

JazzWax

Marc Myers writes daily on jazz legends and legendary jazz recordings

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Geri Allen (1957-2017)



Geri Allen, a jazz pianist and composer with a deeply personal approach to standards and original works who explored a lyrical and tender side of the avant-garde, died on June 27 of cancer. She was 60. [Photo above courtesy of Geri Allen]

Early in her career in the 1980s, Geri recorded extensively with saxophonist Oliver Lake and with bassist Charlie Haden and drummer Paul Motian. Into the 1990s and beyond, Geri seemed to add more and more earthiness and soul to her explorations than many avant-garde jazz pianists at the time. For Geri, the outer-fringes was less about power playing and speed and more about emotionalism, romanticism and sensitivity. In this regard, there was always a special depth and ethereal quality to her playing, akin to Bill Evans and Herbie Hancock.

Giovanni Russonello has a beautiful obit on Geri in today's *New York Times*. [Go here.](#)

I interviewed Geri for JazzWax in January 2012, a conversation I originally posted in three parts. What I remember from our conversation was how open and transparent she was, unafraid to expose her feelings and reasoning. As with her music, a talk with Geri was an adventure.

In tribute to Geri and so her music won't be forgotten, here are all three parts of my interview combined:

JazzWax: You were born in Pontiac, Mich.?

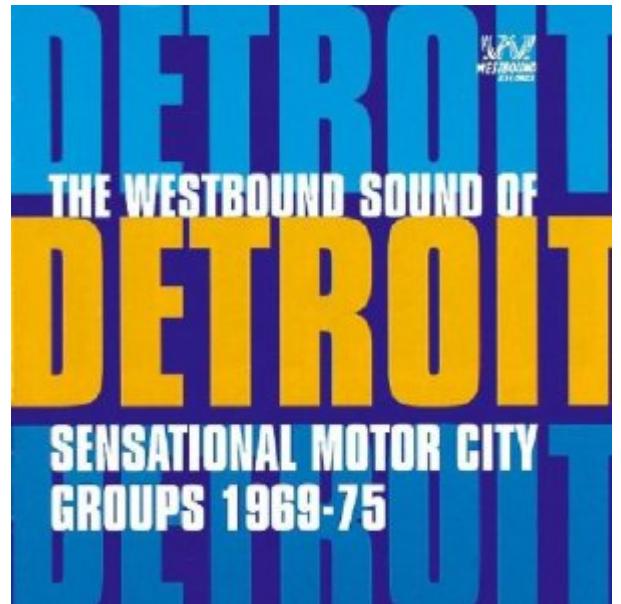
Geri Allen: Yes, and so was my brother, Mount. My mom and her family were from Pontiac. But when I was very young, my parents moved to Detroit, where my dad was a teacher and later an administrator in the Detroit Public Schools.

JW: Growing up in the 1970s, Detroit was a center of soul and dance music. Why did you turn to jazz?

GA: I loved all of it. I listened to radio station WJLB and danced to soul, disco—everything. But my heart was in jazz. My father was

always a huge jazz fan. When I was growing up, he played records by Charlie Parker, the Modern Jazz

Quartet, Sonny Rollins, Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell. The music was always in our home. Just before high school, I made a commitment to myself: I was going to be a jazz pianist.



JW: Did soul and pop leave any impression on you?

GA: Oh sure. I heard both forms on the radio and was trying to learn those songs by ear. I realized later that many of the musicians on those recordings were jazz musicians—many of whom later became my mentors.



JW: Did you study piano?

GA: Yes I studied with a terrific teacher—Patricia Wilhelm—from the time I was in the 7th grade until college. She was very supportive of my search to become a jazz musician. Though she was a classical teacher and didn't have a jazz

background, she wasn't afraid of the music and understood its value and importance to me. [Photo above courtesy of Geri Allen]

JW: What did you learn from trumpeter-teacher Marcus Belgrave when you attended Detroit's Cass Technical High School in the 1970s?

GA: I was very fortunate. The entire jazz scene in Detroit has been fortunate to have Marcus [pictured] there. He's still

that same person today, striving to give young musicians a shot. He gave me a sense of hope. By believing in my talent, Marcus gave me a certain layer of confidence to pursue jazz as an art and a lifestyle. He also gave many others and me the opportunity to test out our abilities in real time—on stage.



JW: For example?

GA: The first time I went to Europe, I went with Marcus, when I was in high school. The trip validated my talent. We went to Amsterdam and played at the Bimhuis Club for three days. When we first went there, it was a small, independent venue that was struggling. It's where all the new music was happening then. I went

back to Bimhuis Club this year [pictured]. Now it's a first-class, government-sponsored concert hall.



JW: Did Belgrave point you in a specific musical direction?

GA: I came away with a greater respect for the whole African-American music continuum. The music of the Supremes

and Muddy Waters and the church—it's all connected and meant to be revered and taken seriously. I also learned that as a pianist, it's important to be able to play many different things. When I came back home, I played Bar Mitzvahs, Italian weddings—all kinds of events. The ethnic music we played gave me a clear sense of the different cultures.





JW: At the University of Pittsburgh, you earned a masters in ethnomusicology. What is that exactly?

GA: Ethnomusicology is the study of how music functions in society and the value placed on music in various cultures around the world. For example, the music of most African societies integrates all of the arts—particularly dance. By doing this, the entire culture is embraced, not just music and musicians. The result is that audiences have a more vivid sense of music's importance. The cultural embrace of music has been a big part of my reality and my art. [Photo above courtesy of Geri Allen]

JW: Your music tends to be highly textured in this regard.

GA: When audiences are really a part of what's being played and they experience the motion and flow of the moment, the spirit of the music crystallizes in a deep and meaningful way. This is key to the quality of the experience.

JW: Did you make a conscious decision to become an avant-garde pianist?

GA: I've always felt that having my freedom in music was important. That's a part of my upbringing. I need to feel I can be versatile, to have the ability to move back and forth between different types of music. I'm attracted to the music of a large variety of great musicians. Then I synthesize all of it in a way that retains my freedom and particular energy as an artist.

JW: Doesn't avant-garde jazz require a different commitment?

GA: Yes. Every music has its own set of idiosyncrasies and audiences are very sophisticated. People coming to experience the music come because they want to participate in the spirit of adventure that improvised music brings. Alice Coltrane said that "music is fundamentally a spiritual language that speaks to the heart and soul." I feel this way as well.

JW: It feels more embracing, actually.

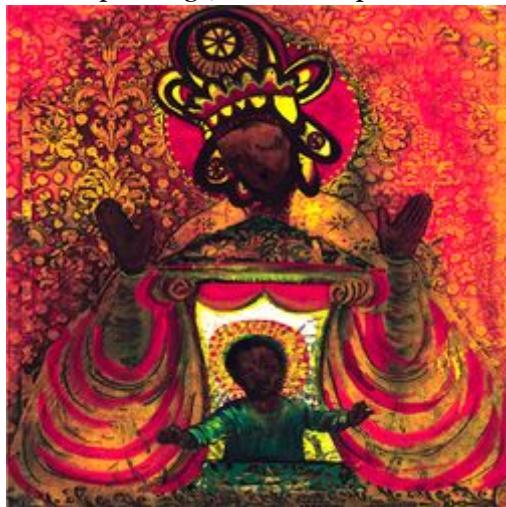
GA: How do you mean?

JW: Your music feels as though it's extending a helping hand to the audience, as if the music is about the community rather than just the technical ability of the performer. Where does this come from?



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GA: I spend a great deal of time with friends in the visual arts. They would never allow me to pigeonhole what I saw in their paintings, film or sculpture. Some critics might ask them, “What were you trying to convey in this work?”



Their answer would be, “Just look at it. What do you feel?” I tend to have the same view about my music. People who come with an open mind will become a part of the experience, informing the moment of improvisation by their willingness to participate. [Album cover artwork by **Kabuya Pamela Bowens**]

JW: What goes through your mind when you’re performing?

GA: When everything is going just right, my mind is clear. I’m not thinking about anything. I’m very alert, and I’m responding to what’s around me. But there’s no thinking. It’s a spiritual flow.



JW: What do you think makes some people uncomfortable about music that's unfamiliar?



GA: The music may be more complex and involved than most of the music they’re used to hearing. But they know what it’s all about. Audiences aren’t always given credit for being emotionally aware of what’s going on. I’ve found that most people are quite capable of internalizing emotions that are stimulated by new music and art, even if it isn’t immediately familiar.

JW: This internalizing starts young, doesn’t it?

GA: Absolutely. When children have access to music at a young age, they understand the emotional side of music without having to be taught. Children as early as preschool age are exposed to a wide range of creative experiences and fully grasp the excitement and



the message of the arts. Through the instant reactions of young children, you sense music’s potential. The excitement that develops early never really leaves us. It’s always there.

JW: Do you find that audiences have a natural, spiritual reaction to your music?

GA: Yes. It’s not necessarily about literal comprehension. It’s much deeper. It’s about participating in the experience of what they see or hear. We all have that. The question is how open people are to getting back in touch with it. I think the initial fears people have about music are a result of the misconceptions created by labels.

JW: Which brings us back to our inner child.

GA: For young children, exciting music and art gives them a sense of entitlement. When they hear different sounds, the experience connects with their feelings. They’re naturally stimulated. I want people who have access to my music to feel the same way—emotionally. I them also to have a sense of connectedness and entitlement to the shared experience.

JW: Is exposing people to your music becoming harder to do?

GA: What do you mean?



JW: Record stores are gone, and radio's mission no longer seems to be instructive—a knowledgeable DJ turning audiences on to great new, exciting things.

GA: Access has indeed changed. But in all fairness, there's now a whole new world of access on YouTube. You can pull up this amazing body of video. It's a different level of access today. Technology makes this possible. [Photo of Geri Allen by [Dave Kaufman](#)]

JW: Do you feel you are trying to form a bridge between fans of traditional jazz and your lyrical, freer form?

GA: That's interesting. What do you mean by a bridge?

JW: Your music is free in its feel, but to me there's this tenderness within the excitement. It's not solely percussive music. It's soulfully dramatic.

GA: Much of this has to do with the responses between all of the musicians on stage, and between the musicians and the audience. I react to audiences based on their responses to my music. They feed off each other. Without people in the room, without the connectedness, some musicians don't find the experience nearly as enjoyable.

JW: For example?

GA: When an audience is fully with us, a different kind of projection is created. I'm always trying to express how I feel organically. It's truthful and honest, and it moves me. I'm always hopeful that audiences will join me that way.

JW: You also incorporate tap dance in your performances.

GA: Having dancers in the show is part of the full experience. Maurice Chestnut, for example, is a young dancer and



musician, and his dancing adds to the musical experience. To see him helps remind audiences that this music is communal. It is for me. Of course, all musicians have their own way of looking at what's important and what they want audiences to come away with.

JW: Is there a distinctly female perspective to your music?

GA: Not really. Our trio [drummer Terri Lyne Carrington (pictured) and bassist Esperanza Spalding] just finished a wonderful run at the Village Vanguard last week. We've been



playing as a trio for about a year, and Terri Lyne and Esperanza are two of the greatest musicians I've ever played with. It's a true musical experience and adventure.

JW: How do you mean?

GA: To interact the way we do on stage is a wonderful, embracing feeling. It's fiercely challenging and encourages a fearless exchange of ideas. But each of us acknowledges

the roots of the music and has an understanding of the language that allows for the freedom we express. And we're all looking out for each other.





JW: Carrington's *The Mosaic Project*, which was nominated for a Grammy, certainly represents this.

GA: Absolutely. *The Mosaic Project* brings together many female musicians and singers with varied backgrounds and musical styles. As a result, the group encompasses an array of styles. But it's not a political recording.

JW: Meaning feminist?

GA: [Laughs] Although I must admit I feel extremely empowered by the existence of this collective of women artists, I believe Terri Lyne chose these musicians simply because she loved what they were doing as individuals. It's not a gimmick—some kind of "all female band" for the sake of marketing or something. We're just musicians she wanted to work with. We're feeling that totally.



JW: But isn't there a female perspective that comes through the music as a result?

GA: I don't know if there is. I am looking at these women as inspiring individuals who have come together to create something of beauty, in a spirit of appreciation for each other and our audience. The fact that we're all women is just a beautiful coincidence. Ultimately, it's about the music, no matter who's up there on stage.

JW: Do you practice?

GA: Yes, usually very late at night and into the morning hours. I mostly work to prepare the foundational aspects of my compositions. I do this so I understand the structure and the inner workings of the music. As I practice, I am striving to feel free, and that feeling only comes after a certain amount of foundational study.

JW: Is practicing a chore?

GA: Never. When I became a jazz musician, I knew it was for life. I learned quickly that with each new breakthrough, a whole new world of challenges would emerge. So a dedication to life and to art exist in simpatico.

JW: Do you ever sit at the piano and apply your approach to the music heard on the radio as a teen in the '70s?

GA: Yes. I find that songs by Motown composers are a great inspiration. Their classic compositions form an exciting platform for improvisation.
Stevie Wonder



and Smokey Robinson are two favorite composers, particularly Smokey's *Tears of a Clown*.



JW: You seem to be most animated when the tempo picks up. Is it thrilling to hear yourself on recordings?

GA: Actually, I don't like listening to myself. It's very difficult, and I tend to avoid doing so unless I am in the throes of working on a new project. The problem is I hear things I wished I had done differently and want to do them over.



JW: When was the last time you and your mentor and trumpeter Marcus Belgrave played together?

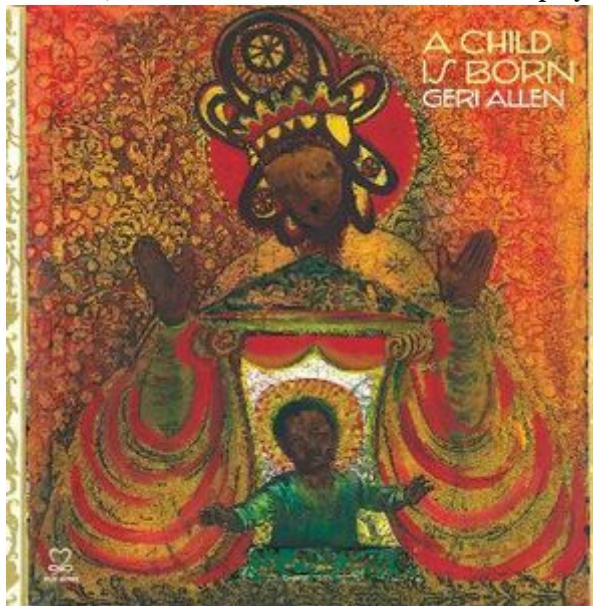
GA: In October of 2011. He was brilliant as always. I am so grateful to him for his innovative, speed-of-light artistry and his willingness to slow down so others can commune with him. [Photo above by Scott Soderberg]

JW: What did you think of *The Mosaic Project*?

GA: Terri Lyne Carrington (pictured) is a visionary, a master drummer and one of the most important musicians of our time. Our gig last week at the Village Vanguard with bassist Esperanza Spalding was one of the absolute highlights of my musical journey so far. On *The Mosaic Project*, Terri brought together an extraordinary group of brilliant musicians to share a moment in time, when people are listening for a sound. Embracing that moment with all of the women on the recording was thrilling.

JW: Your most recent album was *A Child Is Born*, released last year in advance of the holidays.

GA: Yes, Motema Music liked the idea of me playing solo piano



backed by four voices and vintage keyboards, including a concert celeste. My father, Mount V. Allen Jr., liked the music on the CD very much and gave it to many of his friends. That meant the world to me.



JW: Are you playing in New York in the coming weeks?

GA: Yes, I am looking forward to collaborating with filmmaker and photographer Carrie Mae Weems in preparation for Celebrate Brooklyn on June 15. It will be an evening filled with wonderful

visual experiences accompanied by my Timeline group—including tap dancer Maurice Chestnut, bassist Kenny Davis and drummer Kassa Overall. Joining us will be Howard University's Afro-Blue Jazz chorus, which appeared on NBC's *The Sing-Off* last season. Pianist-composer Patrice Rushen, whom you saw in *The Mosaic Project* video posted yesterday, and Afro-electronica artist Val Jeanty, also will join us along with Esperanza Spalding and Terri Lyne Carrington.

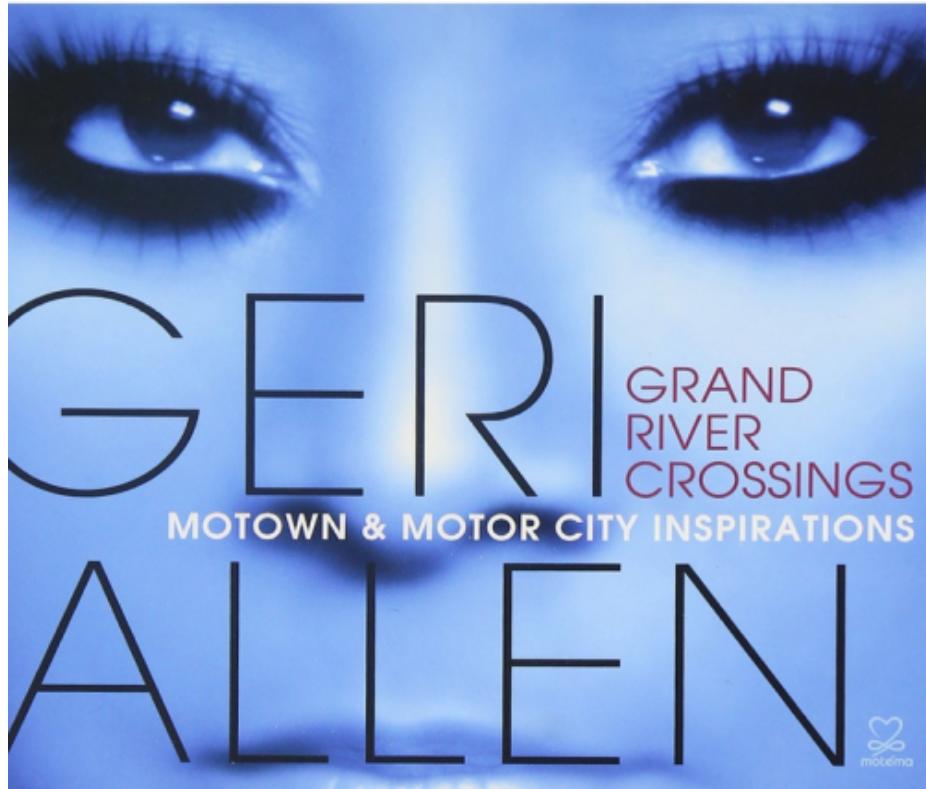
JW: Are you excited about performing this Saturday night at 92YTribecca?



GA: I am. Rachel Chanoff (pictured), 92YTribecca's film curator and the artistic director of Celebrate Brooklyn has created an amazing collaborative opportunity for both Carrie Mae Weems and myself to work together again. We collaborated on my solo piano recording *Flying Toward The Sound* in 2010. It is thrilling to continue doing this type of creative work with Carrie. I am also thrilled to be sharing the stage with Jason Moran this Saturday night.

JW: What will you be playing on Saturday at 92YTribecca?

GA: [Laughs] If I told you, it would take some of the mystery out of it. Let's just say that I'll be playing music that will be sharing the space with Carrie Mae Weem's beautiful images.



JazzWax tracks: If you're unfamiliar with Geri Allen, start with *Grand River Crossings* ([here](#)), a beautiful tribute to Motown and the music of her youth in the early 1970.

JazzWax clips: [Here's](#) *Tears of a Clown...*

Tears of a Clown



[Here's](#) Geri playing *Lush Life...*

Geri Allen - Lush Life



[And here's](#) Geri in 2014 playing *Feel the Line*...

Jazzfest Bonn 2014: Collegium Leoninum, GERI ALL...



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