

Leroy Vinnegar (1928 – 1999)

By Lynn Darroch

Though he spent only the last thirteen years of a long career in Portland, celebrated bassist Leroy Vinnegar became a central figure in the local jazz scene. In 1995, the Oregon legislature honored his contributions to the cultural life of the state by designating May 1 as Leroy Vinnegar Day. The Leroy Vinnegar Jazz Institute at Portland State University was named in his honor, and in 1998, Vinnegar became the first member of the Jazz Society of Oregon's Hall of Fame. Dark Horses Comics, published in Milwaukie, created a vignette (by Arnold Pander and Diane Schutz) featuring Vinnegar for an anthology series titled *Dark Horse Presents* (No. 97).

Vinnegar's legendary status and high-level musicianship, as well as his personal warmth and generosity, made him a respected leader and mentor among area jazz musicians. At his request, the Jazz de Opus nightclub, where his quartet drew enthusiastic listeners, instituted a non-smoking policy for his Tuesday night performances in 1995, long before such restrictions became law.

Known as The Master of the Walking Bass for his development of an approach to the bass fiddle that consists of a series of ascending or descending quarter notes in a steady 4/4 meter, Vinnegar appeared on more than 600 albums. His work in Los Angeles studios in the 1950s and 1960s helped define the style known as West Coast Jazz, and he played on several of the largest-selling jazz albums of all time, including *My Fair Lady* (1956), with Andre Previn and Shelly Manne, and *Swiss Movement* (1969), with Eddie Harris and Les McCann.

Vinnegar recorded with many jazz stars, including Sonny Rollins and Stan Getz, as well as with pop musicians such as Van Morrison. "They hired me because I'm a nice guy and I disciplined myself," the self-taught musician explained with characteristic humility in a 1994 interview. "I didn't talk back and did what I was told—I gave them what they wanted."

A native of Indianapolis, Indiana, Vinnegar's career began in earnest in Chicago in the early 1950s. He moved to Los Angeles in 1954 to work with celebrated pianist Art Tatum. He started visiting Portland in 1973 and moved to Oregon in 1986, in part to alleviate the heart and lung disease that later required him to use oxygen fifteen hours a day. He also chose Portland, he said, because "I met some nice musicians up here and we started creating something." Vinnegar performed regularly at Atwater's in the U.S. Bank Tower. "He was fully aware and grateful for what Portland and Oregon did for him," said Diane Mitchell, wife of Red Mitchell, a fellow bassist and contemporary who also relocated to Oregon.

Nationally touring musicians sought Vinnegar out when they were in town, and Portland musicians considered him their guiding light. "I learned more from him than anyone else I ever played with," said guitarist Dan Faehnle, who has toured with international stars Diana Krall and Pink Martini. Portland drummer and composer Alan Jones released a 2002 CD titled *LV*, dedicated to the bassist. The last album Vinnegar made as a leader—*Integrity* (1995)—was recorded with members of his popular Portland quartet.

Even Vinnegar's suits became venerated objects. Distributed to area musicians after Vinnegar's death from cardiac arrest on August 3, 1999, the suits are still being worn years later, according to saxophonist Rob Scheps, who sported a pair of the bassist's pants for a concert with the Oregon Symphony in 2007.

Sources

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