

Jon Hendricks, Literate and High-Flying Jazz Vocalist, Dies at 96

By DAVID R. ADLER • NOV 23, 2017

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Jon Hendricks at the 1972 Monterey Jazz Festival
DAVID REDFERN / GETTY IMAGES

Jon Hendricks, a revered jazz singer who refined and popularized the art of vocalese, or putting lyrics to famous improvised solos, died on Wednesday in Manhattan. He was 96.

His death was confirmed by his daughter Aria Hendricks.

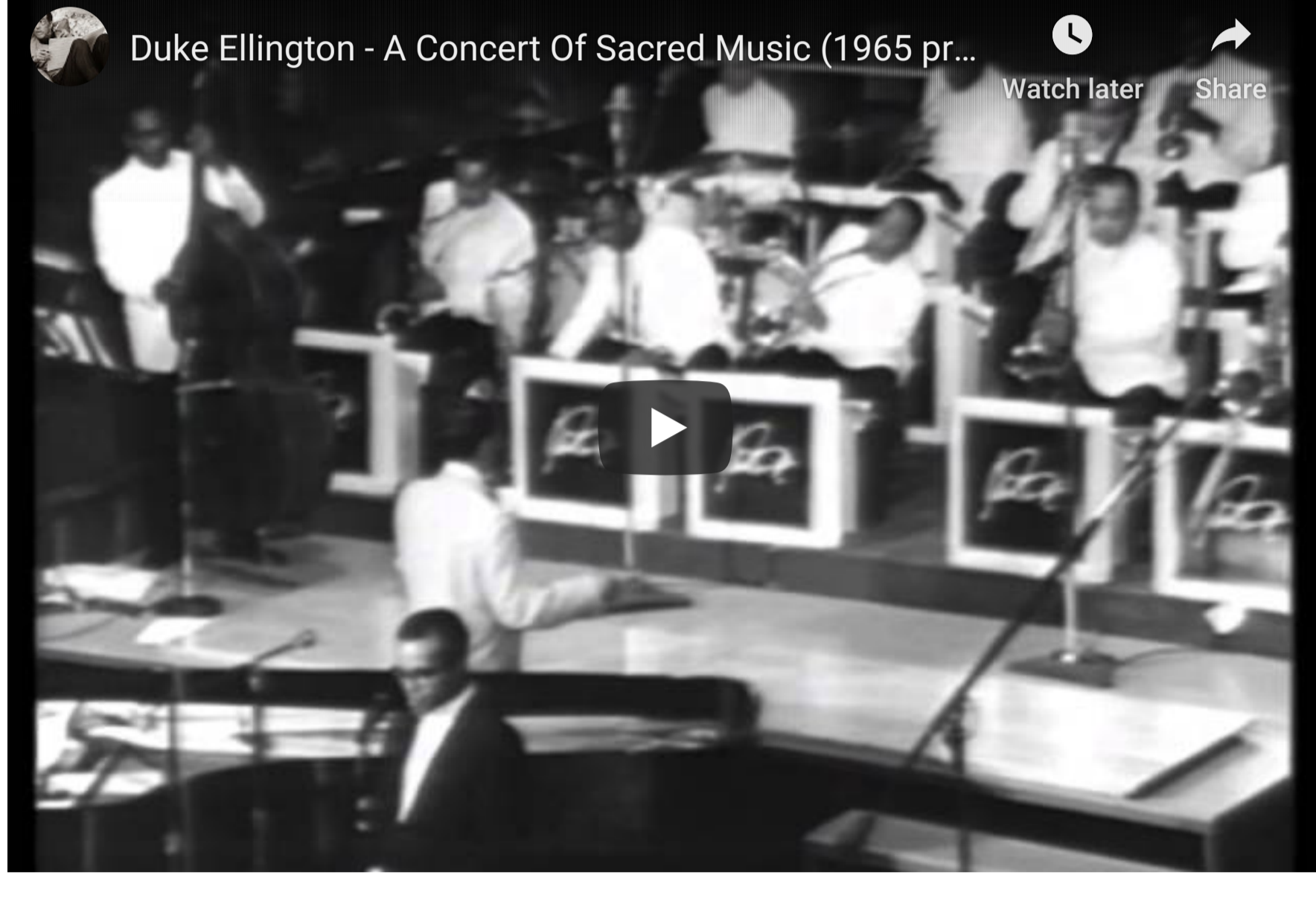
Hendricks' unmistakable gravelly tone and crystal-clear bebop enunciation, even at the most breakneck tempos, placed him at the highest echelon of vocal virtuosity. No mere stuntman, however, he endowed every performance with an irresistible, loose-limbed soul. Assuming a saxophonist-like stance at the mic, he'd wear a perpetual near-smirk as he worked at a sustained high level of harmonic sophistication.



"The ingenuity and spirited mother wit that showed up in Jon's lyric writing, the absolute mastery of jazz nomenclature in his singing and improvisation, was unparalleled," Kurt Elling, one of Hendricks's most successful stylistic heirs, said on Wednesday. "He represented an immediate link to the great 20th-century improvisers — Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Horace Silver, the greatest possible players," Elling continued. "He could quote chapter and verse."

Hendricks' earliest success was with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, a Grammy-winning vocalese trio with Dave Lambert and Annie Ross. The trio could execute dense harmonized passages (arranged by Lambert) and breathtakingly precise scat solos, always rooted in a natural and infectious swing. *Sing a Song of Basie*, their 1957 recording of classic Count Basie repertoire, featured Hendricks' inventive lyrics to historic solos by Lester Young, Buck Clayton and other members of Basie's "Old Testament" lineup of the mid-to-late 1930s. Hendricks was, to the end, a jazz modernist deeply informed by the pre-bebop foundations of the music.

Receiving what is perhaps the ultimate honor for a jazz musician, Hendricks was a featured vocalist with Duke Ellington's orchestra in 1965, at the composer's Concert of Sacred Music in San Francisco's Grace Cathedral.



Hendricks could dispatch any vocal task, with a versatility that had few bounds. He sang original lyrics to Thelonious Monk's "In Walked Bud" on the pianist's 1968 Columbia album *Underground*. Survey his catalog and one hears echoes of soul-jazz and gospel, even rock 'n' roll. He got his start as an R&B songwriter for the great Louis Jordan, among others.

His 1967 performances with the Warlocks, precursor to the Grateful Dead, were recently [discussed by journalist Marc Myers](#) on his blog JazzWax. (It was Hendricks' rapid-fire style that gave Bob Weir confidence to handle the tongue-twisting verses of "Truckin'.") More than simply a bebop master, Hendricks was intuitively in step with a full spectrum of American music.

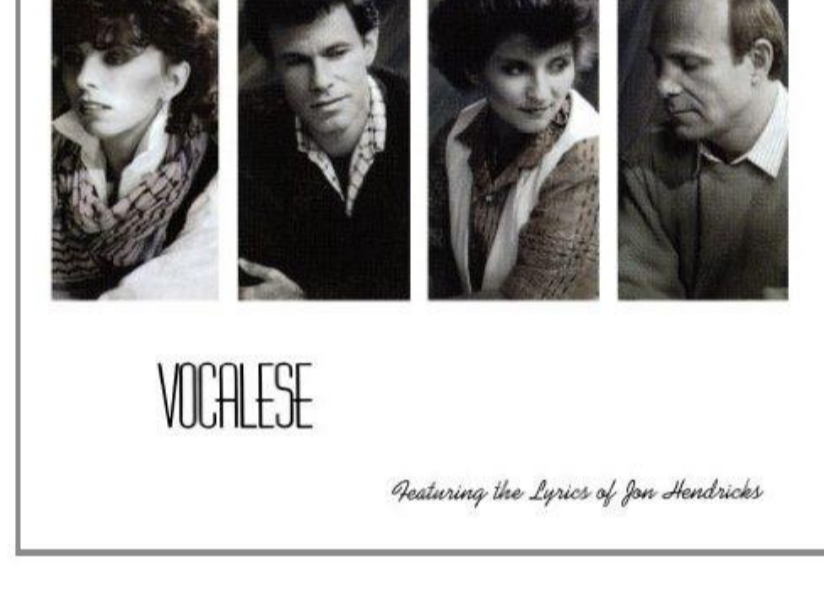
John Carl Hendricks (he took "Jon" as a stage name) was born in Newark, Ohio (near Columbus) on September 16, 1921. He was one of 17 children, 14 of them brothers. The son of a minister father (Alexander Hendricks) and choir-leader mother (Willie Mae Carrington), he began singing in church at age 7. He later moved with the family to Toledo, where he began singing professionally — accompanied for two years by Art Tatum, a [giant in the jazz pantheon](#) who was then still relatively unknown.

After high school, Hendricks furthered his singing career in Detroit, served in the Army during World War II and ultimately settled in New York in 1952. His eureka moment came when he heard [King Pleasure's "Moody's Mood for Love,"](#) featuring a memorable James Moody saxophone solo set to Eddie Jefferson's lyrics. The course for his development of vocalese was set.

Work with Lambert, Hendricks & Ross lasted until 1964 (with Yolande Bavan replacing Ross), but Hendricks returned to the group vocalese format in the late '70s with Jon Hendricks and Company, featuring his wife Judith Hendricks (now deceased) and his three children, among others. Hendricks is survived by his daughters Aria and Michele Hendricks, his son Jon Hendricks, Jr., three grandchildren, and a niece, Bonnie Hopkins.

Hendricks undertook other varied projects during the '70s, including stints as a critic and jazz history professor. His extended work *Evolution of the Blues* enjoyed a five-year run in San Francisco, beginning in 1974.

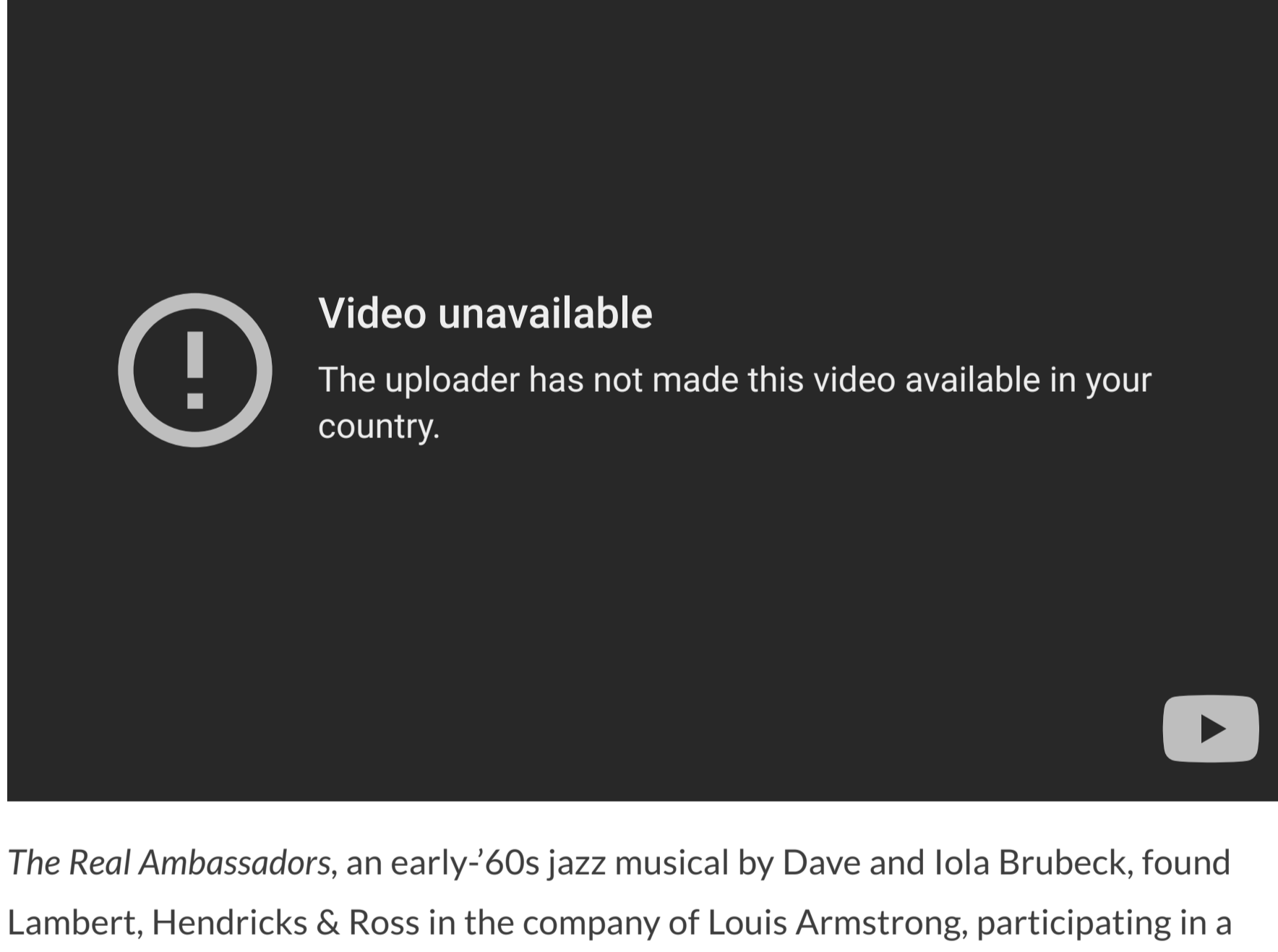
He won a Grammy in 1986 for Best Jazz Vocal Performance, with Bobby McFerrin, for "Another Night in Tunisia," from the Manhattan Transfer album *Vocalese* (which won in two other categories as well). A rendering of Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia," the track found Hendricks matching Charlie Parker's famous alto saxophone solo note for note, with words.



In 1997 Hendricks appeared alongside Cassandra Wilson and Miles Griffith as a vocalist on Wynton Marsalis's Pulitzer Prize-winning jazz oratorio *Blood on the Fields*. His dry delivery and capricious swing feel on "Soul for Sale" make it one of the work's standout moments.

Among Hendricks's many other career highlights, these hold a special place:

The 1955 Lambert, Hendricks & Ross arrangement of Jimmy Giuffre's "Four Brothers," a cathartic 1947 showpiece by Woody Herman's "second herd," features Hendricks singing the saxophone solos of Stan Getz, Zoot Sims, Herbie Steward and Serge Chaloff in succession, with original lyrics depicting a vivid dialogue between each "brother."



The Real Ambassadors, an early-'60s jazz musical by Dave and Lola Brubeck, found Lambert, Hendricks & Ross in the company of Louis Armstrong, participating in a searing satire of U.S. cultural diplomacy and racial oppression during the Cold War. The trio's feats of sheer vocal prowess are pivotal on "Cultural Exchange" and the title track.



Hendricks' first solo album, *A Good Git-Together*, released in 1959 by Pacific Jazz and reissued by Blue Note in 2006, finds Hendricks leading a group with Cannonball Adderley and Wes Montgomery as sidemen. The program is wry and eclectic, and while Hendricks may not have been a ballad specialist, his renderings of Randy Weston's "Pretty Strange" and Benny Golson's "Out of the Past" are sensitive and compelling.



Hendricks was named an NEA Jazz Master in 1993. He became a distinguished professor of jazz studies in 2000 at the University of Toledo (where he studied English literature after the war).

He remained active on the scene as an elder statesman, touring during the early 2000s with Four Brothers, an all-star group also featuring Elling, Kevin Mahogany and Mark Murphy. In one of his final outings, Hendricks attended a recent performance of Fred Hersch's Walt Whitman-inspired oratorio *Leaves of Grass*.

Elling, a featured vocalist on the concert, [posted an Instagram photo](#) of himself with Hendricks and friends backstage. On Wednesday, Elling paid homage to his hero: "He was part of the greatest, deepest link to the jazz spirit that any of us have ever had the privilege to encounter."

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Nicely done, except for the headline. Is it necessary to say "Literate?" That's as bad as saying "Articulate."
I met Mr. Hendricks after a concert in Cambridge, and he was very generous with his time and eager to talk about music.
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