

Remembering

Geri Allen



Remembering Geri Allen (1957-2017)
Feminist Theory and Music
14th biannual meeting
San Francisco State University
29 July 2017

Organized by Courtney Bryan, Ellie Hisama, Yoko Suzuki, and Sherrie Tucker

The Feminist Theory and Music community joins together to share memories and tributes to pianist, composer, bandleader, and educator Geri Allen. Her untimely departure has shaken many musicians, scholars, music lovers, and admirers everywhere.

Geri Antoinette Allen was born on June 12, 1957. She began playing the piano at the age of seven. As a child, she studied classical music with Patricia Wilhelm, who also nourished her interests in jazz. Her music studies continued through high school, Detroit's legendary Cass Tech, where she studied from trumpet player Marcus Belgrave; and then to Howard University, where she studied with John Malachi, at the same time taking private lessons from Kenny Barron. In 1979, she earned one of the first BAs in Jazz Studies at Howard--or really, from anywhere. She completed her MA in Ethnomusicology in 1982 at University of Pittsburgh, where she studied with Nathan Davis. When Davis retired in 2013, she succeeded him as Director of Jazz Studies, after teaching at Howard, the New England Conservatory, and the University of Michigan.

Her 35-year professional career bore the same integrative commitments to performing, composing, teaching, mentorship, and research established in her years as a student--all of these carried out at the highest levels; by 1985, she had released her first album as a leader, *The Printmakers*; followed by countless others--in her case, not hyperbole; just try! Her significance as a composer earned her a Guggenheim in 2009. In 2014, Berklee College of Music awarded her an Honorary Doctorate of Music.

Among Allen's many artistic and educational projects were several that explicitly worked to expand recognition and opportunities for women musicians. These include the Mary Lou Williams Collective, for which she was the founder/director; theatrical collaborations with S. Epatha Merkerson and Farah Jasmine Griffin ("Apollo Women" and "A Conversation with Mary Lou"); and the All-Female Jazz Residency at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center for which she was artistic director.

In her too-short life, generously lived, Geri Allen made the most of her many gifts, including her capacity to recognize and encourage the creativity of others. The following statements are offered by fellow musicians, scholars of jazz studies, students, colleagues, and friends in tribute to a brilliant feminist musician, mentor, and teacher.

—Sherrie Tucker,
Professor, American Studies
University of Kansas
Lawrence, KS

Requiem for Geri

Geri. My sister, my friend.

Her music was my faithful companion of twenty years before the birth of our friendship. My admiration for her artistry grew with each album and CD, with each performance, first with M-Base and then at her own gigs. When, finally, we came to know each other it was delightful, familiar and intimate. We encountered each other with a knowing so deep...

And now, this.

What can I say?

My grief is still raw. My tears still fall throughout the day, sometimes even awakening me from my sleep. There is also laughter at the memory of moments we shared.

What can I say?

Surely you know of her genius and originality. Surely you've heard the shimmering and brilliant solos. The fierce beauty of her music embraced tradition and forged ahead on new paths. At the piano, she was fearless. At the piano she was free. There is an exquisite truth in her playing, her arrangements and her compositions.

What can I say?

Except that in person she was so gentle, humble to a fault, generous and oh so very, very kind. Except that she brought out the protector in me. That she loved her family, lived for her children, and was a devoted and loyal friend. That she could exhaust and exhilarate at the same time. That she reintroduced me to my creative self, which she recognized, and heard, and supported, and insisted I honor. That her passing has left a cavernous void at the center of my being -- one that I try to fill with the music she left for all of us. She gave everything she had to give.

Sweet Geri.

My Geri.

My Sister.

My Friend.

—Farah Jasmine Griffin
William B. Ransford Professor
English & Comparative Literature
and African American Studies
Columbia University
New York, NY

Geri's Presence

I was in Johannesburg when I learned of Geri's passing, overwhelmed with grief and dazed by the swiftness of it all. That night I did an event at a small, beautiful community arts center called the Afrikan Freedom Station in Sophiatown, what used to be the center of Black musical culture before the apartheid regime destroyed it. The writer Bongani Madondo and I praised our new ancestor and shared a long moment of silence with a jam-packed room of South Africans across generation and gender, race, and ethnicity, who knew and loved Geri's music. We all felt her presence in the room, her fingers on the battered console piano in the corner.

Geri was always a hero to me, artistically, intellectually, politically, and in her quiet dignity, grace, and generosity. We first met in 2001, when she was a special guest of the Columbia University Jazz Studies Group. She gave a brilliant presentation about her research on Mary Lou Williams, the forces arrayed against her as a woman, and then shared a powerful story of her own revealing how Jazz at Lincoln Center granted her a commission to compose a piece but proceeded to whittle away her performance time at the last minute in order to give a prominent male pianist more time. The *New York Times* critic who reviewed her piece, concluding that women jazz musicians were not quite ready for the big leagues, was in the room! Allen took it all in stride, never once casting aspersions or showing anger. Instead, she used the occasion to examine the institutional limitations on women artists and the impact it has on the work itself. It was a stunning presentation, and I remember Farah Jasmine Griffin and I fell in love with her on the spot. Four years later, Geri gave another brilliant talk on composer William L. Dawson at a symposium organized by Dwight Andrews at Emory University. Once again, I was sitting next to my dear friend Farah and we were just in awe of Geri, passing notes to each other like giddy teenagers, competing for her attention, fantasizing about future collaborations and the like. We were watching a master at work and she was nowhere near a piano.

Well, Farah won, having collaborated with Geri on two beautiful projects, "Great Apollo Women" and "A Conversation with Mary Lou," but my opportunity came when Geri and Susan Rosenberg asked me to work with them on the Erroll Garner Project. Working with Geri, learning from her, listening to her stories and her laughter, witnessing her enthusiasm—these were among the best times of my life. The work will continue somehow, but without Geri it suddenly feels insurmountable. And yet, Geri gave so much in her short life that even in silence she's present, exhorting us to more imaginative ideas, free of clichés, moving freely in and out of tempo but never losing the pulse.

—Robin D. G. Kelley, PhD
Chair of the Department of African American Studies
Gary B. Nash Endowed Chair in U.S. History
University of California at Los Angeles

Geri Allen's Technologies of Humanism

I met Geri Allen sometime in the mid-1980s, but I finally got my first chance to work with her in 2011. The University of Michigan's Humanities Institute organized an event titled "Improvisation as a Way of Life." Geri and I performed a piece for two pianists and trombonist (me). As often happens in my work, one of the pianists was a computer program that listened to us, creating original material as well as complex responses.

After the performance, Humanities Institute director Daniel Herwitz joined me, philosopher Arnold I. Davidson, and Geri in an audience Q&A. Geri embraced the sense of vulnerability that accompanies musical improvisation at the highest level. At the same time, she refused the human-machine binary, demurring at the suggestion that the computer's responses might be harder to predict than a human associate's: "No, I don't know if I would say that."

In February 2016, Geri co-organized a telematic event with human and computer performers between her home base at the University of Pittsburgh, the University of California, Irvine, and SFJazz in San Francisco. Geri saw this as all about pedagogical research, community outreach, and overcoming the digital divide. For me, if anthropologist Lucy Suchman can assume "the boundaries between persons and machines to be discursively and materially enacted rather than naturally effected and to be available for refiguring," Geri Allen was expanding our sense of what it means to be creative in that brave new world.

Playing with Geri was a dream, and I was privileged to live that dream more than once. She understood interactivity at a philosophically deep level because she could read minds while she played, which was why she was able to perform with the widest range of creative people—and creative machines. In the midst of the poverty of polarization that marked her coming of age as an artist—black/white, uptown/downtown, jazz/classical, swing/free—Geri remained true to the credo to which the very best musicians always adhered: "Listen to everything."

Geri Allen was a musician of the very highest order, and our loss is incalculable.

—George E. Lewis FBA
Edwin H. Case Professor of American Music, Columbia University
New York, NY

Genius without Borders

Each person has a list of musicians who defined the soundtrack of their lives. During my teen years it included Whitney Houston, Janet Jackson, and Queen Latifah. In my twenties, Mary Lou Williams, Thelonious Monk, and Geri Allen were added to that list. I never had the chance to meet Williams or Monk, but I was blessed to be able to know Geri Allen personally.

I first met her in the 1990s, while attending an International Association for Jazz Education [IAJE] Conference in New York. I was fresh out of graduate school, and still trying to find my voice as a scholar. It was a chance meeting that changed my life. I was sitting at a table in the conference hotel, and she asked if she could join me. The conversation over the next hour or two was both personal and professional. It was the type of conversation that every young black female scholar needs to have at some point with a wiser, more seasoned woman.

That was over twenty years ago, and I still remember the gift of that meeting/conversation. It was the beginning of a friendship that grew. Throughout the years, Geri served as a mirror that allowed me to see my potential as a black female musician/scholar working in the academy. While I did not speak with her every day, our occasional talks were timely and much needed.

Last summer, she called me out of the blue. We caught up on each other's lives, and she urged me to finish the book I'm working on. That was Geri—always encouraging. She was one of a kind! I will truly miss her. For me, Geri Allen personified the phrase “genius without borders.” She was beautiful, powerful, and brilliant!! I can only imagine the jam session going on in heaven right now!!!

—Dr. Tammy L. Kernodle
Professor of Musicology
Affiliate Faculty, American Studies, Black World Studies
and Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies
Miami University, Oxford, OH

That Olympian Realm

Gerri commandeered the entire history of the piano's expressive range — from Mozart through Mary Lou Williams, Cecil Taylor to all of Miles' favorite tinklers — and made her firebrand syncretism party to a fluid, highly personal, high-stakes display of keyboard derring-do and gamesmanship every time she sat down at her ax. J.T. Lewis also Went There and just said IT: "If Gerri was a man she'd have been celebrated as A Giant a long time ago." Brother, don't even get me started.

Gerri was the first pianist Ornette Coleman accepted into his ensemble since Walter Norris and Paul Bley in the 1950s. The space that love demands for a pianist in Ornette's music appears daunting, cold and deep, but — no surprise — Gerri aced that challenge like tain't nobody's business. Just as she surely did in Robert Altman's 1996 film, *Kansas City*, where Gerri not only gave her personal best, swing-time Mary Lou Williams impression, but sublimely mirrored the ease with which her predecessor had contemporaneously dealt herself into a room stock full of rampant, unrepentant jazz machismo. So, not a game for a woman player — not in jazz circa '34, nor '96, nor even now — no matter how hip, resilient and adept the Playa-Woman may be. Then again, she's Gerri Allen, and as Marc Cary will tell you, being deemed fit for the stage — a theatre of war, really — tends to render shutting up the jazz boys club of America moot.

Gerri played the Summer Garden series at the Museum of Modern Art in 2011, and mid-performance I had the kind of epiphany one can only have when it smacks you dead upside your doofus noggin: that somebody you've known since you were both collegiate-age babies has done ascended to that Olympian realm where only The Masters dwell.

—Greg Tate



"Gerri Allen and Charlie Haden performing at the Frog Island Jazz Festival", Ypsilanti, MI, 2008." Photo by John Kelin, 2008. (CC BY-ND 2.0)

Gerri Allen. Gerri Allen. Gerri Allen.

We say her name and we make a promise that she will never be forgotten and that her beauty, talent, dedication, generosity of spirit, and music will be forever honored. Her compositions will be played. Her recordings will be played. Her students will continue to be inspired by her wisdom. We who had the honor of knowing her and being with her (if even fleetingly) will always hold her memory close to our hearts.

Father Peter O'Brien was my very close friend and because he was so close to Geri, I would go with him often when she was doing any event for Mary Lou Williams. We went to Madison, Wisconsin for Mary Lou's Mass in a Baptist church. We went to Harlem School of the Arts when Geri was interviewed about her early life in Detroit. We went to Columbia University when she was Artist in Residence. We went to a theatre when Geri was recording Mary Lou's music for a documentary. Geri and Father O'Brien would sit together and hold hands. Very few words were spoken between them but there was always a smile and a whisper. They would go off into a private space together and talk about whatever it was they were doing. I watched them and I was happy for both of them--happy that they had each other. One time when Father O'Brien was at my house for dinner, Geri called him on his little flip phone. I think he only had it because of her. He listened to what she had to say and then he got up and said, "I have to go now. Geri needs me." He never said any more than "Geri needs me." I never forgot that.

I have no doubt that they are together and that Mary Lou is with them and all is well in the world of the divine spirits.

—Maxine Gordon
President, The Dexter Gordon Society
New York, NY

Printmaking

A founder and a historian. A coach and a player. The light and the path.

We are all lucky that Geri found the piano. With her to follow, much about the future was made clear. The music was a portal, and the portal connects us with ancient and future civilizations. History is like clay, it fits within the hands and changes shape as you apply pressure. Geri changed every notion by applying pressure. Pressure to the piano, to the rhythm section, to the soloist, and most importantly pressure on the scene.

She etched her name into the wall, one idea and one letter at a time. It is the name that birthed a new branch of jazz history. It was in her sound that we could find the precision in freedom. It was a naturally detailed sound. The fluctuations made you know it was real, dropping the end of a phrase here, turning a sharp corner there, diving into the deep end and making a big splash. She swept through languages and combined alphabets in a way that created a new slang. I copied her slang, as did many others. That slang is still firmly in my speech, and it always will be. She taught us how to see ourselves and our ancestors in the music. She became my indicator that "there is another way." But also, "Don't forget the way back."

A few years ago my family and I were listening to a recording of Geri. I was explaining the music to my twin boys and I guess they sensed the heroine worship in my voice. Politely, one of them asked “Is she better than you?” I said “YES.”

—Jason Moran
New York, NY

A Deep Listener

I’ll remember Geri Allen as one of the kindest artists I’ve ever met. I’d experienced her powerful, cerebral, lithe, meticulous, and gorgeous art before getting the opportunity to meet her. I honestly expected the personality behind the music to be just as forceful. But Geri came across in our conversations, rather, as a very deep listener. She appeared to be hearing more than what words were spoken. Geri always seemed to dig for deeper meanings, which was evidenced by her follow-up questions about things we were discussing. She seemed to care about what was sincere, real, and politically on target.

And the art. I saw Geri play live in three very different settings in recent years. One time she was playing at the Village Vanguard with a quintet, I believe. She was, of course, swinging hard and taking no prisoners. But what made the gig special was that her son, trumpeter Wallace Roney, Jr. performed in the band. It was very moving to witness a mother accompany—or essentially carry—the young son/artist. It was transcendent on many levels. Another time Geri was playing trio with David Murray and Terri Lyne Carrington at the Blue Note. I was in the center table, first row, and could see everything. Geri’s riveting focus could be felt throughout the club. I believe she was operating on an intense telepathic connection to her bandmates. That performance had so many emotional contours one felt exhausted and, at the same time, exhilarated by end. When Geri collaborated on Farah Griffin’s Mary Lou Williams project, a theatrical presentation at Harlem Stage, one could hear how meticulously she had delved into Williams’ style. Geri moved masterfully from stride, to bebop, to more avant-garde piano styles throughout the show. Pianists Vijay Iyer and Jason Moran attended the night I did and each gave Geri the highest compliments for how much range she demonstrated.

One of the most cherished things I’ll remember about Geri was that she was always interested in talking about music and scholarship. I had a very deep respect for her and she returned the sentiment. It was an honor for me to know her in the limited way I did. She possessed a singular gift, one that blessed all who encountered it. There will never be another Geri Allen.

—Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.
Edmund J. and Louise W. Kahn Term Professor of Music
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA

Calm Virtuosity

Geri Allen is one of my greatest musical heroes, and I've been obsessed with and influenced by her music for thirty years. Her improvisations were full of space, thought, and listening, as well as a liberatory quality; her groove was deep, her contrapuntal independence often shocking; her lines and voicings were fresh and unique; she would seem at times to play with great reserves of calm, but when she chose to step up, she would dazzle with fearless virtuosity. She was at home with experimentalism and tradition, embracing new technologies and old; she let her creative voice shine but would leave no one behind.

In recent years Geri took on a more direct role in my life, as a generous colleague and caring friend. She would drive me home every now and then from wherever we ran into each other, level with me about the business, crack gentle jokes, and share parenting stories. She even gave me her old red Rogers drum set.

Geri was a powerful innovator in modern music and a visionary pianist. She was also a scholar and historian of African American music, a community organizer, an institution builder, a feminist, a deeply committed and big-hearted educator, and a quietly determined leader. As a musician she was a conduit for spiritual truths and healing energies. I am honored to have shared the planet with such a bright soul. This is a tremendous loss for all of us. May we all uphold and honor her legacy.

—Vijay Iyer

Franklin D. and Florence Rosenblatt Professor of the Arts
Department of Music, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

Our Lodestar

Geri Allen was a revered member of our University of Michigan jazz department for ten years. She was our musical, intellectual, and spiritual lodestar and constantly reminded us, in her quiet and dignified way, how to live life with the highest level of integrity possible. She inculcated in our faculty and students a reverence and passion for jazz tradition but was a shining example of how to fuse that respect with a unique and deeply personal means of self-expression rooted in modern day society. She was a champion of social justice, a relentless advocate for jazz education, and a constantly inspiring mentor to her students. Artists and scholars around the world have paid tribute to her, describing her as “a visionary pianist...a conduit for spiritual truths and healing” (Vijay Iyer), “a gracious and beautiful person and a courageous and innovative musician” (Dave Holland), and someone who “funneled every nuance of jazz history in her playing and was able to sound completely fresh” (Christian McBride). We loved her and are devastated by her loss. Her spirit will live on in her music, students, musical and academic colleagues, and of course, her beautiful children. I am honored to have known her.

—Ellen Rowe

Professor, Department of Jazz and Contemporary Improvisation
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI

The Power of Representation

Gerri Allen has been a hero of mine since I was around fifteen years old. My teacher Clyde Kerr Jr. came back from a visit to New York telling me, “This is a pianist you need to hear.” It was Gerri Allen. From both the innovative sound I heard and the image of someone who looked like me (never underestimate the power of representation), I realized a path in front of me.

The first recording of Allen’s that I heard was *Twenty-One*, and particularly her compositions *Drummer’s Song* and *Feed the Fire* excited my imagination. In college, I memorized the whole album *The Life of a Song*, and have included pieces from that album in my performance repertoire. From listening to her various albums, I love the way she played in and around the beat with such intricate and dance-like rhythms, the rich harmonies she constructed, the way she soloed and accompanied, and how she drew inspiration from all of jazz history and beyond, and yet always had her own unique sound that was constantly reaching to some far away time and place, yet grounded here on earth.

At Oberlin, Marcus Belgrave shared stories about Gerri Allen from her early days in Detroit. I learned about her from Billy Hart, and my friend and collaborator Kassa Overall invited me to all of their performances when I was a student at Rutgers. But it was my time at Columbia University and Bethany Baptist Church of Newark when I got to know Gerri. I performed with her for her Christmas concert at Bethany, and shared an unforgettable moment of bonding after hearing her lecture on Mary Lou Williams at Columbia’s Center for Jazz Studies. She was a member of my dissertation committee, my church family, and a friend. I miss her and will continue to share her music and legacy.

—Dr. Courtney Bryan, Assistan Professor of Music, Jazz Studies,
Tulane University New Orleans, LA



Vijay Iyer, Gerri Allen, Courtney Bryan, Farah Griffin, and George Lewis, Philosophy Hall, Columbia University, 2008. Photo courtesy of the Columbia University Center for Jazz Studies.

Belief in the Spirit

Geri was, in a quiet yet forceful way, a master storyteller. She could wind you up and know when to bring you back down. She could scold you and love you at the same time. She was master of the keys—but more, she was a master of the heart.

We were blessed to have Geri as a friend. A joy to work with, Geri's numerous performances at Bethany were greeted with anticipation and expectation. We knew we would not only enjoy her music but we would learn something new. She was a consummate teacher musician.

Geri lived in the world of music but she also lived in the world of the normal—those of us in the business know how abnormal the world of music can be and we sometimes have difficulty fitting into the normal—but Geri did not. This is what made her such a wonderful composer and musician. She would appear in this church at 8 am on Sunday mornings—often after performing until 3 am or later in the City—with children in tow, she would enter with a smile. She would not only stay through the sermon, but would attend Sunday school and never, in any way, call attention to her greatness.

Her life was manifest in the world of artists but also in the world of family and friends— and her music was appreciated by so many because living in the normal world she knew and felt and was able to project those emotions that touch us all.

The Jazz Vespers Committee considered Geri not just another musician but a friend. The Bethany family felt her sincere belief in Christian charity and love. She was a sister who believed in the spirit. We hurt because of her passing but we have joy because our lives were touched by her.

—Dorthaan Kirk

On behalf of the Bethany Baptist Church and the Jazz Vespers Committee
Newark, NJ

A Tenured Professor and Director of Jazz Studies

Geri Antoinette Allen is the most internationally renowned musician to have earned an MA degree (1983) through the University of Pittsburgh's jazz program, founded by Dr. Nathan Davis within the field of ethnomusicology. And as he planned his retirement, he recruited her to succeed him as Director of Jazz Studies and leader of a newly established PhD program in Jazz Studies.

She embraced her role as Associate Professor and architect of a jazz program in higher education with enormous vision, energy, and compassion. It was my good fortune to be selected as her faculty mentor, but she taught me even more through that relationship. I helped her work through the intricacies of unfamiliar institutional protocols and connecting with community resources, and later served as her department chair as well. From even before her arrival to direct the 43rd Annual Pitt Jazz Seminar and Concert in October and November 2013, she devoted herself—heart, mind, and soul—to her new role.

Geri Allen is renowned for her gifts as a pianist, composer, and musical collaborator. She showed herself to be equally talented in choosing students, staff, and

faculty colleagues with whom she wished to pursue her vision. She led the faculty search that brought Aaron Johnson and Michael Heller to the Pitt faculty, created ways to expand the roles of Yoko Suzuki and other graduates, and selected Frank Hammond to staff the Jazz Studies office. Just as she chose artists for the annual Pitt Jazz Seminar and Concert, she built collaborative relationships within the University and through outreach programs to the wider community.

In all these interactions she inspired me with the creative excitement in her eyes, her mind ablaze with ideas for using new technologies such as Internet 2 for continental collaborations, and building networks linking the jazz program, the department, the university, and the wider community—especially young people—through educational and cultural enrichment programs with jazz at the core. She had a special passion for fostering a nurturing jazz environment like what she had experienced in her youth in Detroit, and set the groundwork for developing interactions between the University’s faculty and students with the region’s schools and community agencies. She served as faculty liaison to inaugurate a Music Living Learning Community of some twenty-five freshmen. And she was committed to recruiting and mentoring students at all levels, devoting some of her last energy to providing student learning opportunities during her last tour in Europe in May this year.

Her accomplishments beyond the mentorship role are equally impressive. She worked tirelessly to bring the Erroll Garner archives to Pitt, and shepherd a full-concert CD of Garner’s *Concert by the Sea*, which earned a Grammy nomination. She arranged for a week-long residency by George Lewis. She encouraged the University’s initiatives in diversity and inclusion, served on the steering committee of the Year of the Humanities in the University, and was indeed the face of the University in some of its most prominent advertising. She was a member of our family, and while we are grieving deeply at her loss we will always celebrate her marvelous music and her multitude of contributions to all of us.

—Deane L. Root
Chair and Professor
Department of Music, University of Pittsburgh
Editor in Chief, *Grove Music Online*

Her Singular Vision

The jazz community and the world of improvised music are still reeling from the unexpected news of the passing of Geri Allen, perhaps the most accomplished musician of her generation.

As a pianist, Geri personified black music’s perpetuating virtues of tradition and innovation, of turning hardship into triumph. Geri proudly considered herself not limited to the influence of those greats from her formative years alone, but part of the two-handed tradition of piano playing dating back to jazz’s beginnings. Elements of piano masters, famous and not-so-famous, are found in her creative matrix, but it was her singular vision that held the key.

Geri was a quiet yet forceful builder of communities, proud of being a part of valued music traditions of Cass Tech, of Detroit, of Howard University, and of

Pittsburgh, where she had discovered her academic chops, and was in the process of building a greater jazz studies community. Geri seldom talked about being a “woman in jazz,” but continually acted upon it. First and foremost, she addressed it existentially just by being a “bad mother” (e.g., a giant, master, or heavyweight at what they do) on the piano. She constantly promoted, facilitated, inspired, and enabled women’s careers in music in general and jazz in particular. Even as this tribute is written, her All-Female Jazz Residency is underway in New Jersey. A wonderful mother indeed, Geri attained the highest levels of musical accomplishment while raising three children to adulthood. I can’t count the number of times our meetings were scheduled around their needs. Yet her accomplishments provide evidence that motherhood is not contrary to excellence, in any field, nor contrary to parenthood for anyone willing to take it as seriously as their work. Each of these traits—dedication, tradition, compassion, spirituality, and sacrifice—come through in her performances and in her compositions. It was blessing to have known Geri Allen for over forty years, as a friend, an admirer, and a colleague.

—AJ Johnson
Assistant Professor of Music
University of Pittsburgh



Geri Allen and Wallace Roney Jr., August 24, 1997, JVC Jazz Festival, Toronto, Ontario. Photo courtesy of Mark Miller.

An Essential Resource

Professor Geri Allen was my colleague, mentor, and friend. And she was motherly—she always made sure that I was doing okay. Geri transformed my life in so many ways. She started to teach at the University of Pittsburgh in January 2014. Although our offices were next to each other, I didn't have a chance to talk to her for the first few months. But that changed drastically in early March, when she heard me practicing the saxophone. A few days later, she called me and said, "You sound great—you should be more visible." Her compliments meant a great deal to me because I had almost given up my performance career at that point. I had felt that my life had been a series of failures. She often said, "I don't know why you're not confident. You should go see a therapist. I'm serious!" She greatly encouraged and supported my research and musical projects as well as my teaching career at Pitt, and became an essential resource for me and for many others.

We had a number of long talks over coffee, lunch, and dinner, about a variety of subjects. We talked about collaborating in music and research. We brainstormed how to develop the Jazz Studies program. Through those conversations, I sensed that she had a huge vision in which the Jazz Studies program would be a bridge between academia and underserved communities. For example, she proposed, "Pitt's Jazz Masters in the Pittsburgh Public Schools" program, which would allow our graduate students to work with jazz masters to expose Pre-K through high school-age students to jazz performance and Pittsburgh's rich jazz history.

I'll work hard to ensure that her visions will come true. It's still hard to believe that she's left us, but she always lives in my heart.

—Yoko Suzuki
Instructor, University of Pittsburgh

The True Measure of Success

The first song you taught me was "Babe's Blues" by Betty Carter. But embarrassingly enough, I was so new to jazz back then that I didn't even know who you were. Once you finally started teaching at Pitt, I signed up for your improv class—thus began a journey I could have never imagined. You took me under your wing, and after college, you continued to keep me on track with my music. In summer 2015, you told me to go to your all-female jazz residency program—it changed my life. There you taught me how important it was to not only make music but to inspire others to do the same. And with that, I returned from the program, quit my job, and became a music instructor. Best decision I ever made. Then you helped me prepare for my grad school auditions; you helped me pick out my songs; you wrote me letters of recommendation; you even spent an entire afternoon having me run through my songs in preparation for my first audition. You never asked for anything in return. When I emailed you about being

declined from the programs, you immediately responded back and set up a meeting to discuss what was next. Shortly after the meeting, you messaged me this:

“This music journey is long range.

Some downs but mostly ups.

Longevity is the true measure of success.

Never give up.”

Looking at this picture of us from two years ago, it is almost hard to believe how much I have changed. Mental, physical, musical, educational change—I owe so much of that to you. I wish I could thank you one last time for all that you’ve done for me. I am so blessed to have had you as a mentor. Thank you, Professor Allen.

—Chloe Wiecz

Instructor, Sunburst School of Music
Pittsburgh, PA

Nurturing Young Women in Jazz

To realize her vision of helping young women develop their skills as jazz artists, Geri Allen helped to establish the All-Female Jazz Residency at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center [NJPAC] in 2014 and served as its inaugural Artistic Director. The All-Female Jazz Residency is a summer program for young women in their teens and twenties who are embarking on a career in jazz. It gives them the unparalleled opportunity to study and rehearse with a stellar faculty roster which includes Ellen Rowe, Linda Oh, Jennifer Vincent, Tia Fuller, Stefon Harris, Jeff Watts, Connaitre Miller, Bruce Williams, Tanya Darby, Ingrid Jensen, and to attend a host of lectures and masterclasses.

In partnership with Rutgers University–Newark and its renowned Institute of Jazz Studies, the All-Female Jazz Residency is housed on the Rutgers campus and gives participants the opportunity to take classes in improvisation, musicianship, ensembles, and jazz theory. The residency provides exceptional opportunities for these young women to perform at jazz clubs and jazz festivals, take a tour of the Institute of Jazz Studies, visit Jazz Radio WBGO 88.3 FM, and much more. This year’s participants performed at the 2017 Caramoor Jazz Festival and at Trumpets Jazz Club in Montclair, NJ, and they also enjoyed the opportunity to hear McCoy Tyner.

Although the program is only in its fourth year, Ms. Allen’s vision of mentoring these young women beyond the bandstand has already taken root. The musical relationships and friendships that are formed inspire these young women beyond measure. They walk away from this residency with a great sense of pride and self-worth in the jazz world.

Ms. Allen has helped to establish a thriving program with NJPAC that will surely nurture young women in jazz for many years to come. Thank you, Geri Allen.

—Mark Gross

Director of Jazz Instruction
New Jersey Performing Arts Center, Newark, NJ

This Beautiful Spirit

Geri Allen was a huge inspiration to many including myself, and an indisputably remarkable musician and person. She was the kind of person who made you believe you were special and capable of anything. I am grateful that I had the opportunity to play with her on several occasions as well as teach alongside her at the NJPAC All-Female Residency which she directed. Through this residency, Geri really helped to bring together a support network of female musicians hailing from different generations. This residency was an empowering and inspiring experience I was lucky to be a part of.

Her musicality never ceased to astound me. With her deep musical connection with the present moment, she had the ability to pull you into that space along with her. It makes me happy to see all these beautiful photos and hear these stories about her strong and selfless character. As a female instrumentalist I can't help feeling that we've lost our fearless leader, but I feel incredibly lucky to have known this beautiful spirit. Her legacy will live on forever.

—Linda May Han Oh
New York, NY

A Brilliant Powerhouse

Geri Allen's music, artistry, leadership, teaching, and musical and cultural projects will live on for generations to come.

In her quiet and graceful way, Geri was a brilliant powerhouse who not only had her hands on all the beats, but also captured the pulse on who needed to be reclaimed, reassessed, and reheard. Geri was a master at making the old new. Her priority was always in Jazz and her emphasis on African-Americans and women.

I worked with Geri on the Erroll Garner Jazz Project (EGJP) for the last four years. The EGJP donated the Erroll Garner archive to the University of Pittsburgh because Geri was the director of the Jazz Studies program and because of her dedication to developing legacies – her innovative work on Mary Lou Williams, her love of Betty Carter, her work to bring the Jazz elders from Pittsburgh into the public and to perform and lecture, and her global visionary reach using technology, her focus on young black women and men, always ensuring that each and every individual got their due. Geri's leadership was clear.

We spent hours and hours talking and strategizing about how to make sure that the Garner archive would serve as a bridge between the academy with all its wealth and resources into the heart of the Pittsburgh black community. She wanted the archive to be a living link between the institution and the people, which they so often fail to serve.

We will continue to support the grassroots community-based music programs and musicians in Pittsburgh with Geri in our minds and hearts. Geri co-produced the Grammy-nominated reissue of *The Complete Concert By The Sea*, and the new release of unheard Garner session recordings called *Ready Take One*.

Geri Allen will continue to influence and to thrill all who listen to and love music.

—Susan Rosenberg
Director, Erroll Garner Jazz Project
Brooklyn, NY

Sharing Gifts

I first heard Geri Allen's music at a solo piano performance at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. I was a 15-year old aspiring jazz pianist. Her performance formed much of what my idea of a solo Jazz piano concert should be: reverent of tradition, fearless in innovation, and from the heart.

Years later, in the early '90s, I met Geri for the first time after attending a concert she was sharing with the great Tommy Flanagan in Ann Arbor. Marcus Belgrave made us a gracious introduction after the concert and Geri immediately said, "I want to hear you." I said, "hopefully someday" to which she replied, "We can do it now. Come with me." We walked back into the performance space and she sat in a chair and said, "Play something for me." I learned that Geri Allen was not about wasting time.

In this past year, Geri and I shared a bill in tribute to McCoy Tyner. The concerts consisted of playing some of McCoy's compositions solo and accompanied by his trio before he took the stage. On my first night of these concerts, I remember Geri and I both getting chairs to sit backstage just behind McCoy where we could listen and watch closely while he played. Her excitement was palpable and she would turn to me at certain moments to comment on a phrase or technique. After the concert, McCoy came over to speak with us. He said many things, but I remember mostly him looking at us each directly and saying, "We need you." Geri looked at me after he left and said, "Did you hear what he said? That is important."

And in this moment I think about how much of Geri's music I have emulated, of how every time I saw her she offered me a lesson or an encouragement that nourished and emboldened. I think of this and want to say: Thank you, Geri Allen, for being here with us, for sharing your gifts with the world. Thank you. We needed you.

—Craig Taborn
Brooklyn, NY

A Master of Mystery

Geri Allen was a master of mystery. She could somehow be soft and light as a feather, and at the same time exude a heaviness and depth that connects us all. A heaviness that comes from years of study and appreciation of what came before. A heaviness that reflected her life and a true expression of the human condition. She was one who played music that transcended what we categorize as joy or sadness. Sometimes artists like these are harder to market than your run-of-the-mill musician, but her virtuosity, commitment to the music, and dedication made her greatness impossible to ignore. In her life on this earth and in her passing on, she has inspired me to keep going and to keep seeking through music. Not for success or for any particular prize, but because this is what we chose and what we were put here to do. Music is made eternal by our continuous contribution, and I am eternally grateful for Geri and everything she brought to us all.

—Kassa Overall

A Shared Love for Alice Coltrane

In playing Alice Coltrane's music with Geri Allen, I was given the great privilege of getting to know her. We shared a love and deep appreciation for Alice Coltrane. It was such a sacred space and time whenever we would interpret these deeply spiritual works. I would often act like I was leaving the room, just so I could walk by and hover behind her to catch exactly what she was playing as she was playing it. She had a way with harmonies that I couldn't get enough of, and her command of the instrument was such that she would often seemingly levitate from the piano. She was a force.

Ms. Allen—as I called her—was always very soft spoken and I, being the polar opposite, learned a great deal from her example. She personified grace and class, and continually encouraged me as a musician and as a young woman to remain steadfast on my given path. I noted the sincere appreciation that she had for women in the music and arts industries and the importance that she placed on independence. There is a serious void without her here; however, her spirit and impact on the world will last forever.

—Brandee A. Younger
New York, NY



*"From Thelonius Monk, Sonny Rollins, and Mary Lou Williams to Geri Allen and Rudresh Mahanthappa, the Foundation has a long history of supporting jazz composers." Photo by John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, 2011.
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Flying Toward the Sound

It's raining in Pittsburgh as I write these words, and Geri Allen's interpretation of Strayhorn's "Lush Life" plays softly on a loop. This could be a gloomy scene if it weren't for Geri's sound: a sound that quietly demands, anticipates, ascends. In Geri's hands the song is transformed: it becomes less of a surrender to loneliness than solitude turned inside out: a meditation, a questioning. I hear a similar striving quality in "Flying Toward the Sound," from her 2010 solo piano album of the same name. In Geri's music, one is always "flying toward the sound," approaching the brink, in relentless pursuit of the freedom to imagine otherwise.

As a colleague, mentor, and friend, Geri gave me, and so many others, the freedom to imagine otherwise. I first met Geri as a graduate student in literature at Columbia University at events held by the Center for Jazz Studies. I admired her craft, her intellectual versatility, and her talent for collaboration. I was too shy to tell her so at the time. But later I had the great fortune to join the faculty in English at the University of Pittsburgh just as Geri began her post as Director of Jazz Studies. I will never forget the joy I felt when I saw Geri's face at faculty orientation. She had the uncanny ability to soothe and inspire, to calm your nerves and awaken your mind. She transformed jazz at Pitt, was eager to connect with faculty across disciplines, and was adored by her students. The projects we brainstormed will have to be re-envisioned, but this is precisely what Geri's legacy compels us to do. The gap will not be filled. But we turn once again to her music, and to her memory. Geri, thank you for granting us the gift of your shimmering, transformative presence.

—Dr. Imani D. Owens
Assistant Professor of English
University of Pittsburgh

Shout for Joy

"Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come before him with joyful songs."

Psalm 100:1-2

How can we dare heed the psalmist's call to shout for joy, to worship the Lord in gladness, when our hearts are so heavy with grief? How can we be assured of the love of God when someone so near and dear to us; someone who brought so much compassion and excitement into the world has been taken away from us, and so soon?

In a world where so many people crave for attention, and who insist on pushing themselves to the front of the line, how can we be joyous when we lose one who was a polar opposite of all that?

It is so much like us to be disheartened, to turn to anger and doubt... to wonder about God, whether life has ultimate meaning. Cynicism grows from our arrogance and fear. It grows from our bloated sense of ourselves, from our implicit assumption that the sensate life is the measure of all things. We are so intoxicated by the things of this

world, the things we are able to perceive with our senses, that we give little care or attention to that which cannot be seen and commodified—the things of the spirit. Artists should be especially attuned to the spirit, the perishable, the mystery, the soul forces of rhythm and vibration.

But too often our joy, our lightness of being, our creative capacity is held hostage by the fear of worldly consequences. But we love Geri and her music, because while she was not exempt from human fear, she experienced surges of courage to break free from the confines that stifle celebration! To realize joy. And yes, these surges can and do take their toll, because they compel us to push against the grain of life's dreariness, against the status quo, against vested interests, against small minds, and timid companions.

Therefore, in moments like this, when the providence of God precludes what mortals can prevent; when circumstances do not reward us with happiness; nevertheless the voice of the most high God, calls us not to happiness, but to joy!

—Rev. Dr. M. William Howard, Jr.
Bethany Baptist Church
Newark, NJ

Organizers

Courtney Bryan, Tulane University; Ellie Hisama, Columbia University;
Yoko Suzuki, University of Pittsburgh; Sherrie Tucker, University of Kansas

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Tami Albin for contributing her time and talents in designing and formatting this booklet, and to Annie Randall and Dee Spencer for providing a place on the program to remember Geri Allen. We deeply appreciate the invaluable assistance of Yulanda McKenzie of the Center for Jazz Studies, Columbia University.

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Booklet Editor: Ellie Hisama

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Cover photo: "Jazztalks: David Murray & Geri Allen"

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"Geri Allen and Charlie Haden performing at the Frog Island Jazz Festival, Ypsilanti, MI, 2008. "

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Geri Allen and Wallace Roney Jr., August 24, 1997, JVC Jazz Festival, Toronto, Ontario. Photo courtesy of Mark Miller.

Vijay Iyer, Geri Allen, Courtney Bryan, Farah Griffin, and George Lewis, Philosophy Hall, Columbia University, NY, NY, 2008. Photo courtesy of the Columbia University Center for Jazz Studies.

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