

Remembering Connie Crothers

August 31, 2016



Sometime in the late 1980s, as *Against the Current* was doing some cross-promotion with the European socialist magazine *International Viewpoint*, I was glancing through the list of U.S. subscribers to *IV* when a name jumped out at me: Connie Crothers.

This was interesting, because I had a wonderful duet recording "Swish" (1982) by jazz pianist Connie Crothers with the percussion giant Max Roach. (This was the inaugural recording of Connie's New Artists label - an impressive debut!) I immediately wrote to Connie - this was back in the Middle Bronze Age, before we did everything by email - and soon heard back. Indeed, she was the same Connie Crothers and delighted to hear from *ATC*.

As a student at Berkeley in the early 1960s, Connie was a supporter of the Young Socialist Alliance but moved to New York (before the Free Speech Movement upheaval) to pursue her musical passion. She maintained her leftwing and distinctly Trotskyist sympathies throughout her life. Sometimes her politics were openly on offer, as in her composition "Homage aux Communards" in her solo recording "Concert in Paris" (2011). She performed at the memorial meeting for Murry Weiss in 1981.

Connie became a student of Lennie Tristano, one of the most distinctive and original of modern jazz pianists and educators, best-known for intricate harmonic reworking of standard compositions. In addition to a longtime close friendship with Max Roach, she worked and recorded extensively with other members of the Lennie Tristano "school," including his daughter percussionist Carol Tristano. (I once remarked to Connie that by some accounts, Lennie Tristano was hard on drummers because he felt most of them couldn't keep proper time. Connie told me that wasn't true at all.)

After Lennie Tristano's death in 1978, Connie took on the task of preserving and extending his legacy through the Lennie Tristano Jazz Foundation.

Connie performed and recorded extensively in solo, duet and quartet settings. Her many musical partners included saxophonists Lennie Popkin, Richard Tabnik and Jemeel Moondoc, bassist Cameron Brown and drummer Roger Mancuso among others. A recent four-disc piano duet recording "Spontaneous Suites" with David Arner (on the RogieArt label) is widely acclaimed.

Connie's playing bridged "inside" (traditional) and "outside" (avant-garde) stylings. She firmly

rejected the received wisdom that popular audiences wouldn't accept the challenge of hearing the "outside" creative edge of the music. Connie's piano work was exceptionally fluid without theatrics. She let the music represent itself, and never spoke down to her audience.

I always hoped that Connie would write more. She contributed a fine review of Francis Paudras' *Dance of the Infidels, A Portrait of Bud Powell* (<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/1707>) and an interview on "Jazz in the New Depression" (<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/2369>).

Connie wrote to me after attending the Left Forum in 2015, where she particularly enjoyed the historical presentations of Paul Le Blanc and August Nimtz and the discussions of the Black Lives Matter movement. She took a keen interest in the post-Reconstruction origins of mass incarceration as a form of African American re-enslavement.

Connie had a tape of an old presentation she gave on "Jazz and Revolution." As a Marxist in her political thinking, she had no illusion that jazz could substitute for a revolutionary movement. But she felt that in the presence of a movement, jazz represented both the living heartbeat of the Black freedom struggle *and* the kind of collective democratic creativity that would animate a future socialist society.

At my urging, Connie agreed to work up a new version of "Jazz and Revolution," but the project was repeatedly deferred by the demands of touring and recording, and then by her cancer diagnosis and treatment. She continued to perform until shortly before her death, sadly, this past August 13 at age 75 with so much work still left to do.

Connie's extensive discography can be found at <http://www.conniecrothers.net/discography.html>. There are treasures to be mined there.

**David Finkel is an editor of Against the Current. He was honored to write liner notes for "Conversations," a duet recording by Connie Crothers and clarinetist Bill Payne (2008).*