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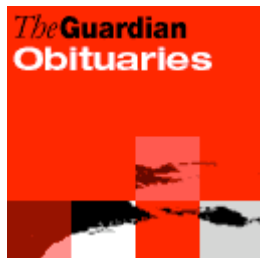
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Obituary

Steve Lacy

Versatile soprano saxophonist who inspired John Coltrane

John Fordham

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Steve Lacy, who has died of liver cancer aged 69, was one of the great practitioners of the soprano saxophone and, unlike most soprano saxophonists, he played that instrument exclusively. It was Lacy who inspired John Coltrane's adoption of that delicate, highly strung, distantly oboe-like instrument. Throughout a career of performance, teaching and recording, he paid heed to no fashions.

Lacy's music was personal, exploratory and driven by a quiet passion. While he was an undeviating experimenter, the quirky beauty of his music frequently had more in common with his original model, Sidney Bechet, than the stylistic distance between them would suggest.

Lacy enjoyed fruitful relationships with two formidable pianist-composers - Thelonious Monk and Cecil Taylor. He also worked with Gil Evans, Don Cherry and many European free-improvisers, crossed into contemporary classical music (sometimes with his cellist-singer wife Irene Aebi) and experimental electronics and mixed-media, and confronted himself with the daunting challenge of the unaccompanied saxophone recital. Yet for all his work's variety, Lacy always returned to celebrating Monk, his greatest inspiration.

Born in New York of Russian descent and raised on the Upper West Side, Lacy had childhood piano lessons, but it was the blazing tone, rhythmic audacity and inventiveness of Sidney Bechet's playing that led him to take up the clarinet and then the soprano saxophone.

In the late 1940s, Lacy encountered swing trumpeter Rex Stewart and began working in Dixieland bands with him.

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During 1953 and 1954, the saxophonist studied at Boston's Schillinger House of Music (later the Berklee School) and at the Manhattan School of Music, before meeting the revolutionary Monk-inspired free-jazz pianist Cecil Taylor. He was in Taylor's group from 1955 to 1957.

This stride across apparently unrelated styles led to the belief that Lacy became a contemporary improviser without bothering with bebop. But Lacy shared with Taylor a fascination with Monk's revealing dissonances and eccentrically measured melodies, and Monk was a musician who had been at the centre of the bebop revolution since 1940. Lacy knew everything he needed to about bebop, but adapted from the methods of its least formulaic interpreter. Lacy learned all Monk's compositions and, in 1958, recorded the first of many Monk-centred dedications, the album *Reflections*.

The saxophonist also began working with composer Gil Evans, his floating, enigmatic lines entirely appropriate to Evans' rolling-mist scores. He then worked in Monk's group in 1960, and then co-led (1961-64) a Monk-devoted quartet with the trombonist Roswell Rudd.

He briefly replaced Eric Dolphy in Ornette Coleman's double-quartet, and took to playing in Europe from the mid-1960s, exploring the burgeoning free-jazz scene. He played with trumpeter Don Cherry in Denmark, toured with the Jazz Realities quintet that included Carla Bley, and with a quartet featuring the Miles Davis-influenced Italian trumpeter Enrico Rava and two South Africans, bassist Johnny Dyani and drummer Louis Moholo - one of his favourite bands.

With Rava and others, Lacy formed a shortlived ensemble that performed in Germany with Swiss violinist and singer Irene Aebi - meeting Lacy led her to abandon classical music, learn the cello, and enter his musical world as an instrumentalist and singer, sometimes intoning literary texts by Apollinaire, Herman Melville or Bryon Gysin.

Lacy also worked regularly with Musica Elettronica Viva, and on the Italian avant-garde. Aebi and Lacy married in 1970, moved to Paris, and became the core of an ensemble with another soprano saxophonist, Steve Potts. This was the period in which Lacy's work appeared to travel to its furthest distance from the orthodox tradition - a two-soprano front line with Potts interacting with Aebi's inventive but unjazzy singing and injections of poetry and sometimes dance. Lacy also worked with the British guitarist Derek Bailey, an implacable opponent of traditional methods.

The saxophonist was emerging as a significant composer with audacious but shapely pieces like *The Wane* and *The Owl*, though he would remind listeners of his roots with

references to Bechet and New Orleans clarinetist Johnny Dodds, as on 1972's Lisbon recording *Cinco Minutos De Jazz*. Lacy's jazz links resurfaced most tellingly with an equally pungent player, the former Billie Holiday pianist Mal Waldron. The two sometimes led bands together, or worked as a drily conversational duo, demonstrating their intelligent, independent angles on Monk, their common muse.

Lacy took to solo recitals in 1972, his technique unfolding a hypnotic soundscape of birdlike or vocal sounds, urgent, sucking inhalations and languorous outbreaths, percussive noises, fragments of Monk themes, witticisms, and experiments with harmonics in abstract territory related to that of the American Anthony Braxton and the Briton Evan Parker.

Parker, Bailey and Lacy sometimes came together at Bailey's Anything-goes Company festivals, and on projects organised by London free-jazzers John Stevens and Trevor Watts. Lacy also performed in the 1980s with Indian musicians, with Japanese Kabuki dancers, and with the Monkish Dutch pianist Misha Mengelberg.

The past constantly revisited Lacy with fresh insights. In the 1980s, he recorded an album devoted to Monk and to the much-neglected pianist Herbie Nichols. He struck up another excellent performing relationship with a pianist (Bobby Few), made *Chirps*, a superb soprano-duo album with Evan Parker, and then explored larger-scale projects. Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn surfaced as inspirations alongside Monk on the 1980s albums *Sempre Amore* and *Let's Call This*. Saxophonist Ricky Ford joined Lacy and Aebi for a series of tributes to Miles Davis, Coltrane, Charles Mingus and abstract painters Arshile Gorky and Keith Haring (Lacy's spare, sometimes unresolved sax lines are often compared with the brushstrokes of abstract expressionists) on *Vespers* (1993). Winning the United States's MacArthur Foundation award (1992) funded the composing of an opera, *The Cry*, from Bangladeshi feminist Taslima Nasreen's poetry.

Lacy periodically returned to the US, leading bands, appearing with Aebi, on solo recitals and on Monk tributes. The saxophonist's virtuosity, and fascination with the world beyond jazz, is apparent on a 1995 solo recording, *Actuality*, in which his shrill and fragile sound is caught in the embrace of a church acoustic. Lacy's sound seemed to mellow and its sometimes frosty sheen to soften in his later years. He and Aebi pursued a unique path that promised much inimitably original music to come; she survives him.

• Steve Lacy (Steven Norman Lackritz), saxophonist, born July 23 1934; died June 4 2004

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