

A portrait of Geri Allen, a Black woman with long, dark dreadlocks, wearing a black long-sleeved top. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. Her hands are resting on a piano keyboard in the foreground. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

GERI ALLEN

JUNE 12, 1957–JUNE 27, 2017



ORDER OF SERVICE

PRELUDE

Pitt Undergraduate Student Ensemble
Musical Selections

Patrick Gallagher

Chancellor of the University of Pittsburgh

Kathleen Blee

Bettye J. and Ralph E. Bailey Dean of the
Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences
University of Pittsburgh

Pitt Graduate Student Ensemble

“Feed the Fire” *

“Little Wind” *

Janis Burley Wilson

CEO and President of the August Wilson Center

Michael Heller

Assistant Professor of Jazz Studies
University of Pittsburgh

Pitt Faculty Ensemble

“For Alice Coltrane” *

Deane Root

Chair of the Department of Music
University of Pittsburgh

Mount Allen III

Geri’s brother

POSTLUDE

Pitt Community Jazz Horn Ensemble

“Steal Away to Jesus”

“Yes, God is Real”

* Written by Geri Allen

REMEMBRANCES

To Geri Allen

Geri had a wonderful ability to work with everyone because she cared about everyone. She provided leadership and guidance for all the dimensions of Jazz Studies—the performance component, especially the annual Jazz Seminar; her colleagues; the undergraduate courses; and the students working towards their doctoral degree. She was always willing to try something new, and she almost always made experiments work.

I can't imagine never seeing her again, poised over her keyboard and about to take us to another place artistically, referencing her mentors and influences, but always so now and so herself; what we will really miss, though, is her warmth, her grace, her compassion, and her gentleness.

– N. John Cooper

Executive Administrator, Office of the Provost and former Bettye J. and Ralph E. Bailey Dean of the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences
University of Pittsburgh

An Essential Resource

Professor Geri Allen was my colleague, mentor, and friend. And she was motherly—she always made sure that I was doing okay. Geri transformed my life in so many ways. She started to teach at the University of Pittsburgh in January 2014. Although our offices were next to each other, I didn't have a chance to talk to her for the first few months. But that changed drastically in early March, when she heard me practicing the saxophone. A few days later, she called me and said, "You sound great—you should be more visible." Her compliments meant a great deal to me because I had almost given up my performance career at that point. I had felt that my life had been a series of failures. She often said, "I don't know why you're not confident. You should go see a therapist. I'm serious!" She greatly encouraged and supported my research and music projects as well as my teaching career at Pitt, and became an essential resource for me and for many others.

We had a number of long talks over coffee, lunch, and dinner, about a variety of subjects. We talked about collaborating in music and research. We brainstormed how to develop the Jazz Studies program. Through those conversations, I sensed that she had a huge vision in which the Jazz Studies program would be a bridge between academia and underserved communities. For example, she proposed, "Pitt Jazz Masters in the Pittsburgh Public Schools" program, which would allow our graduate students to work with Jazz masters to expose Pre-K through

high school-age students to jazz performance and Pittsburgh's rich jazz history.

I'll work hard to ensure that her visions will come true. It's still hard to believe that she's left us, but she always will live in my heart.

– Yoko Suzuki

Lecturer, University of Pittsburgh

Flying Toward the Sound

It's raining in Pittsburgh as I write these words, and Geri Allen's interpretation of Strayhorn's "Lush Life" plays softly on a loop. This could be a gloomy scene if it weren't for Geri's sound: a sound that quietly demands, anticipates, ascends. In Geri's hands the song is transformed: it becomes less of a surrender to loneliness than solitude turned inside out: a meditation, a questioning. I hear a similar striving quality in "Flying Toward the Sound," from her 2010 solo piano album of the same name. In Geri's music, one is always "flying toward the sound," approaching the brink, in relentless pursuit of the freedom to imagine otherwise.

As a colleague, mentor, and friend, Geri gave me, and so many others, the freedom to imagine otherwise. I first met Geri as a graduate student in literature at Columbia University at events held by the Center for Jazz Studies. I admired her craft, her intellectual versatility, and her talent for collaboration. I was too shy to tell her so at the time. But later I had the great fortune to join the faculty in English at the University of Pittsburgh just as Geri began her post as Director of Jazz Studies. I will never forget the joy I felt when I saw Geri's face at faculty orientation. She had the uncanny ability to soothe and inspire, to calm your nerves and waken your mind. She transformed jazz at Pitt, was eager to connect with faculty across disciplines, and was adored by her students. The projects we brainstormed will have to be re-envisioned, but this is precisely what Geri's legacy compels us to do. The gap will not be filled. But we turn once again to her music and to her memory. Geri, thank you for granting us the gift of your shimmering, transformative presence.

– Imani D. Owens

Assistant Professor of English, University of Pittsburgh

Her Singular Vision

The jazz community and the world of improvised music are still reeling from the unexpected news of the passing of Geri Allen, perhaps the most accomplished musician of her generation.

As a pianist, Geri personified black music's perpetuating virtues of tradition and innovation, or turning hardship

into triumph. Geri proudly considered herself not limited to the influences of those greats from her formative years alone, but part of the piano masters, famous and not-so-famous, are found in her creative matrix, but it was her singular vision that held the key.

Geri was a quiet yet forceful builder of communities, proud of being a part of valued music traditions of Cass Tech, of Detroit, of Howard University, and of Pittsburgh, where she had discovered her academic chops, and was in the process of building a greater jazz studies community. Geri seldom talked about being a “woman in jazz,” but continually acted upon it. First and foremost, she addressed it existentially just by being a “bad mother” (e.g. a giant, master, or heavyweight at what they do) on the piano. She constantly promoted, facilitated, inspired, and enabled women’s careers in music in general and jazz in particular. Even as this tribute is written, her All-Female Jazz Residency is underway in New Jersey. A wonderful mother indeed. Geri attained the highest levels of musical accomplishment while raising three children to adulthood. I can’t count the number of times our meetings were scheduled around their needs. Yet her accomplishments provide evidence that motherhood is not contrary to excellence in any field, nor contrary to parenthood for anyone willing to take it as seriously as their work. Each of these traits—dedication, tradition, compassion, spirituality, and sacrifice—come through in her performance and in her compositions. It was a blessing to have known Geri Allen for over forty years, as a friend, an admirer, and a colleague.

– Aaron Johnson

Assistant Professor of Music, University of Pittsburgh

A Tenured Professor and Director of Jazz Studies

Geri Antoinette Allen is the most internationally renowned musician to have earned an MA degree (1983) through the University of Pittsburgh’s jazz program, founded by Dr. Nathan Davis within the field of Ethnomusicology. And as he planned his retirement, he recruited her to succeed him as Director of Jazz Studies and leader of a newly established PhD program in Jazz Studies.

She embraced her role as Associate Professor and architect of a jazz program in higher education with enormous vision, energy, and compassion. It was my good fortune to be selected as her faculty mentor, but she taught me even more through that relationship. I helped her work through the intricacies of unfamiliar institutional protocols and connecting with the community resources, and later served as her department chair as well. From even before her arrival to direct the 43rd Annual Pitt Jazz Seminar and Concert in October and November 2013, she devoted herself—heart, mind, and soul—to her new role.

Geri Allen is renowned for her gifts as a pianist, composer, and musical collaborator. She showed herself to be equally talented in choosing students, staff, and faculty colleagues with whom she wished to pursue her vision. She led the faculty search that brought Aaron Johnson and Michael Heller to the Pitt faculty, created ways to expand the roles of Yoko Suzuki, Doretta Whalen, and other graduates, and selected Frank Hammond to staff the Jazz Studies Office. Just as she chose artists for the annual Pitt Jazz Seminar and concert, she built collaborative relationships within the University and through outreach programs to the wider community.

In all these interactions she inspired me with the creative excitement in her eyes, her mind ablaze with ideas for using new technologies such as internet 2 for continental collaborations, and building networks linking the jazz program, the department, the University, and wider community—especially young people—through educational and cultural enrichment programs with jazz at the core. She had a special passion for fostering a nurturing jazz environment like what she had experienced in her youth in Detroit, and set the groundwork for developing interactions between the University’s faculty and students with the region’s schools and community agencies. She served as faculty liaison to inaugurate a Music Living Learning Community of some twenty-five freshmen. And she was committed to recruiting and mentoring students at all levels, devoting some of her last energy to providing student learning opportunities during her last tour in Europe in May this year.

Her accomplishments beyond the mentorship role are equally impressive. She worked tirelessly to bring the Erroll Garner archives to Pitt, and shepherd a full-concert CD of Garner’s *Concert by the Sea*, which earned a Grammy nomination. She arranged for a week-long residency by George Lewis. She encouraged the University’s initiative in diversity and inclusion, served on the steering committee of the Year of the Humanities in the University, and was indeed the face of the University in some of its most prominent advertising. She was a member of our family, and while we are grieving deeply at her loss we will always celebrate her marvelous music and her multitude of contributions to all of us.

– Deane L. Root

Chair and Professor

Department of Music, University of Pittsburgh
Editor in Chief, *Grove Music Online*

Fearless Generosity

One of the many times I fell in love with Geri Allen’s music was when I first heard her recording of Mary Lou Williams’ *Zodiac Suite*—a piece for which she and I

shared a particular passion. Like all of Geri's work, it combines a profound knowledge of the tradition with an unflinching fearlessness to extend it. It is exhilarating, thought-provoking, boundlessly creative, and charged with electricity. It's the kind of work that reminds you of why you fell in love with jazz in the first place, where around every corner (even the ones you've turned before) you can find endless possibilities for new creation.

It's rare to get an opportunity to work with one of your heroes. But I was blessed to do just that. When I first learned I would be working with Geri at Pitt, I was excited but also nervous, I won't lie. She was a luminary, and I was just some unknown researcher. But from day one, Geri was one of the most open, kind, and generous people I've ever met. Her priority wasn't just teaching jazz, but building a community around jazz here at Pitt. I don't think I ever had a meeting with her where she wasn't first and foremost concerned with helping someone else, particularly her students: "How's Billy doing? Is there any way we can get more support for Irene? Have you met with John—how's his research coming along?" And most would close with, "And how are YOU doing? Are things going ok? How's your family?" Coming from a giant of her stature, this level of care was so profoundly inspiring. She didn't just provide a model for how to make incredible music, she provided a model for how to live.

Her loss is deeply felt by all whose lives she touched, both here at the University and around the world. In the Pitt Jazz Studies Program, our task now is to honor her by continuing to maintain and expand the community that she built; to help those around us and to step forward together; to remember to both explore our roots and to extend our branches; to keep our tools sharp and our batteries charged; to always look around that next corner.

– **Michael Heller**

Assistant Professor of Music, University of Pittsburgh

She Didn't Know

In September of 2016, I walked onto the Pitt campus for an interview. I went through so many interviews around Pittsburgh after graduating from college with no success. I didn't know that this particular interview for the Jazz Studies program assistant would start such an impact on my life.

I was nervous and sweating from head to toe when I walked into the Music Building. As the interview kept going, I felt more confident in myself. Geri was soft spoken, friendly, warm, and very motherly. Not what I was expecting during an interview, but I felt comfortable talking in front of her when I was asked to share my work ethic and my own visions on how I see the future

of the Jazz Studies Program. To my surprise, I was asked back for a second interview with the rest of the jazz faculty and to my surprise again they offered me the job.

A week later, after my first day and after the 46th Jazz Seminar week was over, I got a chance to talk to Geri, face-to-face and she shared with me that she was glad that I accepted the position. Every time we would meet, she would say, "You look dapper..." which was never told to me before in my life so I would always laugh. After getting the job as her assistant, I couldn't understand why I was chosen amongst the many applicants, but I guess Geri saw something in me.

I don't think she knew when she appointed me to this job, what she had done for me. Because of her I was able to leave a bad working environment from a previous job, I was able to have a livable wage, I could move out of my parent's house, and I can start my journey on becoming a leader in the arts community in Pittsburgh. She gave me a chance and I thank Geri Allen with all of my heart for giving me this opportunity to work with great people who are helping me grow as a professional. I am thankful that I was able to work for someone so talented, gentle, and powerful.

– **Frank Hammond Jr.**

Jazz Studies Program Assistant, University of Pittsburgh

Dear Professor Allen

In 2013, I was studying music at Siena Jazz, and I had a wonderful instructor in an ensemble class, bassist Silvia Bolognesi. As an assignment, Silvia told me to listen to some of Geri Allen's recordings. In class the following week, I reported back to Silvia how much I enjoyed listening to Ms. Allen's playing—and "oh, by the way," I said, "she just took up the position as Director of Jazz Studies in my hometown of Pittsburgh." Silvia looked at me like I was crazy, and in her beautiful American-influenced accent said, "What are you doing here in Italy? Go back home and study with Geri Allen." Needless to say, my mother, who had been praying for three years that I would come back home, was relieved to hear my excitement about applying to Pitt's Jazz Studies Program. A year later, I was interviewing with Professor Allen and telling her all about the wonderful musicians I had met in Italy. In my first semester under her wing, I wrote a paper called "Listening Like a Gentleman: What Italian sprezzatura can teach us about the effortless mastery of Jazz." I submitted it to present at a conference and it was rejected. When I received that news, I confided in Professor Allen who suggested, "Why don't you change the title to something gender-neutral?" and I did. The new title, "Listening Like an Italian Courtier", was accepted at a different conference. A few months later, Professor Allen told me

she was going to be touring with Enrico Rava, who I had written about in my paper. Professor Allen followed up with, “Why don’t you come along?” as if it was no big deal (yeah, right). Next thing you know, I’m on a two-week tour through Europe with her and Enrico Rava, constantly having to remind myself that this wasn’t a dream. It was the most incredible experience of my life. In hindsight, it was bitter-sweet. Only a month after the tour finished, she passed-on. I’ll never forget sitting in an Italian restaurant with her, half-way through the tour; fighting through my tears, I did my best to thank her for allowing me to be part of that experience. I explained that the trip was symbolic in that it represented a full-circle from where I had begun this musical journey. I was back in Italy, with her, the same woman I had left Italy to go study with in the first place. She reached out, placed her hand on mine, and with all the meaning that you can possibly pack into four words, she said, “Thank you for sharing.” I’m beyond grateful that I got an opportunity to tell her that. She always addressed her e-mails to me: “Dear Irene,” which took a little while to get used to because I had been groomed to believe that “Dear so-and-so” wasn’t professional. However, life is too short not to pack every word with all the emotion we are trying to express. So, with that, I would just like to say to her: “Dear Professor Allen, thank you for sharing—your gifts, your wisdom, your energy, your time, your support—everything.”

– Irene Monteverde

PhD Graduate Student, Jazz Studies
University of Pittsburgh

Perpetual Grace

When I was told the great Geri Allen was coming to Pittsburgh, the first name to my mind was Mary Lou Williams, the legendary jazz pianist and Pittsburgh native. I only know Williams through her music and the music she composed for folks like Cab Calloway, Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington. But somehow it felt like Geri Allen’s move was a homecoming and acknowledgement that this was the home of the woman called “The Mother of Jazz.” Mary Lou Williams never had any children, but Geri Allen was her daughter.

In his autobiography, *Music Is My Mistress*, Ellington called Mary Lou Williams “perpetually contemporary.” He said, “Her music retains, and maintains, a standard of quality that is timeless. She is like soul on soul.” Even before we lost her, the same was said of Geri Allen. When we met I immediately recognized her as the love child of Mary Lou Williams and Duke Ellington. She was stately, patient, and intimidatingly quiet. As Ellington said of Williams, Geri’s “writing and performing have always

been a little ahead throughout her career.” I can’t speak with any jazz expertise, but I find her music muscular in the way ballet and Olympic swimming is muscular: focused, buoyant, and always shaped by grace. Or, don’t take my word for it go listen to her rendition of Stevie Wonder’s “That Girl” on that 2013 record *Grand River Crossings, Motown & Motor City Inspirations*. Just amazing and just the edge of what makes her “timeless... like soul on soul.”

When she put one of my poems to music a few years ago it was like dancing in water. She sort of moved, almost transparently around the lines I’d written. She was open to everything—every style of playing, even to not playing. She was an amazing listener. She was many kinds of genius, but let us acknowledge her today as a genius of listening as well. She was listening and teaching me to listen and then the poem was afloat on her playing. Grace.

I’m certain she is as close as I will ever come to the likes of Duke Ellington and Mary Lou Williams. I’m sorry I never got to say exactly that to her. The music reveals her spirit: perpetually gentle, perpetually generous, perpetually brilliant.

– Terrance Hayes

Codirector of the Center for African American Poetry and Poetics, and Professor of English, University of Pittsburgh

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Undergraduate students: Nick Amoscato (alto saxophone)*, Iyanna Buffaloe (trombone)*, Ethan Dunbar (alto saxophone), Aidan Epstein (bass), Carter Freije (drums), Jason Greenlaw (guitar)*, Hezreel Robertson (piano)

Graduate students: Benjamin Barson (baritone saxophone), Sam Boateng (keyboard), Aidan Epstein (bass), James Johnson III (drums)*, Irene Monteverde (piano solo), William D. Scott (piano)

Faculty musicians: Aaron J. Johnson (trombone), James Johnson Jr. (piano), James Johnson III (drums), Kenneth Powell (saxophone), Paul Thompson (bass)*, Tony Campbell (saxophone)*

Pitt community: Benjamin Barson (saxophone), Ethan Dunbar (saxophone), Ron Horton (trumpet)*, Aaron J. Johnson (trombone), Kenneth Powell (saxophone)

Modern Piano: Joe Ravita (Yamaha piano provider)

* Guest musicians



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