

MUSIC ARCHIVES

Jazz–Rock Icon Larry Coryell Dies at 73

by DAVID R. ADLER
February 23, 2017



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 *Splendid*), 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.”

This article from the *Village Voice Archive* was posted on February 23, 2017

MORE: [JAZZ](#) [NEW YORKERS](#) [OBITUARY](#) [ROCK](#)

ARCHIVE HIGHLIGHTS



EDITOR'S NOTE

65 Years and Counting

As *New Yorkers*, we reflect so much that is best about this great democracy

by R.C. BAKER
December 23, 2020

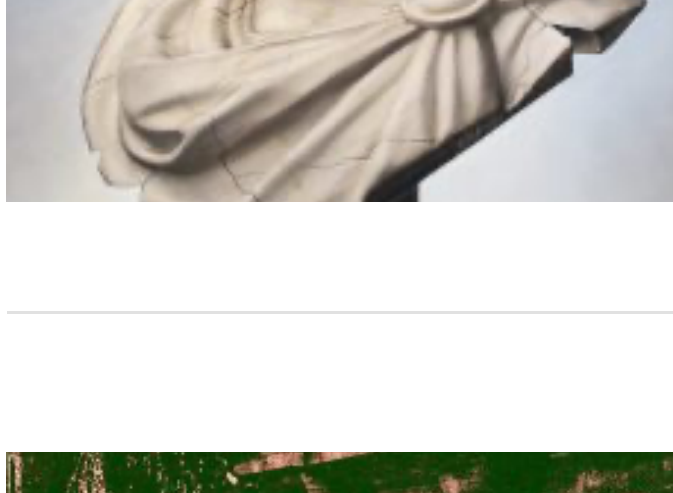


CRIME ARCHIVES

The Sad, Strange Tale of Judas Priest

“These people act like we drink a gallon of blood and hang upside down from crucifixes before we go onstage,” Rob Halford says. “We’re performers, have been for two decades. We do the show and we wear the costumes our audience expect us to.”

by IVAN SOLOTAROFF
Originally published September 4, 1990

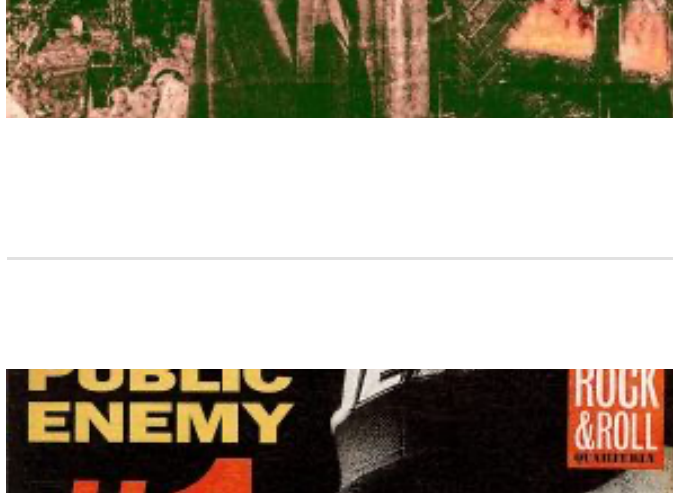


NEWS & POLITICS ARCHIVES

The Romans Tried to Save the Republic From Men Like Trump. They Failed.

Trump now takes office on the strength of his demagoguery. A student of little else, Trump is an intuitive expert in popular fantasy, and he plays his American audience like a well-worn instrument.

by JOY CONNOLLY
Originally published January 17, 2017



MUSIC ARCHIVES

Christmas Music: Reasons to Be Cheerful

“I like Christmas music. I like the schlock and I like the religion. I like sentimental innocence and I like trancing out on the same standards sung and resung. So here, with what I sincerely hope is the right mix of Christian charity and obsessed consumerism, is a guide to some of the season’s better music”

by TOM SMUCKER
Originally published December 23, 1981

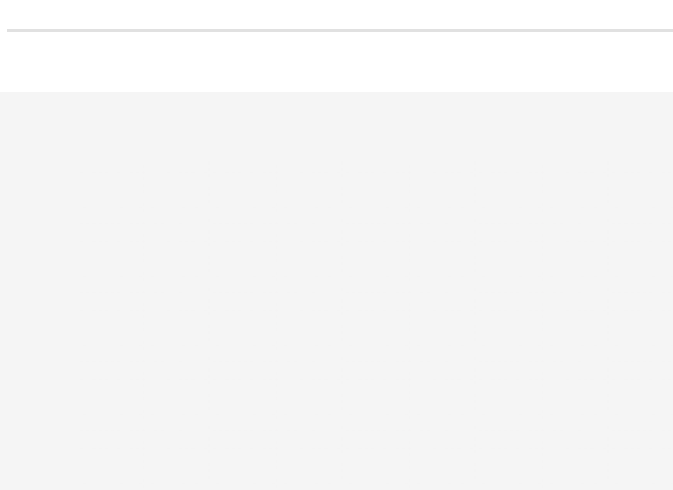


MUSIC ARCHIVES

Chuck D: All Over the Map

“It’s a make-it-or-break-it period for us. We do the right thing, we’ll be able to pull it to the 21st century with some kind of program. We do the wrong thing, the 21st century is going to be gone, there’ll be no coming back”

by ROBERT CHRISTGAU and GREG TATE
Originally published October 22, 1991



ART ARCHIVES

Arthur Jafa Distilled the Black American Experience Into a High Art Music Video

90 percent of the cutting on *Love* was completed before he settled on “Ultralight Beam” as the guiding song — an astonishing statistic, given the piece’s exquisite dovetailing of sound and image.

by DANNY KING
Originally published December 27, 2016