

In Memoriam: Hamiet Bluiett

BARITONE SAXOPHONIST HAMIET Bluiett, a founding member of the World Saxophone Quartet, as well as the Black Artists Group, died Oct. 4 in St. Louis. He was 78.

During a career of more than five decades, Bluiett created an innovative approach to the baritone saxophone. With his extended range, circular-breathing technique and uncanny combination of power and precision, Bluiett reinvented the role of the baritone saxophone in small group, large ensemble and solo settings.

In a 1997 interview with *DownBeat* at the Montreal Jazz Festival, he explained his unique approach to the instrument. "This is my concept, and it's all about the baritone, really," Bluiett said. "The music has to change for us to really fit. ... We've got to play what this horn will sound like. ... So, what I'm doing is redesigning the music to fit the horn."

His discography includes more than 90 albums as a member of WSQ, as leader of his own sessions and as a contributor to recordings by Charles Mingus, Randy Weston, Gil Evans, Lester Bowie, Don Cherry, Anthony Braxton,

Larry Willis, Eddie Jefferson, Arthur Blythe, James Carter, Bobby Watson and Andrew Cyrille.

Bluiett topped the Baritone Saxophone category in the *DownBeat* Critics Poll eight times: first from 1990-'93, then from 1996-'99.

He was born Sept. 16, 1940, in Brooklyn, Illinois, a town also known as Lovejoy and located north of East St. Louis. While still in elementary school, he played clarinet with a local high school band under the tutelage of noted bandleader George Hudson. He began playing baritone sax at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, and joined the U.S. Navy in 1961, continuing to play in bands after enlisting.

After his discharge, Bluiett returned home and became a founding member of the BAG in 1967. He began playing with saxophonists Oliver Lake, Julius Hemphill and other BAG musicians, and led the group's big band before moving to New York in 1969.

With his innovative approach to the baritone, Bluiett soon found work with Sam Rivers, Tito Puente and Babatunde Olatunji, and became a key player on New York's growing loft scene. In



Hamiet Bluiett (1940–2018)

1974, Bluiett got the call to join Mingus.

A one-off New Orleans concert in late 1976—which featured Bluiett, Lake, Hemphill and David Murray—led to the founding of the WSQ a few months later. The group became an ideal setting for Bluiett's playing, songwriting and wide-ranging improvisations.

"He was a master, a natural teacher and a mentor to many musicians," Lake recalled. "He also had a wicked sense of humor."

Bluiett's influence as a mentor was especially important to saxophonist and Detroit native Carter, who first heard him play with the WSQ in 1982.

"I was 13 and my sax teacher took me as a treat," Carter said, "and it came at the proper time. I was ready for the next level. Hearing Bluiett play his low-A baritone up close was musical nirvana. It was just what I needed."

As Carter matured and developed musically, his relationship with Bluiett grew as well.

"I played with him in his group Baritone Nation and later subbed in World Sax," Carter said. "He always gave me good advice. I remember him telling me: 'Don't let them take your ears away—or your heart. Those will always tell you what to do.'"

After returning home to Lovejoy in 2002 to deal with health issues, Bluiett focused on teaching music at area schools. He eventually regained his health and played concerts again—often with his student orchestras.

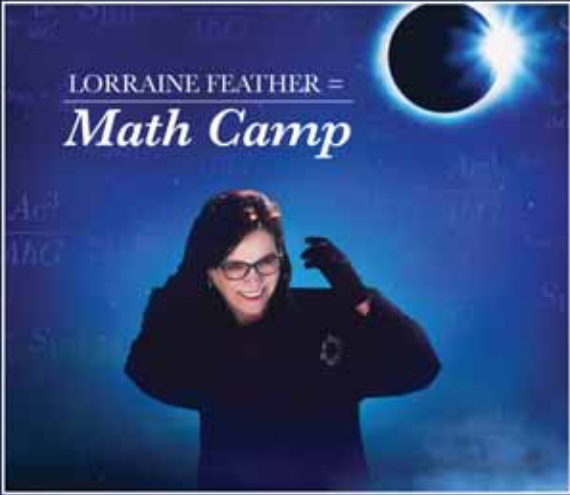
Bluiett returned to New York in 2012, and was again active on the music scene. But after suffering a severe stroke in 2016, he retired from performing. Eventually, his family moved him back to St. Louis, and on Sept. 16, his 78th birthday, he was transferred to St. Louis University Hospital and later taken off life support.

"Bluiett was my soul brother," Lake said. "I will miss him."
—Terry Perkins

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