



2008 Induction Class



Les McCann

Born in 1935 in Lexington, Kentucky, Les is a self-taught musician (other than the four piano lessons he took as a youth from a nice old lady who lived in the neighborhood). In the early fifties, he left the South and joined the Navy. While stationed in California, he took every opportunity to visit San Francisco's jazz clubs, where he first experienced Miles Davis and his music. His first major influence though, was pianist Erroll Garner, who shared the same exuberance and bursting vocalizations. After his discharge from the military,

McCann moved to Los Angeles and formed a trio, Les McCann Ltd., which became a favorite on the Sun Strip in the late fifties.

Always fueled by his renegade spirit, Les McCann was recommended by Miles Davis to play with Cannonball Adderly, but turned it down in order to form his own band. In 1960, McCann was signed to the L.A.-based Pacific Jazz label owned by producer Nick Venet, who recognized Les signature soul groove style that mothered an entire movement of back-to-the-roots jazz. McCann became the label's top-selling artist, debuting with **Plays the Truth** (1960). He also co-headed albums with legendary labelmates such as organist Richard "Groove" Holmes, saxman Ben Webster, The Jazz Crusaders and the Gerald Wilson Orchestra.

McCann's laid-back personality has always been an opening for musicians to perform together. 1960/2 Antibes Jazz Festival was a hit as he shared the stage with Ray Charles and Count Basie. The year after he toured Europe with Zoot Sims and Charlie Byrd. He would move constantly, playing in countless sessions with the greatest names in jazz. He co-produced and co-headlined the debut album from Lou Rawls, **Stormy Monday** (1960), and guested on each other's records with Stanley Turrentine, who played sax on McCann's **In New York** (1960) and McCann on Turrentine's **That's Where It's At** (1960). In the early seventies, McCann heard Roberta Flack for the first time at a nightclub in Washington D.C., and immediately became her champion, as he did similarly with Mahalia Jackson and Nancy Wilson. After a brief stint on the Limelight label (subsidiary of Mercury Records), which boasted Dizzy Gillespie, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, and Art Blakey, McCann signed to Atlantic Records in 1967, his first major label deal. Said producer Joel Dorn of those years, "His perfect marriage of church and swing captured the spirit of the times in the same way that Ray Charles' mixture of gospel and blues heralded the arrival of soul."

Les is best known for his work in the late 60s and early 70s with partner/saxman Eddie Harris, whom he first encountered at the Montreux Jazz Festival. The resulting album, **Swiss Movement** (1960), was a top selling jazz record, and the single "Compared to What" sold platinum. The same year, **Much Les**, without Harris, hit hard with the ballad "With These Hands." **Second Movement** (1971), reunited McCann and Harris, and acclaimed recordings such as **Invitation to Openness** (1972), the double-record **Live at Montreux** (1973), and **Layers** (1973) followed. The latter was a revolutionary, improvisational experiment that included 15 musicians and one 27-minute song. Les McCann helped pioneer the use of electric piano, clavinet, and synthesizer, starting with this work which was one of the earliest electronic jazz albums.

The early eighties saw the creation of **McCann's Magic Band**, which has recorded a number of independently-released albums and featured Jeff Elliott, Keith Anderson, Tony St. James, and Abraham Laboriel. His last release, **On the Soul Side** (MusicMasters 1994), featured his Magic Band and once again reunited him with Eddie Harris and Lou Rawls.

On the Soul Side was produced by Alan Abrahams who has also navigated the recording of **Listen Up!** with McCann and Nic. tenBrook. Abrahams maintains an impressive list of production credits in addition to McCann's last two albums, including Tavares, Stanley Turrentine, The Memphis Horns, Freddie Jackson, black gospel choirs such as the L.A. Mass Choir, Joan Baez's last four albums, and most currently, Ladysmith Black Mambazo's new album. His relationship with deep-rooted respect for Les is revealed in his words, "Les is only about love."

Rhino/Atlantic has recently re-released **Swiss Movement**, featuring a new track and some new arrangements. Les is perpetually known as a grooveman, and as a result, over the last few years, his music has been sampled by the hottest hip hop and jazz artists out there. For example, the latest smash hit **"Right Back At You"** (BMG/Loud Records) by hip hop artists Mobb Deep, samples Les' legendary tune *"Benjamin."* Other popular artists, such as De La Soul, Lords of the Underground, and Pete Rock and C.L. Smooth, have also had hits with Les McCann samples. His music will undoubtedly stand the test of time, as his ingenuity and artistry can be appreciated by anyone.

As if a lifetime of musical success is not enough, Les' creations go beyond the keys. His personal relationships with jazz legends such as Miles Davis, Art Blakey, and Duke Ellington as well as many other great historical characters, have been documented in a collection of more than 8000 photographs that Les has taken over the years. As a serious photographer, Les has built a darkroom in his home, and has sold a significant number of pieces. A large exhibition of his work will be exhibited at this year's Montreux Jazz Festival, reproduced by Graham Nash (Nash Editions). In addition, Les is an exhibited painter, primarily a watercolorist with a particular interest in flowers. His work is hanging in two galleries, in Scottsdale, AZ, and Santa Barbara, CA, as well as in his home, where he entertains private showings. After the stroke, Les has become remarkably prolific, discovering that painting and maneuvering the camera are both therapeutic and strengthening. Les' expression as a visual artist communicates similar vibes of freshness, experimentation, and peace as does his music.

Les McCann is an inspiration, not only as an artist but because he is not afraid of anything. He comments, "I never plan the future," which leaves him with nothing to fear, and more space in which to create. His teaming with Alan Abrahams and the musicians on **Listen Up!** is brilliant and healing as well ... he remembers favorably the spontaneous energy created in the September 1995 recording session and notes that "it was evidently meant to be. Thanks to the people who have helped me, including the musicians, the hospitals -- the incredible amount of angels in my life."

In 1997 Les teamed up with Joja Wendt, Europe's hottest pianist, resulting in the outstanding recording **Pacifique**. In 1998, 32 jazz released "**How's your Mother?**" a classic live performance recorded at the Village Vanguard in 1967.