

Deceased in 2004

New England jazz lost some of its favorite sons and daughters in 2004. Here are the obituaries for James Williams, Steve Lacy, John LaPorta, Porky Cohen, Chuck Niles, and Elma Lewis that originally appeared on this site.

James Williams, 53; Was Pianist, Bandleader, and Educator in Boston and New York

James Williams, a soulful and swinging pianist with a comprehensive knowledge of both the jazz canon and popular music, died July 20, 2004 in New York City of liver cancer. The bandleader, educator, composer, and producer was 53. At the time of his death, he was director of jazz studies at William Paterson University.

Williams was a well-known member of the Boston jazz scene, as a teacher at the Berklee College of Music from 1974 to 1977, a performing resident until 1984, and a frequent visitor in the 20 years since.

Born March 8, 1951 in Memphis, Tennessee, Williams grew up listening to R&B and gospel. He began his formal piano studies at age 13, and served as organist in his Baptist church for six years. His playing always reflected the influences of gospel and the blues.

Part of the Memphis jazz scene with Harold Mabern, George Coleman, and Jamil Nasser, Williams took special interest in music of pianist Phineas Newborn Jr., who also came from Memphis. In 1989, Williams appeared in a Boston tribute to Newborn, "A World of Piano," an eleven player marathon featuring pianists as diverse as Mabern, Mulgrew Miller, Joanne Brackeen, and Dave McKenna.

After graduating from Memphis State University with a B.S. in Music Education, Williams moved to Boston to teach at the Berklee College of Music from 1974 to 1977. In those years he worked regularly at Michael's, and performed with groups led by Joe Henderson and Woody Shaw. In 1977, he joined the Jazz Messengers for a four-year, 10-album tenure with bandmates including Wynton Marsalis, Bobby Watson, and Bill Pierce. Williams, in fact, formed a life-long musical association with Pierce, his tenor saxophonist of choice on numerous recordings.

Williams left the Messengers in 1981, and back in Boston he worked frequently with Pierce, drummer Alan Dawson, and bassists John Lockwood and Whit Browne. He appeared locally in venues such as the Willow and the Starlight Roof. He moved to New York in 1984, where he thrived as a pianist, bandleader, and producer.

Williams played and recorded in a wide range of formats: as a single at the Maybeck Recital Hall; in a duo with bassist Dennis Irwin; in the Magical Trios; in a sextet with a three-tenor front line; with his Contemporary Piano Ensemble, a Memphis-flavored piano quartet with rhythm section; and the Intensive Care Unit, a jazz-gospel ensemble. He recorded over 20 albums for Red Records, Concord, Sunnyside, EmArcy, DIW, and Evidence.

A leading jazz educator, Williams taught at the Hartt School of Music at the University of Hartford as well as Berklee. He was named director of jazz studies at William Paterson University in Wayne, N.J., in 1999. He was an active member of the International Association of Jazz Educators.

He performed, toured, or recorded with a Who's Who of Jazz---Thad Jones, Joe Henderson, Clark Terry, Benny Carter, Dizzy Gillespie, Ray Brown, Clifford Jordan, Art Farmer, Kenny Burrell, and many others. He appeared twice on NPR's "Piano Jazz" with Marian McPartland.

Williams formed Finas Sound Productions in 1993 to produce both recordings and concerts.

Mr. Williams is survived by two brothers, Hannibal Parkes and Ralph Parkes, and a sister, Barbara Williams, all of Memphis.

—Richard Vacca, NEJA

Steve Lacy, 69, Star Soprano Saxophonist and Educator

BOSTON -- Steve Lacy, the American soprano saxophonist who worked as an expatriate in Europe for over 30 years,

died of cancer June 4 in Boston. His death was announced by the New England Conservatory of Music, where he had been teaching since 2002.

Steve Lacy was inspired to pick up the soprano by the playing of Sidney Bechet. Over the course of his career, Lacy played everything from Dixieland with Red Allen and Pee Wee Russell to avant-garde with Cecil Taylor. He worked with Mal Waldron and Gil Evans, and was well known for his work with Thelonious Monk, as well as his interpretation of Monk's music. He recorded extensively over the years; between 1957 and 2003, Lacy recorded more than 50 albums under his own name, including more than 20 solo saxophone albums. Lacy was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 1992.

New York City-born Lacy left the United States in 1965 and eventually settled in Paris. In Europe, he met his future wife, singer Irene Aebi. Though he frequently performed in the United States, he remained in Europe until 2002, when the New England Conservatory offered him a teaching position.

New England Conservatory's Jazz Studies Department will present a memorial concert on Tuesday, Oct. 12 at 8 p.m. in Jordan Hall.

The staff at NEC has prepared an extensive Lacy obituary and compiled links to other Lacy articles, available at http://www.newenglandconservatory.edu/whatsnew/Steve_Lacy_Memorial.htm.

Reed Player and Educator John LaPorta, 84

(SARASOTA, Fla) -- John Daniel LaPorta, renowned jazz composer, performer, and teacher, died May 12 at the age of 84, several months after suffering a stroke. LaPorta had lived in Sarasota since his 1985 retirement from the faculty at the Berklee College of Music in Boston.

Born in Philadelphia April 13, 1920, John LaPorta began studying clarinet at age nine. He picked up both alto and tenor sax (he later came to prefer the alto) and also learned to write for large ensembles. As a teenager he began playing with bands in Philadelphia, and he ended up alongside such players as Charlie Ventura and Bill Harris.

High points of LaPorta's performing career include playing with the big bands of Bob Chester (1942-1944) and Woody Herman (1944-1946), recording with Lennie Tristano, and founding the Jazz Composers' Workshop with Charles Mingus and Teo Macero in 1953. LaPorta led sessions for Debut, Fantasy, and Everest during 1954-1958, worked with Herb Pomeroy and Dizzy Gillespie, and eventually earned BS (1956) and MME (1957) degrees from the Manhattan School of Music. He was soloist for the Everest Recording of Stravinsky's "Ebony Concerto" and for the New York Philharmonic premier of Teo Macero's "Fusion" with conductor Leonard Bernstein in 1957.

In the late 1950s, LaPorta turned his attention to teaching, first at the Manhattan School of Music and then at Berklee, which he joined in 1962. He was creator and founding chair of the Instrumental Performance Department, and noted for his ability to work with lower-level students. Of this, he said: "I think as a teacher I should be concerned about hidden talents, not obvious ones. We're supposed to help people grow and become whatever they can." He retired in 1985.

LaPorta was a founding member of the National Association of Jazz Educators (now the International Association of Jazz Educators). In 1994 he received the Humanitarian Award at the 21st IAJE Conference in Boston, and this year he won the Satchmo Award for outstanding contributions to jazz.

John LaPorta is survived by Virginia, his wife of 59 years, as well as four children and five grandchildren.

Rhode Island Trombonist Porky Cohen, 79

NORTH PROVIDENCE, R.I. -- Trombonist Zolman M. "Porky" Cohen, 79, died April 14 at a Providence-area hospital. Born in Springfield, Mass., Cohen had been a trombonist for 65 years and was a member of AFM Local 198 of Cranston.

From 1942 to 1950, Cohen played in the big bands of Charlie Barnet, Lucky Millinder, Benny Goodman and more. He returned to Rhode Island and played locally with the Jewels of Dixie, and also worked at Ladd's Music, in Cranston and later in Providence.

But Cohen and the road weren't through with each other. In 1979, at the age of 54, he joined Rhode Island's rhythm-

and-blues stalwarts, Roomful of Blues, and stayed until 1988.

Cohen appeared on several Roomful records, including Hot Little Mama, Live at Lupo's and Dressed Up to Get Messed Up, as well as their records with Big Joe Turner, Earl King and Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson. Cohen earlier recorded with Charlie Barnet. In 1996, he released Rhythm & Bones, his only solo album, featuring members of Roomful as his backing band.

After leaving Roomful, Cohen freelanced around Rhode Island and played in the band Swingtime. His last gig was at Autumnfest in Woonsocket last October.

Cohen is survived by his wife of 52 years, Esther D. (Chiaro) Cohen, and a daughter, Barbara.

Chuck Niles, 76; Voice of Los Angeles Jazz Radio Was Born in Bay State

Chuck Niles, whose velvety baritone voice and music knowledge earned him the only Hollywood Walk of Fame star awarded to a jazz radio host, died March 15, 2004 of complications from a stroke. The voice of jazz radio in Southern California for more than 40 years, he had been on the air on KKJZ-FM until Feb. 25. Niles had worked at KKJZ since 1990.

Niles, also known as "Mr. Jazz" and the "Minister of Cool," was honored by several prominent jazz musicians in songs including "Niles Blues" by Louie Bellson, "The Hippest Cat in Hollywood" by Horace Silver, and "Bebop Charlie" by Bob Florence.

Born Charles Neidel in Springfield, Mass., on June 24, 1927, he eventually adopted Niles because he got sick of people mispronouncing his name. Niles took up clarinet at an early age and played his first paying gig on saxophone at age 15. After Navy service in World War II, Niles returned to music full time, playing alto sax.

Back in Springfield, Niles earned a bachelor's degree in sociology from American International University and, in 1951, landed a job playing music on a local radio station. In 1953, he worked in radio in West Palm Beach, Fla., and in 1956, at KFOX in Los Angeles. In 1957, he joined jazz radio station KNOB.

In 1965, Niles left KNOB for KBCA, another all-jazz station that changed its call letters to KKGO in 1979. KKGO switched to classical music in 1990, and Niles left for all-jazz KLON-FM, the station of Cal State Long Beach. The station changed its name to KKJZ in August 2002.

Local Arts Patron Elma Lewis, 82

The New Year begins with some sad news. To quote the Boston Globe, "Elma Lewis, a Roxbury native who brought Boston's African-American arts community to international prominence by founding the National Center for Afro-American Artists and the Roxbury arts school that bore her name, and who preached a gospel of self-empowerment and self-discipline to generations of city schoolchildren, died yesterday [Jan. 1] at age 82." Here is the complete article.