

Thara John Memory (1948-2017)

By Lynn Darroch

Thara John Memory was a trumpet player, composer, educator, and activist in the Portland jazz community. In 2011, the Portland Jazz Festival named him an Oregon Jazz Master, and he was selected as a Portland Jazz Hero by the Jazz Journalists Association in 2014. In 2013, Memory won a Grammy award for his arrangement of "City of Roses," on the album *Radio Music Society*, by his former student Esperanza Spalding. He received an honorary Doctor of Music degree from Berklee College of Music (Massachusetts) in May 2014.

Memory arrived in Portland in 1970, when he first saw the city while on tour with R&B star Joe Tex. "We were driving through this neighborhood with all these trees and nice houses," he recalled in an interview with the author, "and they told me this was where Black people lived, and I said, 'Let me off this bus!'" Soon he was working with top area bands, most notably, the Mel Brown Sextet—a hardbop group modeled on the bands of Art Blakey—which won the Hennessy International Jazz Competition in 1989. He also worked with Brown, an award-winning drummer, in his B3 Organ Group and Septet, both of which have enjoyed long tenures at Jimmy Mak's, beginning in 1998, when the Portland club opened. In addition, Memory was a member of bassist Leroy Vinegar's Quartet (1993-1995), and he organized several programs with Ghanaian master drummer Obo Addy, including "Africa Speaks, America Answers" (2009). Since the early 1990s, he has led his jazz-funk group, the Thara Memory SuperBand. His jazz operetta, *Sherman*, was staged in 2011 at Portland's Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center.

Memory was influenced both musically and personally by mentors that included his seventh-grade band director, Louis Hamlin, Jr. (author of the James Brown hit, "Every Beat of My Heart"), and his teacher at Alabama State University, William B. Fielder, a jazz and symphony trumpet player. In 2011, Memory told a story, paraphrased here, about a formative experience with another kind of teacher. At age twelve, he fell in love with the music of Miles Davis and listened to the trumpeter's album, *Porgy and Bess*, every day, until he realized that he would never be as good as his hero. Nevertheless, he started attending every Davis concert he could, hanging around backstage. One day, Davis approached him. "You're that trumpet player, aren't you?" he asked. "I bet you can't play worth a shit." Recognizing that the famously critical Davis must be interested enough to speak to him, Memory took courage. "Not compared to you I can't," he replied. "But I can hold down my own thing and bring some people up with me."

It is Memory's work as a jazz educator that may have had the greatest impact on the Oregon and national jazz scenes. His student jazz ensembles include award-winning programs at Wilson High School in Portland and the Arts & Communications Magnet Academy in Beaverton, and his American Music Program won numerous national student competitions, including the Next Generation Festival in Monterey, California, and Essentially Ellington at Lincoln Center in New York. His students include bassist Esperanza Spalding with whom he shared a Grammy award for an arrangement on her *Radio Music Society* album and saxophonists Patrick Lamb and Hailey Niswanger, in addition to many others who have received scholarships to top music colleges.

As a band leader, Memory has two CDs, *Juke Music* (1991) and *Chronicle* (2008), which recalls his early years in Florida, including residence in Eatonville, hometown of Harlem Renaissance author Zora Neal Hurston. In his 50s, Memory lost parts of two fingers to the effects of diabetes but continued to perform on a trumpet custom-made for him by Portland's internationally known instrument maker, David Monette.

In February 2017, Memory pleaded not guilty to an indictment by a Portland grand jury on misdemeanor third-degree sexual abuse of former students. He lived in Portland with his wife Karen until his death in June 2017.

Sources

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