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'Old Main Chapel' by Ron Miles and 'Big Large: In Memory of Curtis Fowlkes' by the Jazz Passengers Reviews: Musical Legacies

Albums from a trumpeter and a trombonist, both of whom died in the past few years, serve as graceful, moving reminders of their artistic personalities.

By Larry Blumenfeld

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Ron Miles PHOTO: ELLIOT ROSS

Musicians are best memorialized through their music, of course. In jazz, their legacies are most clearly expressed through individualized sounds on chosen instruments, approaches to both repertoire and improvisation, and, perhaps most of all, influence on the players with whom they worked most closely.

Two new releases available May 10—“Old Main Chapel” (Blue Note), from trumpeter and cornetist Ron Miles, and “Big Large: In Memory of Curtis Fowlkes” (Food Records), from the Jazz Passengers and dedicated to the trombonist and singer—add depth and detail to the profiles of two musicians who were soft-spoken off the bandstand and worked largely out of the mainstream spotlight, but were nonetheless bold and beloved presences on jazz’s landscape.

Miles died in 2022, at 58 years old, from complications of a rare blood disorder. “Old Main Chapel” is a previously unreleased recording of a 2011 concert at one of his favorite venues in Boulder, Colo., not far from Denver, where he grew up. It documents a pivotal period in a career that ended abruptly while on an upward arc. Miles’s trio here, with guitarist Bill Frisell and drummer Brian Blade, would go on to release two fine studio albums before growing, through the addition of pianist Jason Moran and bassist Thomas Morgan, into the quintet on Miles’s most acclaimed recordings, 2017’s stirring “I Am a Man” and 2020’s irresistibly lovely “Rainbow Sign.” Listeners will never know where Miles’s talent and ambition might have led, but “Old Main Chapel” reveals some formative moments for his music.

The album begins with Miles’s buoyant yet restrained trumpet tone, first declarative and then broken, playing his theme to “Mr. Kevin,” which sounds folk-like even as its asymmetrical phrases suggest more adventurous ideas. The easy grace of these tracks—six of the seven are original compositions—belies the completeness and complexity of Miles’s writing. In a liner note, Mr. Moran describes the 11-by-17-inch handwritten scores Miles would give fellow musicians as “pencil portraits of his community.”

By community, Mr. Moran means the players who were attracted by Miles, including Mr. Frisell—who first played with the trumpeter 30 years ago, and who recruited him for his 1996 album, “Quartet.” Mr. Moran’s note also alludes to Miles’s community in Denver, where Mr. Frisell also grew up, and whose Five Points neighborhood was once known as the “Harlem of the West.” That opening track is named for bassist Kent McLagan and the playfully dancing “Rudy-Go-Round” refers to drummer Rudy Royston, both Denver musicians. The trio spends more than 12 minutes working through “There Ain’t No Sweet Man That’s Worth the Salt of My Tears,” which was notably recorded in 1928 by the

orchestra led by Paul Whiteman, another Denver native. Miles waits until halfway in to play the melody, which arrives cloaked in new harmonies and with an original section added. He had a sly way of investing fresh energy into tried-and-true musical styles. Formally speaking, “Guest of Honor” is ragtime, yet its gait feels contemporary, with Mr. Blade’s rhythms arriving in painterly washes and tiny bursts. “I Will Be Free,” on which Miles and Mr. Frisell play gorgeously braided phrases, sounds like a hymn that would befit any moment.



Curtis Fowlkes PHOTO: R.I. SUTHERLAND-COHEN

The recording sessions for “Big Large: In Memory of Curtis Fowlkes” gathered current and former members of the Jazz Passengers—the singularly irreverent and consistently excellent group co-founded nearly 40 years ago by saxophonist Roy Nathanson and Fowlkes—in a Manhattan recording studio in January 2023. Seven months later, Fowlkes, known as “Big Large” for both his physical stature and his mastery of a broad range of music, was gone at age 73 from congestive heart failure. During the album’s first 30 seconds, on “You’re the Fool,” atop glowing tones from Bill Ware’s vibraphone, Fowlkes’s trombone sound moves from precise and round to smeamy, exuding the congeniality and authority that attracted so many musicians to him.

Through the years, the band’s ranks have included established stars such as guitarist Marc Ribot, who plays with both poise and abandon on four tracks, and Mr. Nathanson, who is among jazz’s most distinctive and expressive saxophonists. During his long career, Fowlkes was integral to acclaimed ensembles including Henry Threadgill’s Very Very Circus, Charlie Haden’s

Liberation Music Orchestra and Steven Bernstein's Millennial Territory Orchestra. Yet his clearest home was the Passengers, for which his soulful playing provided an emotional core. These songs here have previously been sung by the likes of Mavis Staples, Elvis Costello and Debbie Harry. Yet Fowlkes's soft, often grainy vocals—he sings the lead on five tracks—is an important signature of this band.

In several spots—especially during an improvised interlude in the fast-paced “Kidnapped,” and when the rest of the band briefly drops out on “Salty Tears”—he and Mr. Nathanson complete each other's phrases (“Just like we did in real life,” Mr. Nathanson told me). The Jazz Passengers are a wily and brilliant crew who here play mostly Mr. Nathanson's oddly charming compositions; they move gracefully from the hard-driving funkiness of his “Carol Ann” to his gently swaying “Fire at Keaton's Bar & Grille.” On “Jolly Street,” the smartly swinging blues that ends the album, Fowlkes, its composer—during one of his final recorded takes—sings “it's time to come home.” Forty-five seconds later, he plays a slowly unfurling solo. It swaggers, sways, jumps forward, lays back and then lands right on the beat.

—Mr. Blumenfeld writes about jazz and Afro-Latin music for the Journal and is editorial director for Chamber Music America.

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