a jazz musician. He did this by raucous, burly and elegant example. And he did it all free of charge. All you had to do was show up, show respect and love the music. I owe him my vocation in life."

**Ari Brown:** "Von was one of the greatest saxophonists of all time. When he played, you could hear the whole history of the tenor saxophone, from Lester Young to Grenette Coleman. He was a great human being who was very encouraging to me from the late '60s to the last time I played with him in 2010."

**Sonny Rollins:** "I never met Von or got the opportunity to play with him, but I knew him by reputation. There was no point in a man like him being sick in this world, he's moved to the next realm. I would like to congratulate him on a life well lived, we'll miss him."

**Mike Altemana:** "He taught us the value the music had to the people who came out [to listen]. That sense of the cultural and social importance of the music has pretty much gone. Without him, it is going to be impossible to replicate that vibe."