

HERBIE MANN - BIOGRAPHY

Herbie Mann, credited as being one of the seminal jazz flutists, is probably best known for the musical odyssey that has taken him around the world. Long before the concept "world music" was coined, he was exploring the rhythms and harmonies of Africa, India, Cuba, Jamaica, the Middle East and Japan. But the country whose music has most influenced his playing and most touched his heart is Brazil - more about this later.

Herbie was born in Brooklyn, New York, on April 16, 1930, as Herbert Jay Solomon. He expressed his love of music by using the only resources available -- pots and pans. In an attempt to pacify disgruntled neighbors, his mother tried to re-channel his musical interests by taking him to a Benny Goodman concert at the Paramount when he was nine years old. It worked and two weeks later he had a clarinet. Though the academics of music were never appealing to Herbie, his love of playing and music were what turned his focus eventually to the tenor saxophone and later to the that instrument with which he's been so identified, the flute. By fourteen he was playing tenor at gigs in the Catskills and in 1948 he entered the US Army where he spent nearly four years in Trieste, Italy, playing with the 98th Army Band.

Once he was out of the Army and back on the New York music scene, he worked hard at carving out a place for himself. However, like so many other tenor saxophone players of that time, Herbie's style was derivative of Lester Young's so it was difficult to stand out from the rest. When the Dutch accordionist, Mat Matthews, told him he was looking for a jazz flute player for the first album by the then unknown Carmen McRae, Herbie immediately jumped at the opportunity and spent days "woodshedding" before going into the studio. With this opportunity he was able to distinguish himself from other players as a jazz flutist, of which there were only a handful.

Herbie's reputation as a flutist took a distinctive turn in 1958, when he followed legendary jazz DJ Symphony Sid Torin's suggestion that he add a conga player to his group. This added rhythmic element boosted Herbie's popularity and the list of Latin percussionists who played with him in the late 50's and 60's reads like a Who's Who of the genre: Candido, Ray Barretto, Olatunji, Potato Valdes, Willie Bobo and others. Audiences around the world loved this sound. It was during this period that he recorded the legendary HERBIE MANN AT THE VILLAGE GATE album and did a month long tour of Africa for the State Department.

Despite his increased popularity, Herbie felt frustrated by the simplicity of the Latin and African melodies and the monotony of their rhythms. So, in 1961 when he heard about a tour of American players going to Brazil, he convinced his manager, Monty Kay, that he had to go, too. This experience changed his musical life more than any other experience before or since. At last here were complex, beautiful melodies supported by compelling rhythms!

One trip wasn't enough so soon after his return he convinced his record company, Atlantic, to sponsor an extended visit to Brazil to record his next album. On this trip he met many of Brazil's then emerging musical talents including Sergio Mendes, Antonio Carlos Jobim, and Baden Powell.

His ensuing releases, DO THE BOSSA NOVA WITH HERBIE MANN and HERBIE MANN/JOAO GILBERTO/ANTONIO CARLOS JOBIM helped usher in the Bossa Nova craze. These were the first recordings made that combined Brazilian musicians and their music with an American jazz player.

Soon thereafter, Brazilian music was ubiquitous and Herbie found himself in search of new inspiration. Atlantic albums like NIRVANA with Bill Evans, IMPRESSIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST, THE WAILING DERSHES, REGGAE, MEMPHIS UNDERGROUND, and PUSH PUSH document his search for new sounds.

When the disco craze hit, Herbie figured, "Why not?" He made three "disco" albums on Atlantic and one of the songs, "High Jack" went Top Ten. This "pop" -ularity was scorned by many of the purists and Herbie found himself out of favor with most of the Jazz community.

When Herbie's attention reverted back again to the more satisfying Brazilian music, he was no longer able to sustain the kind of sales he had established with his "pop" albums. His refusal to stay in that genre and Atlantic's unhappiness with the new sales resulted in the termination of their 20 year relationship in 1980.

He was on his own and the absence of corporate support proved difficult for his career. He signed with two record companies that went Chapter 11 and went through several musical constellations that were ultimately unsatisfying and unsuccessful.

However, towards the end of this ten-year period, he formed a group, Jasil Brazz, and once again reestablished his musical footing in the fertile sounds of his beloved Brazil. He produced two records, JASIL BRAZZ and OPALESCENCE featuring Brazilian guitarists Romero Lubambo and Ricardo Silveira. Throughout the label "shifts", he retained his rights to these recordings and in 1992 formed his own label, Kokopelli Music. He launched the label with the release of DEEP POCKET - an all star, soul/jazz recording featuring Les McCann, Cornell Dupree, David Newman and Chuck Rainey.

Two years later, Herbie went into a partnership and Kokopelli Music was expanded to Kokopelli Records. This year and a half venture produced nearly a dozen recordings including Herbie's PEACE PIECES, a tribute to the music of Bill Evans, featuring guitarist Bruce Dunlap, Eddie Gomez and Randy Brecker. Herbie is no longer in partnership with Kokopelli.

Herbie's career is enjoying a renewed level of appreciation. In the late 50's, Herbie began a thirteen-year run as DOWNBEAT'S Number One Flutist. Though years since passed with little "formal" acknowledgement, his name is once again being highlighted. In 1996 and CE97, he was voted Number One Jazz Flutist in JAZZIZ and Number Two in JAZZ TIMES magazines.

After nearly 60 years of living in New York City, Herbie moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, the "Land of Enchantment", in 1989. He shares a wonderful life there with his wife, Susan Janeal Arison, an actress and writer.

Herbie released two albums on the Lightyear label from his 1995 weeklong celebration of his 65th birthday. The recordings, "Celebration" and "America Brasil" feature many of his longtime friends and musical partners from his past, including David "Fathead" Newman, Dave Valentin, Ron Carter, Billy Taylor, Tito Puente, Randy Brecker, Claudio Roditi and others.

Since 1998, Herbie's been writing music for his new group, Sona Terra. The music reflects the rhythms and feelings of Eastern Europe, his roots. The new group includes: Gil Goldstein on accordion and keyboards; Paul Socolow on bass; Bruce Dunlap on guitar; Geoff Mann (Herbie's younger son) on drums, mandolin and percussion; and Alexander Federiuk, cymbilum.

In 1997, Herbie was diagnosed with inoperable prostate cancer. He has received radiation and chemotherapy treatments and at this writing is doing well. Out of his experience has come the desire to help spread awareness about the deadly disease and its very easy detection and prevention. He has formed a nonprofit foundation called Herbie Mann's Prostate Cancer Awareness Music Foundation that will use performances and recordings to help spread the word. (See HerbieMannPCAMF.com)