



Michael Jackson

Lester left town

By John MacCalkies

RECENT MONTHS HAVE TAKEN THEIR TOLL ON THE TRUMPET SECTION, WITH THE DEATHS OF LESTER BOWIE, HARRY "SWEETS" EDISON AND NAT ADDERLEY.

The latter two were toasted at last week's Trumpet Summit at Symphony Center, by a superb cast of brass matadors, including Clark Terry and Roy Hargrove jousting on Edison's "Jive at Five" and Adderley's "Work Song." Conspicuous by absence was a nod to Bowie, whose passing in November was the more tragic, quantified by relative youth: Adderley was 69, Edison 85, Bowie 58. But Bowie was more than just a stylist, he was a catalyst, iconoclast and irrepressible satirist. His originality and stratified irony rendered him critique-proof, immune to imitation or ready-made homage.

Bowie's achievements as cultural avatar, demonstrated not only through his boundary-bending music, but also his early AACM stewardship (he was the organization's second president), his involvement with The Black Arts Group in St. Louis and the uniquely cooperative stance of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, refuses to be trivialized by those who do not appreciate his genius for parody.

"Lester was a complete person and masterful storyteller, more than just an instrumentalist but a communicator. The things he said and also didn't say made him akin to a painter—he understood spatial relationships and surface reflection, allowing you to see what the form really looks like."—Kahil El'Zabar

"Lester died with his boots on. His last move was the ultimate—playing to the very end. His spirit therefore keeps on, it didn't shrivel up and go."—Hamiett Bluiett.

"Once I was road managing the Art Ensemble in Sardinia, and Lester said 'I'll give you a lesson.' We took a paddleboat onto the Mediterranean. We hadn't gone far before he said, 'See all those people on the beach, see the water, see the sky? Lesson Number One: Absorb Your Environment.' A little further out, he said 'So what do you see now?' I said 'Well the people look smaller, there's more water in front of us, the sky looks about the same.' 'That's right,' said Lester, 'you gotta keep things in perspective. That's lesson number two, and that'll be two grand.' We went out so far we heard oil tankers blowing. He said 'Play to the fish.' I had my trumpet and I blew fish sounds. He said 'No, no, play to the fish.' So I put my horn into the water and started blowing. 'That's it!' he laughed. I snatched my horn up and said 'What's in this water man?' 'Jaws, his momma and his daddy-lesson number three: know when to quit. Let's get the hell outta here!'"—Ameen Muhammad.

"The first time I played with Lester was at a benefit he threw for Julius Hemphill in NYC involving sixty saxophone players. I was also privileged to perform at his Louis Armstrong concert at the Museum of Science and Industry in October. When Lester turned up to run through his commissioned piece, things were untogether, the band was uptight but he emphasized that the charts were 'just a guide,' and on the gig extended the piece into another realm. Although he couldn't play as strongly as he would've wanted, the notes he chose and how he set up the whole concert was magical."—Ari Brown.

"When I was battling drug problems, Lester straightened me out. He bought me a trombone and a plane ticket to the Caribbean. Along with a couple hundred bucks, he gave me his well wishes at the airport. I lived in St. Croix for two years and it was just what I needed."—Joseph Bowie (Lester's brother).

"To be asked to play at the memorial is an honor. After Don Cherry, Bowie is one of the most significant trumpet players in the history of the music. He had this incredible sound and made a connection between the openness of James Brown's music, for example, and the realm of freedom. People tend to forget about the soulful nature of the avant garde, and Lester was a crucial conduit for that."—Ken Vandermark

"Lester and Roscoe Mitchell did for new music what Bird and Diz did for bebop, viewing jazz as ever-evolving rather than crystallized in time. Lester stood on the shoulders of the masters and took a broader vision, showing that innovation and imagination were not bad things. His economic contribution to jazz was also major. The Art Ensemble became one of the top ten groups in jazz in terms of the fees they could command. He was a fine role model who helped dignify the whole profession—its up to us to take up where he left off."—Malachi Thompson.

Ameen Muhammed, Malachi Favors and Ari Brown will perform a tribute to Bowie January 27 at the JIC Jazz Fair at the Chicago Cultural Center, 78 East Washington, (312)744-6630. The other musicians quoted above appear January 20 at Hyde Park Union Church, 5600 South Woodlawn, (773)363-6063, for a special event benefiting the Zola Bowie Colleague Fund.