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Orbert Davis takes the stage to lead his Chicago Jazz Philharmonic on Wednesday.

## IN PERFORMANCE

# Orbert Davis, CJP bring their best to 'Best Of'

Ensemble covers 13 years of work with passion, skill

BY HOWARD REICH  
Chicago Tribune

On an indelible night in 2004, trumpeter-composer Orbert Davis introduced to the world a majestic new ensemble: the Chicago Jazz Philharmonic.

"Give me about five seconds," he told the Chicago Jazz Festival crowd in Grant Park, as he surveyed his 55-piece band.

"You know what's the bad thing about dreams? You wake up. ... And I don't want to wake up."

Remarkably, the dream continues, as Davis and the CJP proved Wednesday night at the Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park. Launching a four-concert series that will continue in the summer of 2018, Davis and the CJP have become indispensable figures in musical Chicago.

For during the past 13 years, these musicians have premiered ambitious, evening-length works, most composed by Davis and each embracing both jazz and classical traditions, to varying degrees. There's no other ensemble quite like it in America, and bravo to the city's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, which has given the CJP a singular opportunity in Millennium Park.

For though Davis and the CJP already have played several of Chicago's most prestigious musical addresses, including Orchestra Hall and the Auditorium Theatre, the chance to perform multiple free concerts at the Pritzker Pavilion (for the first time since 2008) will enable it to reach a broader public than ever before.

As if to help listeners catch up on what they may have missed, Wednesday evening's "The Best Of" program featured highlights of past performances, encapsulating more than a decade's work in a little over two hours of music-making (plus a rousing, curtain-raising set by the Chicago Jazz Philharmonic Youth Ensemble, skillfully led by Roosevelt Griffin). The CJP's sheer range of expression — from mainstream swing to edgy avant-garde to straightforward Americana — illuminated the value of this organization.

Davis has created some of his most pictorial writing for the CJP in his suite "The Chicago River," which told the story of the reversal of the great waterway. When Davis and the CJP premiered the piece in Orchestra Hall in 2013, historic photos of the river from Michael Williams and Richard Cahan's book "The Lost Panoramas" were projected onto a screen, taking listeners back to the turn of the



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The Chicago Jazz Philharmonic Youth Ensemble offered the crowd a rousing, curtain-raising set Wednesday.

previous century via sound and image.

Davis and the CJP employed the same device at the Pritzker, a rare instance in which the oversize LED screen was put to effective use in a jazz context. As the audience witnessed idyllic scenes of the river's flow, listeners heard Davis' gorgeous, pastoral passages for woodwinds in the opening movement, "A Lost Panorama."

But before the Chicago River's course was reversed, parts of it were filthy and putrid, leading Davis to build sharp dissonance and thick textures into the "Brewing the Toxic Stew" movement. Even if you didn't know of the tanneries and factories that once dumped so much sludge into the river, you'd realize this vignette carried some of the most evocative orchestral writing of Davis' career.

Davis has been grappling with Miles Davis and Gil Evans' "Sketches of Spain" for decades, and Orbert Davis (no relation) dared to expand on the masterwork in 2011 with "Sketches of Spain (Revisited)." The "El Moreno" movement he built on themes of the original "Sketches" stood as a tour de force of subtle orchestral color and sounded still more alluring this time around. Duet passages between trumpeter Davis and John Moulder, playing flamenco guitar, were among the most tender of the evening.

Each work on the program, however, offered a distinct sonic vocabulary. The innovations of Igor Stravinsky and Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians echoed in the "1000 Questions, One Answer" movement of Davis' "Collective Creativity" suite (2005), enhanced here by guest flutist Anabel Gill (her presence a testament to the CJP's ongoing collaborations with musicians from Havana). And the joyously populist facets of the CJP were plain to hear and see in "Hoe Down," Davis' riff on that movement from Aaron Copland's "Rodeo" suite, with tap dancers Brill Barrett and Tre Dumas hoofing exuberantly in front of the band.

Singers Maggie Brown, Bobbi Wilsyn and Terisa Griffin sang standards with the philharmonic, underscoring Davis' efforts to prove that accessibility and sophistication need not be mutually exclusive propositions.

It has taken Davis and friends a long time to reach this level of artistic elan and to have built this large and varied a repertoire. That's quite an achievement, and it augurs well for the ensemble's return to Millennium Park next year.

Howard Reich is a Tribune critic.

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## JOHN ABERCROMBIE 1944-2017

# Influential jazz guitarist of the '70s fusion scene

By HARRISON SMITH  
The Washington Post

John Abercrombie, an influential jazz guitarist and composer who came to prominence in the 1970s with a lyrical, improvisatory style that applied the swagger of rock 'n' roll to the loose rhythms of jazz, died Tuesday at a hospital in Cortlandt, N.Y. He was 72.

Marc Copland, a friend and pianist who performed with Abercrombie at his final shows in late 2016, said Abercrombie had a stroke in May and had been ill for several months.

A leading guitarist of jazz fusion's heyday in the 1970s, Abercrombie sported a thick mustache and wavy hair, playing stringed instruments including the acoustic mandolin and the Roland guitar synthesizer, a device he once described as a "red electric safety pin."

While Abercrombie produced a sound that was sometimes wildly experimental, incorporating electric squawks and heavy reverb, his four-decade career was largely defined by gentle, impressionistic guitar melodies. His music helped his longtime home, ECM Records, acquire a reputation as a haven for jazz musicians with a reflective, refined sound.

Abercrombie played with greats including saxophonists Jan Garbarek and Charles Lloyd, trumpeters Enrico Rava and Kenny Wheeler, and fellow guitarist Ralph Towner, whose classical style he accompanied on a pair of soaring guitar records, "Sargasso Sea" (1976) and "Five Years Later" (1981).

His subtle fretwork and understated stage presence as a bandleader led some critics and musicians to compare him to jazz guitarist Jim Hall, who died in 2013 and whom Abercrombie cited as a key influence, along with Wes Montgomery and pianist Bill Evans.

"He was really concerned with contributing to the overall sound of the group rather than calling attention to himself," Copland said. "He used to like to say onstage, 'I like to pretend I'm a sideman in my own group.' It would always get a chuckle, but he was kind of being serious."

John Laird Abercrombie was born Dec. 16, 1944, in Rye, N.Y., according to Copland — some say the birthplace was nearby Port Chester — and grew up in Greenwich, Conn.

When he was 14, his parents bought him an acoustic guitar with steel strings "like telephone cables," Abercrombie once



CHRISTOPHER TRIBBLE/ECM RECORDS

In addition to performing, John Abercrombie lectured on jazz at Purchase College in New York.

told NPR, and he began imitating the rollicking style of Chuck Berry before turning to jazz.

He studied at Berklee College of Music in Boston — in part, he said, to avoid the Vietnam War draft — before moving to New York, where he gained notice playing with drummer Chico Hamilton and contributed metallic guitar riffs to one of the strangest children's albums ever made, "The Stark Reality Discovers Hoagy Carmichael's Music Shop" (1970).

The record was a piece of psychedelic jazz rock in the mold of Miles Davis' landmark album "Bitches Brew" — and aimed, ostensibly, at the "Sesame Street" crowd.

It flopped but was rediscovered decades later by hip-hop artists including Schoolboy Q and the Black Eyed Peas.

Abercrombie performed with Dreams, a short-lived but pioneering jazz-rock outfit, before leading a group of his own on "Timeless," his 1975 debut with ECM and one of his most acclaimed records. The album featured keyboardist Jan Hammer, who went on to score the theme to "Miami Vice," and drummer Jack DeJohnette, who had played on "Bitches Brew."

The title track, music critic Larry Rohter wrote in a review for The Washington Post, was "a 12-minute masterpiece that conveys the feeling of drifting and floating dreaminess better than any recorded piece since Miles Davis' 'In a Silent Way.'"

Abercrombie followed it with "Gateway" (1976), which featured DeJohnette and bassist Dave

Holland in a group that intermittently toured and recorded for the next 20 years.

The Gateway trio was one of Abercrombie's best-known projects, but he said his most enjoyable ensemble may have been a recently formed quartet with Copland on piano, bassist Drew Gress and drummer Joey Baron. The outfit assembled for the 2013 album "39 Steps" and for "Up and Coming," released in January.

"In a world of rampant populism, the description 'musicians' musician' might become even more of a backhand compliment, but if anyone can defend its virtues, it's American guitarist John Abercrombie," jazz critic John Fordham wrote in a review for Britain's Guardian. "The whole album is the quintessence of jazz power in reserve."

Abercrombie's survivors include his wife of 31 years, the former Lisa Abram.

Abercrombie was a lecturer in jazz at Purchase College, part of the State University of New York system, and said his musical style was in a constant state of development.

"I am playing the music I want to play for now. The only thing that's not right about it is it's not as good as I want it yet," he said in "What Is This Thing Called Jazz?" a 2001 collection of interviews by consultant Batt Johnson. "I want to become like Miles (Davis) was and Louis Armstrong. I want to be vocal on the instrument without necessarily being technical. ... The thing that gets you first is their music, just the sound of it. Then afterward you realize how difficult it was to play what they played."

## The New York Times Critics Pick

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