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# FLUGELHORN PLAYER

IN A MEDICAL COAT



## A CONTRADICTION

amongst trumpet players, **Lester Bowie** was the most successful trumpeter of the avant-garde and at the same time the contemporary player who was most happy when digging about in the roots of jazz from the earlier parts of the

By Steve Voce

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century.

Because he used mutes in the 'wah-wah' style that was a Duke Ellington speciality of the Twenties and Thirties, Bowie was sometimes known as 'the new Cootie Williams' after one of Ellington's more spectacular trumpeters. Bowie was happy to lift the growls and half-valved sounds of the earlier players and drag them into his experimental playing. Gospel music also figured in his plans and there was a vocal quality to his trumpet that was unfashionable but very effective. When he played, he swept from slashing, violent improvisations to themes of haunting beauty, often stepping off in between to incorporate banal quotes from pop songs.

**He** also delved sideways into contemporary black pop music, and one of his most famous recordings was a vivid 16-minute version of the Platters' hit 'The Great Pretender' recorded with his first wife, the singer Fontella Bass, in 1981. Was it sly humour or the wish to provide an easy access to his music that led him to follow up with long reworkings of 'I Only Have Eyes For You' (1985) and Louis Armstrong's 'Blueberry Hill' (1986) and 'Hello, Dolly' (1987)?

His music covered the widest and most unpredictable spectrum, so that one had to absorb, next to 'Blueberry Hill' on the ascetic and dignified ECM label, his composition 'No Shit' - words and arrangement by Lester Bowie. The lyrics consisted of two words repeated. Bowie's music was unfailingly exuberant and everybody went along with his wry humour and volcanic trumpet playing. Except that is, for some of the eminent younger musicians who followed and, as is the habit of the young, regarded him as either a traitor or a musical irrelevance.

Neither was the case, for Bowie was one of a group of intelligent and committed musicians who combined their music with their fight for racial freedom. Considering the emerging trumpet virtuoso Wynton Marsalis, Bowie said, 'With his chops and my brains I could have been one of the

greatest!' Bowie was by no means in the Marsak league as a technician. He and his fellows in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), and the subsequent Art Ensemble of Chicago (AEC), a band that they formed in 1968, brought pantomime to jazz, using face make-up and creating a travelling theatre from their bands. The only programme for their concerts was that there wasn't one and they happily mixed theatrical jokes with serious creative avant-garde music.

Born in Maryland in 1941, Bowie grew up in St Louis at a time when musicians were still coming up from New Orleans. He played first in local rhythm-and-blues bands led by Little Milton and Albert King, both soon to become famous. He also worked with some of the young musicians in the city who, like him, were destined for fame. They included the saxophonists Roscoe Mitchell and Joseph Jarman and the drummer Jack DeJohnette. Bowie moved to Chicago in 1965, where he met Fontella Bass and became her musical director.

The same year, the pianist Muhal Richard Abrams formed the AACM as a jazz workshop and Bowie joined him. Their first recordings in 1967 show a group of unknown but very advanced musicians in completely spontaneous but expert and intoxicating improvisations. From this point on Bowie and his friends were no strangers to odd instrumentation. He played trumpet and flugelhorn but also anything exotic that seized his fancy, like bass drum or the mysterious cowhorn. Logs, bells, sirens, gongs, whistles and a zither also found their way into the armoury.

**The** band, finding no outlet at home, moved to France in 1968 and the following year recorded the LP *A Jackson in Your House*. Typically, the piece begins with a dignified and pompous overture which is punctured by the laughter of the band before it rocks into Dixieland ensemble complete with clarinet and then into an approximation of the swing style. Although the music is unusually and intentionally funny, the direct social criticism of *A Message to Our Folks* done a couple of months later is much more serious. The two albums perhaps typified Bowie's

weakness for slapstick and the way it occasionally diluted his more serious messages.

In 1969 ACM was founded with a completely new vision of jazz. On stage, the band imitated the street bands of South America, recited poetry and used a variety of unlikely sound effects as they played both avant-garde and more conventional jazz.

Bowie moved all over Europe and recorded in 1969 as soloist and composer of the suite *Getting' to Know Y'All* with the Baden-Baden Free Jazz Orchestra, a 50-piece group that included some of the top stars of European jazz. More recently, in 1994, he recorded with the Polish avant-garde band Milosc, and had been in London this autumn with his group Brass Fantasy.

**He** didn't confine himself to Europe and performed with local drummers in Senegal during an African visit in 1974. In 1983 he was a member of the New York Hot Trumpet Repertory with Wynton Marsalis and played with the all-star avant-garde group the Leaders in the middle Eighties.

In 1990 he recorded the theme music for the television

series *The Bill Cosby Show* and worked on film soundtracks with the composer Philippe Sard in the early Nineties. He taught at many trumpet clinics and was at one time artist in residence in colleges at Yale, Dartmouth and Harvard.

He has left a multitude of recordings, one of the most fascinating a double LP from 1982 called *All the Magic*. It features on the first LP his group with Fontella Bass and David Peaston in gospel-inspired vocals and includes his suite *For Louie*. The second has Bowie in a series of often hilarious trumpet solos, including amongst them 'Miles Davis Meets Donald Duck'.

In 1985 he first formed Lester Bowie's Brass Fantasy, the group that he recently brought to Britain. It consisted of four trumpets, two trombones, French horn, tuba and drums. Later the line-up rose to 10 pieces. The band was quite dazzling, using imaginative tone colours and subtle scoring that was perhaps obscured by the reinterpretation of pop songs that his audiences had come to love and expect. His programmes for Brass Fantasy included Whitney Houston's 'Saving All My Love For You' and Patsy Cline's 'Crazy'. The 1990 album by the band, *My Way*, included the Sinatra hit along with 'Honky Tonk' and James Brown's 'I Got You'.

He remained a sight to make the eyes sore and in later years added sequins to his trademark white medical coat.

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