



Clarinet & Saxophone

Winter 2022 Volume 47, No 4

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BARBARA THOMPSON

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Barbara Thompson MBE

27 July 1944 – 9 July 2022

A trailblazing saxophonist in the days when there were few women on the scene, her haunting sax is known to TV viewers as the voice of A Touch of Frost. But to musicians her virtuosity, creative compositions and adventures with Paraphernalia are what they will remember. Barbara Thompson's collaborator and friend Andy Scott remembers the good times and speaks to those who knew her

On July 9th 2022 the world lost one of its most distinctive, imaginative and creative musicians, Barbara Thompson. The British multi-instrumentalist (primarily saxophone and flute) and composer was a force of nature in the world of music. As a person she was kind and generous, fiercely driven and inspiring. She and husband Jon Hiseman (who was taken from us in 2018) had an unbreakable bond, a sparkly-eyed sense of discovery and determination, a fine balance of music and business. They were a brilliant team, and as Jon would say whenever he was faced with a challenge: "It's a game!" The purpose of this tribute isn't simply to list Barbara's achievements, which are well documented, but rather to offer a more personal insight into her life, with anecdotes and recollections from those who knew her, including Jess Gillam, Nigel Tully and Tim Redpath. Barbara wrote a piece of music called *Celebration* and that is exactly how her life should be remembered.

In 1982 I was sitting outside in the sun pretending to revise for my O levels whilst listening to music. I had a Weather Report cassette, another by The Police and an album called 'Mother Earth' by Barbara Thompson's Paraphernalia. One track on this album, 'The Fear of Spiders', totally captured the imagination of this naive teenager. I was transfixed, my mind transported to another place entirely (which is probably why my grades were so bad!). This music was so distinctive; the saxophone sound, the composition, the band. Little did I know that I'd end up recording albums of Barbara's music, co-composing an album with her, and even have her guest on my album, at her home studio in leafy Sutton.

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In the 1990s I was touring festivals throughout Europe with London Saxophonic (led by Gareth Brady), and everywhere we went we would see posters for Barbara Thompson's Paraphernalia. I was to learn later that Barbara and Jon were hugely popular everywhere and especially in Germany. Later, Jon would explain to me that they would record an album every 18 months and then take it on the road. Album sales were an important part of the overall financial deal when touring, and he and Barbara had been doing this since the late 1960s.

score" was always the reply! What if there was ever a fire? I thought that something needed to be done to catalogue Barbara's compositions. My colleague Tim Redpath agreed with me, and he has taken on the task of collating, copying and cataloguing Barbara's music. It seems appropriate at this point to hand over to Tim.

Barbara pushed the boundaries on what each individual instrument was capable of

fast", delivered with a cheeky glint in her eye. Barbara never really praised because she worked on the premise you should just be able to play it – end of!

Later in her life Barbara revealed to me that she didn't like going to concerts "because I spend my whole time thinking that I can do it better, or if they can do

better than me then I don't like them!". Her life's achievements stand testament – she could indeed produce the goods to the highest standard. (Tim Redpath)

Barbara had announced that she was retiring from performing and was to concentrate on her writing, and played a farewell gig at Ronnie Scott's club (incidentally Ronnie was great friends with Barbara and Jon), but that was never going to be the last of her saxophone playing, fortunately for us all! After improvements with her medication, she was able to play with Jon's band Colosseum, as well as continuing with Paraphernalia. In 2015 Jon had invited me to his studio to record an album with my ensemble, Group S. I was busy writing charts in 2016 and ➡



Barbara Thompson with Paraphernalia

When Barbara was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease in 1997, she dedicated a lot of her time to composing, which included writing commissions for contemporary classical groups in addition to jazz, rock, pop and fusion. These pieces ranged from full orchestral works, to solos and duos and works for choirs. My group, the Apollo Saxophone Quartet (ASQ) was fortunate to be a beneficiary of this creative compositional output. After an initial encounter between Rob Buckland and Barbara the seeds were sown for many a collaboration between Barbara and the ASQ. We recorded the 'Three Quartets' album, with Jon producing. Good times, even when Jon sheepishly told us that he had accidentally wiped the whole album! It was ok with us, we re-recorded the entire album and had the opportunity to hang out with them for longer.

When working with Jon I would take breaks and head up to see Barbara in her music room. It was one of those rooms that looked utterly chaotic, in a good way – she was surrounded by the accumulated relics of the life of a touring musician. I started going through her hand-written scores. "That one was for a big band in 1970", or "There's a BBC recording, have a listen" Barbara would say. I'd invariably ask her if it was published. "No, that's the only

To say that Barbara's life was music is an understatement. She lived and breathed it. During the past decade I was lucky enough to spend many, many hours with her, in her home environment, and later in her residential care homes.

Her passion for her art never showed any sign of waning. Although Parkinson's made the simple daily tasks that we all take for granted a challenge, it never stopped her pursuing her overwhelming desire to create music. I spent so much time watching her negotiate the mouse and cursor on her computer. Opening a single file would often take a minute or two, but she never asked for help – it took as long as it took, she never showed a sign of impatience. Of course, within that file lay the latest composition which was ever-clear in her mind.

Barbara was a perfectionist. In the early days of my ensemble Trifarious, Barbara composed a masterpiece entitled Russian Roulette. She pushed the boundaries on what each individual instrument was capable of. One of the movements was entitled Spin. We very much had in mind the tempo for this exciting movement. On asking Barbara what she thought of our first performance (expecting some praise and adulation for a reasonably good first effort), her reply was simply "Spin was too



PHOTOGRAPHY: GUNTER LEITHE



Barbara's. We didn't leave until 3am; they weren't easy parts at the best of times, let alone at the end of a sociable evening!

At Barbara's funeral in July of this year, Jess Gillam spoke from the heart. Jess had become close to Barbara over the last decade. She wanted to say these words in tribute:

Barbara was one of the most inspirational people I've ever met. It's difficult to put into words how determined, passionate and gracious she was and her spirit and music will leave a beautiful legacy. I first met Barbara when I was around 15 - I remember going to visit her and her husband Jon at their house and being in total awe! They both lived and breathed music and were so ready to kindly share their passion and knowledge with others. I learned so much from them both - Barbara would help me find fingerings for difficult passages, tell me stories from her early days, show me people to listen to and whenever I had spent time with her, I would come away feeling deeply inspired and have a new zest for life. She was someone who genuinely made the world a greater place to be, both through her music and her personality. As a



As a young saxophone player, I didn't have many female role models to look up to but Barbara was the one icon who helped me to realise what was possible

the improvisatory magic to emerge from Barbara, John, Jon, Gwil, James and Laurie. I called the piece 'La Grande Image'. Jon said that he needed to record Barbara 'on a good day' and later told me that he had a semicircle of microphones around her when recording, which he mixed post recording, as her body involuntarily moved so much when playing. It's a quite remarkable achievement from Barbara, but a lifetime of musicianship meant that she could continue despite her health challenges.

In 2017 I had asked Rob if he would co-produce the Group S album with Jon and myself, which he did (as well as playing on the recording). We must have spent the equivalent of a fortnight with Jon and Barbara that year mixing, and it was always a riot, great fun! I recall one evening Rob Buckland and I dropped by to see Barbara and Jon for dinner. We had a meal, wine, and a good catch up and were just about to leave when Jon asked if we could record the sax section for a big band chart of

young saxophone player, I didn't have many female role models to look up to but Barbara was the one icon who helped me to realise what was possible. She was a force of nature and an extraordinary person. She had an unbelievable amount of positivity and optimism - it was impossible not to be inspired by her. Her unmistakably soulful sound with all of its inflections, ornaments and power will thankfully live on through the many recordings she made and through her compositions, but to know that as a saxophone community we have lost one of our great pioneers is devastating. Barbara and Jon had one of the most special relationships I've known and they set the example for the kind of person I wanted to grow to be. Thank you Barbara, for everything. (Jess Gillam)

Barbara was indeed a trailblazer, a woman who more than stood her ground in a male-dominated industry from the mid-1960s onwards. Jon and Barbara married in 1967 and somehow juggled raising their

two children, Ana and Marcus, with the life of touring musicians, as well as making time to contribute their expertise to help others. Their connection to the National Youth Jazz Orchestra of the UK (NYJO) is one such example, and the ensemble's chair, Nigel Tully MBE, has this to say:

One strange but true story: NYJO now has a Royal Patron, HRH Prince Edward, who is a genuine and informed jazz fan. For the four years prior to the pandemic he always came to our annual residency at Ronnie's, where the table configuration is such that my wife and I always need a fourth to make up the table with the prince. I asked Jon to be that person in January 2018; he and HRH Prince Edward got on like a house on fire, swapping stories about their sons learning to play drums on modern electronic kits. They had met before at a concert at Buckingham Palace where the prince saw Jon struggling to carry his kit in and promptly carried his cymbals for him; not many drummers get a real Prince as a roadie!

NYJO's collaboration with Barbara on Bulletproof [a big band/fusion album with Paraphernalia and the NYJO] stemmed from years in which she and her husband Jon Hiseman freely offered the band help and advice, for which I was especially grateful when I took over from Bill Ashton in 2009. For years she and Jon came to NYJO's annual residency at Ronnie Scott's Club, and Barbara's detailed feedback after the gigs was hugely valued by NYJO Artistic Director Mark Armstrong and NYJO's musicians. When Jon died, Barbara and her daughter Ana Gracey requested donations to NYJO instead of flowers. In August 2018, months after Jon's death, she insisted on walking independently to the NYJO Prom from a reception half a mile away, using her own walker and refusing all help despite her difficulties with Parkinson's; she was indomitable and fiercely determined to the end. Barbara and Ana also insisted

that proceeds from the celebration concert at the Shepherd's Bush Empire the following year went to NYJO, many of whose members had the time of their lives playing in the concert alongside the stars of Paraphernalia. Barbara introduced the concert and made it clear how important it was to her for NYJO's young musicians to work with and learn from her older colleagues; she then continued to help Mark re-arrange classics like 'Breathless' for the Bulletproof album while retaining their original feel. Her commitment to helping young aspiring jazz professionals should not be forgotten. (Nigel Tully)

Barbara's playing and composing was always authentically true to herself



Barbara had such a genuinely distinctive musical voice. She played different saxophones, from Conns to Selmer, to Yanagisawa, and favoured Lawton mouthpieces on her tenor saxophone, always looking for the set-ups that would allow her to express herself musically in the environment that she was in. Her playing and composing was always authentically true to herself. Many of our readers will be familiar with the huge musical personality that is Barbara Thompson. I am honoured to represent the many people who had the opportunity to work with Jon and Barbara, who loved them, and have become better people through knowing them. Rest in peace, together, Barbara and Jon. ■



asked him if he and Barbara would guest on the (to be written) final track of the album 'Ruby & All Things Purple'. Drummer Elliott Henshaw moved aside for Jon to play drums, with pianist Gwilym Simcock, guitarist James Pusey and bassist Laurence Cottle. I wanted to write a feature for two saxophones, Barbara and the legend that is John Helliwell (who has played in Group S, formerly called SaxAssault). By this point, Barbara hadn't played her saxophone for a while and due to PD her movement was jerky and very unstable. I knew what to write for Barbara, and Jon knew that I would write something that would be practical. The key was leaving space that would allow



Barbara's musical legacy

- For more on Barbara Thompson's life and music, see the website maintained by her family, where you can also download some of her compositions: www.barbara-thompson.co.uk
- Turn to page 25 for FREE sheet music: *Lili* for soprano saxophone and piano by Barbara Thompson.
- Learn more about Barbara's recordings at www.temple-music.com
- For more about the life and work of Barbara's husband, Jon Hiseman, see www.jonhiseman.com