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Gerry Teekens, Whose Criss Cross Label Was a Harbor to Several Jazz Generations, Dies at 83

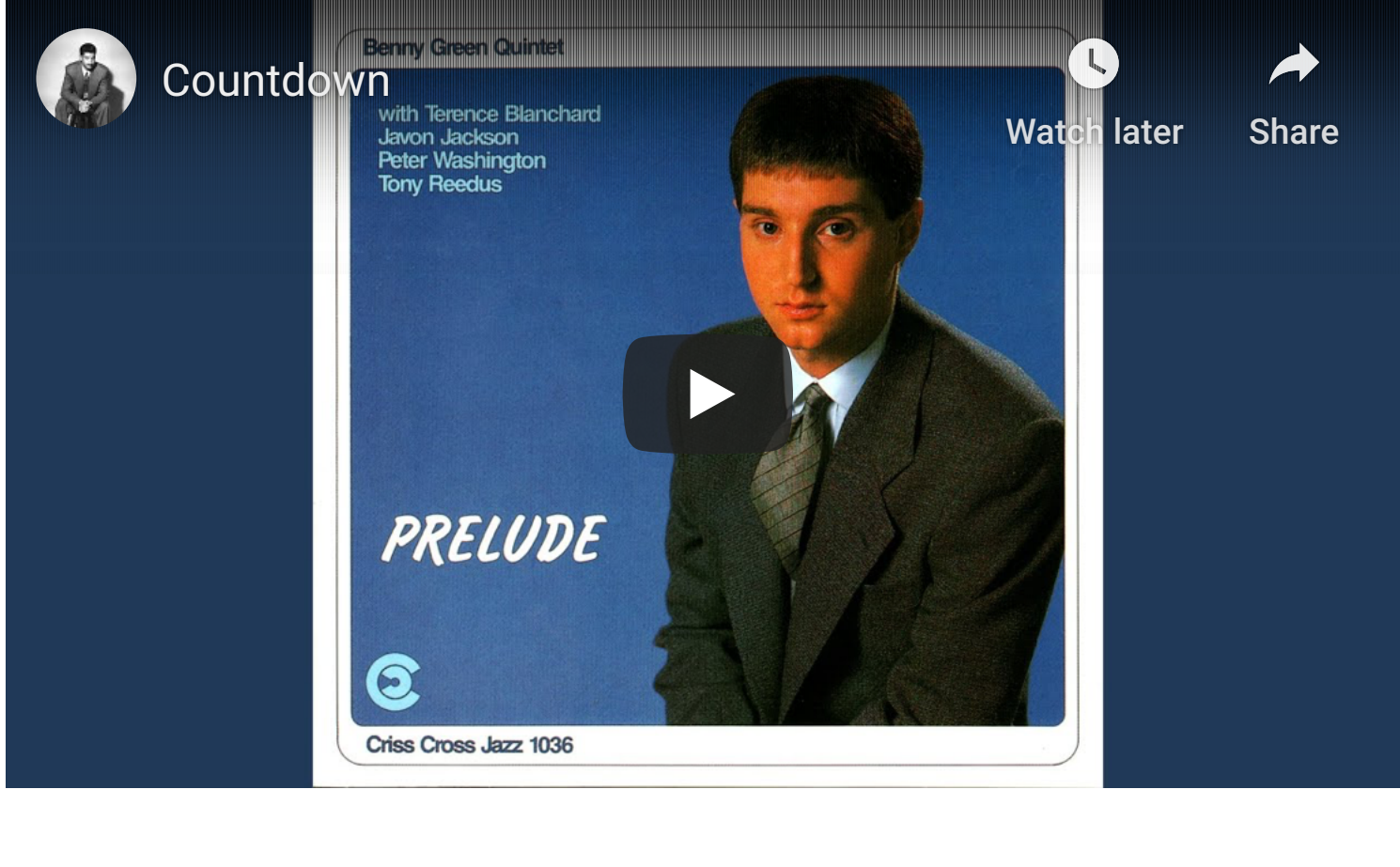
By DAVID R. ADLER • NOV 6, 2019

LEO VAN VELZEN / [LEOVANVELZEN.COM](https://leovanvelzen.com)

Gerry Teekens, founder and proprietor of Criss Cross Jazz, an unassuming Dutch indie label that became a vital repository of recorded jazz from the 1980s onward, died on Oct. 31. He was 83.

His death was confirmed by his son, Jerry Teekens, Jr. At the news, tributes poured in from Criss Cross artists old and new, including [soprano saxophonist Sam Newsome](#) and guitarist David Gilmore.

Formerly a professional drummer, Teekens founded Criss Cross in 1981 with a mission to document swinging, straight-ahead jazz of the highest caliber. At first the roster featured musicians as revered as guitarist Jimmy Raney and saxophonist Warne Marsh, but it grew to include the young and the promising: saxophonists Kenny Garrett, Chris Potter and Mark Turner, to name but a few, and pianists Orrin Evans, Bill Charlap and Benny Green.



Multiple times a year, Teekens would cross the ocean from Enschede, Netherlands (thus the Criss Cross name), taking up at Rudy Van Gelder's famed studio in New Jersey (and later at [Systems Two in Brooklyn](#)) for a full week of recording — knocking out an album a day, in the old-school way.

In recent years the Criss Cross aesthetic began to broaden, with artists like alto saxophonist David Binney and trumpeter Alex Sipiagin using electronics and synthesizers, moving beyond the strictures of one-take-and-done while still remaining on board with the label.

Teekens had his diehard personal tastes — his fondness for standards, bebop and blues — but he also trusted artists with whom he'd developed a track record and a rapport. So he oversaw a catalog that came to embody some of jazz's inner tensions, as a music of tradition and change all at once.

Criss Cross releases have a certain standardized and simple look, each one accompanied by lengthy liner notes reflecting a fastidious house style. I wrote more than 30 of these, starting in 2002. Teekens would sometimes invite me to Systems Two — where I witnessed recording sessions by pianist David Kikoski and guitarists Adam Rogers, Lage Lund and Mike Moreno, among others — before commissioning me to write.

He wasn't especially chatty between takes, and hard to read at times, but out of the blue he could start reminiscing about seeing Bud Powell live in Europe in the early '60s. Inscrutably, he might cease contact for years, only to end the silence with a sudden voicemail, in that unmistakably gravelly high-pitched voice: "This is Gerry Teekens. I need some liner notes. I'm in a terrible hurry."

In an email, Orrin Evans remembers Teekens as "an opinionated dude with strong views on what was 'swinging' or not." Evans adds: "Most times we fought about my sidemen and the material I chose for my record dates — but he helped me pay my rent with those dates at least once a year, and by watching him run a label I learned what to do and what *not* to do when I started my label."

Gerry Teekens was born on Dec. 5, 1935 in The Hague, Netherlands. After a stint as a working drummer, he became a professor of German studies and taught the subject for 25 years. In his free time, he organized tours and concerts for American jazz musicians including Marsh and Raney, two of Criss Cross' inaugural artists, along with trumpeters Johnny Coles and Chet Baker, pianists Kirk Lightsey and Kenny Barron, saxophonist Clifford Jordan and others.

In addition to his son, Teekens is survived by his wife and two grandchildren.

The best way to appreciate Teekens' significance is to catalog-dive the 400-plus recordings listed at the utilitarian yet efficient [Criss Cross website](#). What you'll find is a specific yet wideranging subset of modern jazz history, starting in the Young Lion years, with heady releases by the likes of trumpeter Tom Harrell (*Moon Alley*) and saxophonist Sam Newsome (*Sam I Am*, his debut and only recording on tenor).

A few years later comes Mark Turner's influential debut *Yam-Yam*, along with efforts by Tim Warfield, Ralph Bowen, Walt Weiskopf and Seamus Blake — a tenor sax lineage that carried forward on the label with Dayna Stephens and Noah Preminger.



Trombonists Wycliffe Gordon, Conrad Herwig and Steve Davis had a healthy presence as well, as did the late organist Melvin Rhyne. The label's output began to slow around 2017; its three releases in 2019 were Preminger's *After Life*, Lage Lund's *Terrible Animals* and bassist Matt Brewer's *Ganymede*.



In a [critical appreciation](#) of Teekens and Criss Cross for *The New York Times* in 1996, Peter Watrous compared the label's role to that of Blue Note or Prestige in the '50s.

"It is recording works that make up the backbone of jazz, played by musicians who might not be photogenic, charismatic or extroverted enough to be taken up by the pop star-making machinery of major labels," Watrous wrote. "Criss Cross' releases are a record of the daily activity of jazz practice without the intrusion of marketing or the weight of financial expectation."

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