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A Concert by the Man Who Knows Everything About Jazz

By Marc Myers

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Dressed conservatively in a black suit, a pale-pink shirt with French cuffs, and a burgundy tie, Dick Hyman looked relaxed, almost bankerly. But once seated at the piano here on Friday night at Princeton University's Taplin Auditorium as part of the Golandsky Institute's annual concert series, Mr. Hyman launched into ferocious solo improvisations that made eclectic use of Scott Joplin, Jelly Roll Morton, Fats Waller, Duke Ellington and other jazz piano greats.

At 88, Mr. Hyman is widely regarded as one of jazz's most spellbinding virtuosos, a master of piano approaches, some dating back to jazz's start in the early 20th century. For the past 65 years, Mr. Hyman has been recording and performing ragtime, stride, boogie-woogie, swing, bebop and all other jazz styles in between and beyond, becoming an encyclopedic link to the music's past.



PHOTO: Getty Images

He has recorded upward of 1,000 albums, including more than 100 under his own name. He is one of the last surviving jazz pianists to have played with Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie together (their 1952 TV clip of "Hot House" appears on YouTube). He studied with pianist Teddy Wilson and recorded behind many jazz greats of his time, including Lester Young. Three of his jazz singles were Billboard pop hits.

In 1968, Mr. Hyman was one of the first jazz musicians to record on a Moog synthesizer, and pianist Marian McPartland, before she died in 2013, told me that Mr. Hyman knows more songs than any other jazz musician. Starting in 1980, Mr. Hyman composed the music for 12 of Woody Allen's films, including "Zelig" and "Radio Days," and in 1987 he wrote the score for the film "Moonstruck." He is also probably the only jazz musician who routinely practices piano while reading the daily newspapers.

Today, Mr. Hyman continues to tour and is appearing at five more venues nationwide this summer (see dickhyman.com for tour dates). In concert last Friday, he performed 12 songs plus an encore—each an improvised masterpiece that featured multiple jazz styles and classical motifs. His technique is so polished and fluid that his hands at times seem to belong to two different pianists.

Mr. Hyman opened with "Children's Prayer" from the opera "Hansel and Gretel," at one point playing in waltz time with his left hand and 4/4 with his right. On "Sweet Georgia Brown," this left-brain, right-brain dichotomy expanded as his right hand unleashed cascades of runs down the keyboard while his left maintained a firm walking bass line.

Mr. Hyman turned next to "Lullaby," which George Gershwin wrote in 1919 for a string quartet. Here, Mr. Hyman included a passage with block chords in the style of George Shearing. On Thelonious Monk's "Misterioso," first recorded in 1948, Mr. Hyman turned the song inside out to expose its blues base.

About halfway through the concert, Mr. Hyman asked the capacity audience of 200 for suggestions. On W.C. Handy's "Yellow Dog Rag" (1914), he demonstrated his masterly command of ragtime; on the ballad "A Child Is Born" (1969), by Thad Jones and Alec Wilder, he created a happy marriage of stride and Chopin.

The last two songs were the concert's high points. On Duke Ellington's "Dancers in Love," which Ellington first recorded in 1944 at Carnegie Hall as a live tribute to Fats Waller, Mr. Hyman reprised Waller's keyboard mischief and Ellington's romanticism. Then he took on "Carolina Shout" (1921), a rambunctious midtempo boogie-woogie by pianist James P. Johnson. As Mr. Hyman's right hand splashed away high up on the keyboard, his left wove in complex boogie-woogie figures.

Mr. Hyman's passion for the physically challenging piano styles of jazz greats began early. Born in 1927, he was exposed to jazz by his brother, Arthur, who brought Bix Beiderbecke records home from college. To unravel the intricate mysteries of syncopation and improvisation, Mr. Hyman slowed down the rolls on his family's player piano and listened to records backward and forward. He also took up the clarinet and jammed along to records, which helped give him the jazz feel.

Throughout the 1950s, the pianist recorded jazz and pop frequently as a sideman, leader and arranger. When he began doubling on organ, his workload expanded in the 1950s and '60s to include playing on soap operas and TV game shows. In the 1970s, when the organ's popularity waned, Mr. Hyman focused again on the piano, becoming a one-man Smithsonian of jazz styles.

But Mr. Hyman's hands weren't the only appendages active during his recent performance. Under the piano, his right heel kept time during tricky passages, occasionally letting out an emphatic bang or two on the polished wood floor. When his right hand shifted into double- or triple-time, the same foot moved from back to front, as if pumping a gas pedal or sewing machine to gain momentum. As for his left foot, it kept time only intermittently with his left hand. Further proof that when Mr. Hyman performs solo piano, it's really a duet.

Mr. Myers, a frequent contributor to the Journal, writes daily about music at JazzWax.com, winner of the 2015 Jazz Journalists Association's "blog of the year" award.