

★ BETTY CARTER

Born May 16, 1930, in Flint, MI | Died September 26, 1998, in New York City

“It was very important in those days for a musician or a singer to become an individual,” Betty Carter once said. Born Lillie Mae Jones, the vocalist was an iconoclast from the start, earning the nickname Betty Bebop for her insistence on scatting modern bop lines in Lionel Hampton’s traditional swing band. The name Betty stuck, but the free-spirited vocalist would always refuse to be pigeonholed as anything but a musician. She came to national attention for her recordings with Ray Charles in 1961. But it was her effort “to always reach for something new” in a melody that made her a favorite among musicians. In the 1970s, when her peers struggled to make a living playing jazz, she founded her own label, Bet-Car, and, as one of jazz’s leading talent scouts, eventually taught a new generation how to find their individual voices.

👑 NEA Jazz Master

★ ORNETTE COLEMAN

Born March 9, 1930, in Fort Worth, TX

“The theme you play at the start of the number is the territory,” Ornette Coleman said, “and what comes after, which may have very little to do with it, is the adventure.” Coleman relished the adventure as few had before him. He sought “to reach into the human voice” through his horn, liberating the improvising musician from the rhythmic and harmonic structures of jazz. His music was called free jazz. Coleman’s adventure began in Fort Worth, Texas, where the young alto saxophonist absorbed the sounds of gutbucket blues and the robust “Texas tenors” who held forth at local nightclubs. The blues, along with the language of Charlie Parker, would become inscribed in his music, even when a fixed pitch seemed lost, a steady pulse distant. His recordings of the late 1950s placed him at the forefront of the avant-garde, but Coleman always saw himself within the jazz tradition. “Bird,” he said. “would have approved of our aspiring to something beyond what we inherited.”

👑 NEA Jazz Master

★ JOHN COLTRANE

Born September 23, 1926, in Hamlet, NC | Died July 17, 1967, in New York City

“My music,” John Coltrane said, “is the spiritual expression of what I am.” The grandson of ministers, he began his career in the blues clubs of Philadelphia, and throughout his career he combined the sacred and the secular in the intense, earnest sound of his saxophone. Coltrane fell under the spell of Charlie Parker at age 18 and dedicated himself to a practice regime that

sometimes found him asleep, fingers still ghosting the keys. He first gained fame as a member of Miles Davis’s classic quintet in 1955, worked with Thelonious Monk, and then became a leader in his own right—and the most admired, most influential, and most adventurous saxophonist of the 1960s. “There are always new sounds to imagine,” Coltrane said. “And always, there is the need to keep purifying these feelings and sounds so that ... we can give ... the best of what we are.”

★ WYNTON MARSALIS

Born October 18, 1961, in New Orleans, LA

“Jazz is an art form,” trumpeter Wynton Marsalis has said, “that gives us a painless way of understanding ourselves.” Few contemporary jazz musicians have stated the case for jazz more articulately than Marsalis, and few have made their art more welcoming. The son of a jazz pianist and a brother to five siblings, three of whom are also musicians, the New Orleans native had earned a reputation among both jazz and classical musicians by his late teens when he left New York’s Juilliard School to join drummer Art Blakey. Two years later he became the first musician to win Grammy awards in both the classical and jazz categories. In 1987 he co-founded Jazz at Lincoln Center, and, as its artistic director, he has led its resident big band, the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, in concerts, clinics, and parades in every part of the world. The first jazz musician to win the Pulitzer Prize, Marsalis makes the case that jazz “provides a way to look in wonderment at the world around us,” helping us to “see and hear the many forms and concepts that unite us all.”

★ WAYNE SHORTER

Born August 25, 1933, in Newark, NJ

Wayne Shorter, Miles Davis remembered, was “the idea person. The conceptualizer of a whole lot of musical ideas we did.” One of the most influential composers in jazz, Shorter gave birth to musical ideas that helped change the landscape of jazz in the 1960s. Shorter was by all accounts a quirky kid, but his originality on the tenor and soprano saxophones and as a composer served him well on the bandstand, where he came to prominence as musical director of Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers and, from 1964 to 1970, as a sideman in the Miles Davis Quintet. The compositions he wrote during that time—including “E.S.P.,” “Nefertiti,” and “Pinocchio”—offered a compelling alternative to the Tin Pan Alley standard. Like Davis, Shorter also experimented with fusion, forming Weather Report in 1970 with keyboardist Joe Zawinul. Today Shorter continues to write music that requires “courageous soul.”

👑 NEA Jazz Master