

MUSIC ARCHIVES

Jazz–Rock Icon Larry Coryell Dies at 73

by DAVID R. ADLER
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COURTESY OF THE LARRY CORYELL ESTATE

The career of jazz guitar great Larry Coryell, who died on February 19 at age 73, is in some sense a microcosm of jazz itself, in all its stylistic and aesthetic breadth. Steeped in the hard-swung tradition of the archtop guitar masters (Barney Kessel, Wes Montgomery, Kenny Burrell, Tal Farlow), Coryell would go on to open up many other musical worlds on his instrument. He could deal with jazz harmony on the highest level but was fluent in blues and rock, throwing in Chuck Berry licks on his first mid-'60s sideman appearances with Chico Hamilton (*The Dealer*) and Chico O'Farrill (*Nine Flags*), among others.

He brought that edgy yet sophisticated approach to his groundbreaking work with the Gary Burton Quartet on such albums as *Lofty Fake Anagram* and *Duster* (paving the way for Burton's next guitar protégé, Pat Metheny). He rocked out, sang, and got psychedelic on his early bandleader efforts such as *Coryell* (1969) and *Barefoot Boy* (1971). He joined the fusion wave of the '70s by cranking up and wailing with his project The Eleventh House. (He was working on reviving that band when he died: a summer tour had been planned; a new full-length album titled *Seven Secrets* is due out in early June.)

To hear Coryell at his best, however, was to really *hear* him, i.e., in more stripped-down and intimate settings. His duo collaborations and solo six- and 12-string acoustic work remains some of the most inspired and imaginative in the annals of modern guitar. There were early glimmers of this: his composition "Lines" from *Lofty Fake Anagram* was a duet with Burton, impossibly fast yet rippling with nuance. "Rene's Theme" from the classic *Spaces* (1970) found him in a bracingly uptempo swing duet with the great John McLaughlin. "Gratitude (a 'So Low')" from *Introducing the Eleventh House* and "Eyes of Love" from the follow-up *Level One* were engrossing solo-guitar meditations that stood apart from the fairly dated funk of those sessions.

Soon came more sustained solo and duo exploration, much of it on acoustic guitar, typically a round-backed Ovation model. He made fine duet albums with Philip Catherine (*Twin House* and *Splendîd*), Steve Khan (*Footprints*), Brian Keane (*Just Like Being Born*), and Emily Remler (*Together*). He played trio with McLaughlin and flamenco master Paco de Lucía in an acoustic summit called *Meeting of the Spirits* (predecessor to the more acclaimed *Passion, Grace & Fire* trio with Al Di Meola). He made acoustic albums such as *The Restful Mind* with Ralph Towner, Collin Walcott, and Glen Moore, and *Standing Ovation*, a quirky solo gem with liberal use of overdubbing.

But with *European Impressions* (1978), a wholly unaccompanied acoustic set, Coryell made what is arguably his masterpiece. The lyrical melodies, angular atonal passages, epic hard-strummed (almost Pete Townshend–esque) vamps, and lightning improvised breaks amounted to something unclassifiable, setting a new bar for solo performance. At any time, traces of jazz, blues, country, classical, flamenco, and Indian music could arise in his playing. Several years later he arranged Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, Ravel's *Bolero*, and Stravinsky's formidable *L'Sacre du printemps*, *L'Oiseau de feu* and *Petrouchka* for solo acoustic guitar as well, on albums that are long out-of-print. His uninhibited technique was never flawless; his sound was markedly trebly and not particularly warm. But he was ambitious, deeply soulful, and always irrepressibly individual.

In 2007 Coryell published a memoir called *Improvising: My Life in Music* (Hal Leonard). He chronicles his birth in Galveston, Texas, as Lorenz Albert Van Delinder III, deaf in one ear ("monaural by default," he quips). He acquired the name Coryell at age five after being legally adopted by his stepfather, Gene Coryell, a man he loved dearly. He was raised mainly in southeastern Washington and made the move to New York in 1965. There he lived the life, and the stories are amazing: he was in the studio while Jimi Hendrix was recording "House Burning Down" and "Voodoo Chile" for *Electric Ladyland*. But he struggled horribly with drug and alcohol addiction. He cleaned up in the early '80s and returned to straight-ahead jazz, and the hollow-body electric guitar, on such albums as *Comin' Home*, *Equipoise*, *Toku Do*, and *Shining Hour*. He also became devoted to Nichiren Buddhism with the encouragement of his friends Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter.

In *Improvising*, he writes: "I've made a difference (I'd like to think). If I hadn't gone through all the struggles for my music, fighting to develop my style of playing and my concept, then perhaps some people never would have been reached by the magic of music. That, I see now, was my mission — and it still is."

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December 23, 2020



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by IVAN SOLOTAROFF
Originally published September 4, 1990



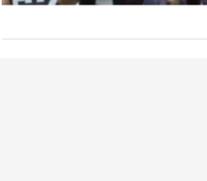
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Originally published December 23, 1981



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by DANNY KING
Originally published December 27, 2016