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WALKIN' 'TUFF' TO THE END

Chicago jazz great Von Freeman, dead at age 88, remained a stalwart figure

BY MICHAEL JACKSON

Chicago jazz great Earl Lavon Freeman, known commonly as Von and affectionately in the jazz community as "Vonski," died Sunday of heart failure at the Kindred Chicago Lakeshore care center. He was 88.

Internationally acclaimed, Mr. Freeman last year received a Jazz Master Fellowship, the nation's highest jazz honor, from the National Endowment for the Arts.

His death came just weeks after false reports of his passing in June, when a neighbor saw him being transported by ambulance from his longtime South Side home.

Seeing the tenor sax icon departing from the dwelling that he occupied with his brother, jazz guitarist George, was a shock because Mr. Freeman was revered as a free-standing structure who knew nothing of the words "failure of heart."

"Walkin' Tuff!" (1989), the title of an excellent recording on Chicago's Southport label, depicts Mr. Freeman on the cover shooting pool like some kingpin from the

hood. His father, one of Chicago's first black beat cops, was gunned down during a gang incident, so his son Von had first-hand knowledge of the crime-ridden turf he called home. Before Freeman Sr. died after the shooting, he told his sons George, Eldridge ("Bruz") and Von, "Look after your mother." While Bruz worked as a tennis pro as well as a drummer and lived in Hawaii, and George spent some time on the West Coast, Von never left Chicago for any extended period, staying tight with his mother until she died at the age of 101.

Though increasingly well-known in Chicago after recording with Chuck Nessa's label and then becoming a strong fixture on producer Michael Friedman's Premonition roster, Mr. Freeman was known further afield. He was popular in Paris, recorded in New York with his saxophonist son Chico's quartet at the Blue Note in 1998 and feted at the Berlin Jazz Festival in 2002, where he performed with staunch young cohorts from

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his long-running sessions at the New Apartment Lounge, including guitarist Michael Allemanna and drummer Michael Raynor.

Formative musical experiences included hearing such as Fats Waller and Earl Hines play on his father's piano, and then after Navy service, working with the big bands of Horace Henderson and Sun Ra and with bluesman Sunnyland Slim.

It wasn't until the early '70s that Mr. Freeman came into his own as a leader on record with his Atlantic debut "Doin' It Right Now," produced by jazz great Rahsaan Roland Kirk. That disc featured the stellar rhythm section of bassist Sam Jones and drummer Jimmy Cobb, known for his work on Miles Davis' "Kind of Blue."

"I remember when Von and [pianist] John Young came to New York for that session, which was Von's big break," recalled Cobb during the recording of a more recent New York collaboration, 2006's "Good Forever" (Premonition). "Von had to get back to Chicago the same day, and I just couldn't believe it. He had a steady gig at the Rendezvous club and hadn't subbed it out."

Such dedication to his hometown and steady work was evident one night at the Apartment Lounge, when it was close to 3 a.m., and he was due to be picked up not too long thereafter to play for an early morning TV show, live in Daley Plaza. Von was then well into his 80s; he would routinely blow hard with his quartet and then hand over the microphone at the Apartment Lounge to a wild assortment of local singers and instrumentalists, encouraging their self-expression. Holding court at the bar that night, he refused to leave early, listening to "his horses" and offering hollers of support from the back.

His signature querulous



Von Freeman (shown here in November 2011) died Sunday, just weeks before his 89th birthday on Oct. 3. | PHOTO BY MICHAEL JACKSON

but forceful tenor sound was not for the faint-hearted and an acquired taste. Often it has been great players on the instrument itself who have championed him, including such as masters as Steve Coleman, Sonny Stitt and notably, Kirk.

But Mr. Freeman was totally his own man and his message was fearlessly life-affirming. He had the knack for creating in-the-moment excitement and never took prisoners. His tumbling, curiously staccato, rapid-fire runs were never glib, always alive and fertile. Mr. Freeman, like several of the renowned jazz musicians mentored by Capt. Walter Dyett at Chicago's DuSable High School, including Johnny Griffin, Eddie Harris and Gene Ammons, also could woo with a ballad. "This is for the ladies," he'd say, but he charmed as many men with his old-school wit and creative, wholly original badinage. It might be "Nature Boy," "Never Let Me Go" or "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered" but Von knew how to tell the story with a glorious subtone to match his raucous upper register.

Along with his brother George, he is survived by two sons, Chico and Mark; daughters Denise and Brenda both died of lupus years ago. Services are pending.

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