

In Loving
Memory
of

Reuben
Lincoln
Wilson

Sunrise: April 9, 1935 - Sunset: May 26, 2023

Saturday, June 10, 2023 @ 3 PM

Williams Institutional CME Church
2239 Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd. NYC, NY 10027

Obituary

Few are the folks who could cast a literal shadow over the iconic Hammond B-3 organ, nicknamed "the Beast" by many of the jazz musicians who have helmed the hefty 425-pound instrument. But Reuben Wilson — who died on May 26 at the age of 88 — was one such organist. When he perched his athletic 6-foot-5-inch frame behind the dual-manual keyboard, quick hands and size 15 feet sparring with the drawbars, pedals and electromagnetic tonewheels housed in a wooden box that could be mistaken for living room furniture — it didn't seem so big after all. The funk-ridden grooves of his music could feel larger than life, however, particularly those he created for Blue Note Records in the late 1960s and early '70s. These landmark LPs provided his peers with "a groovy situation" (as one album was titled), and would inspire acid jazz DJs and hip-hop luminaries worldwide a generation later.

Wilson's death was confirmed by his son, Reuben Reuel Wilson. After battling dementia the last several years, and recently being diagnosed with advanced lung cancer, he died in Harlem.

"Reuben Wilson helped usher in what we now call Soul Jazz," says Pete Fallico, founder of the Jazz Organ Fellowship Hall of Fame, an organization dedicated to honoring the history of jazz organ, and into which Wilson was inducted in 2013. "And in the '90s, his music was revitalized when English DJs like Gilles Peterson started playing all these old funky tunes he had recorded decades earlier."

Born April 9, 1935, in the tiny town of Mounds, Okla., Reuben Lincoln Wilson was the second youngest of 13 siblings. When Reuben was 5, Dust Bowl conditions forced the family westward to Pasadena, Calif., where his father Amos worked odd jobs and his mother Elizabeth was a domestic worker. As a teen, Wilson tinkered on the home piano. He loved the boogie-woogie sounds the delivery guys would stick around to play after dropping off ice for the family's ice box, and was further piqued after a visit to the house by rising pianist Sonny Clark.

But music was second-string to his love for hitting people. He earned All-City football honors playing defensive end, and gravitated to the ring as a professional heavyweight boxer, becoming a sparring partner of future champ, Floyd Patterson. "Kirk Douglas was my sponsor," Wilson told me in a 2004 interview. "I knocked a lot of guys out." His relationship with the Hollywood star landed him the role of the knocked out boxer in *Carmen Jones*, the 1954 film featuring Harry Belafonte and Dorothy Dandridge. "After I moved to New York years later," Wilson recounted, "every time I ran into Harry he'd put his dukes up and say, 'Alright, man, let's go!'"

In his early 20s, a stint playing defensive back for the semi-pro Orange County Rhinos convinced Wilson it was time to permanently swap cleats for keyboards. Moonlighting piano gigs around LA eventually led him to the burgeoning sound of the Hammond organ gaining traction in predominantly African American neighborhoods, and being propelled by the likes of Bill Doggett, Jimmy Smith and Richard "Groove" Holmes, the latter taking the time to show Wilson the instrument's nuances during jam sessions. Wilson became so obsessed with the hard-driving, "East Coast sound" of his mentor, he moved to New York City on Christmas, 1966.

Late night field study in Harlem clubs such as the Club Baron, Count Basie's, and Well's Chicken and Waffles, led to a steady organ gig with noted saxophonist, Willis "Gator" Jackson, introducing him to the jazz scene's heavy hitters, and piquing the ears of Blue Note Records' Francis Wolff. A subsequent five-album deal would change Wilson's life. He had noticed during jazz set intermissions, the clubs' jukeboxes would stir the crowd with the likes of James Brown and Gladys Knight — not jazz — and wanted to incorporate that into his own sound. "I wanted a different kind of approach," Wilson recalled to me. "We played jazz, but we had the drummer play funk. And it worked."

1969's *Love Bug* unabashedly illustrated this beat-first philosophy on a mix of originals and covers, particularly on the opening tune, "Hot Rod," named for Wilson's son Roderick. Drummer Idris Muhammad's funk undeniably worked, as did the guitar of Grant Green, trumpeter Lee Morgan and tenor saxophonist George Coleman. This groove-centric approach permeated the rest of his efforts for Blue Note, notably then again for the aptly named Groove Merchant Records, and culminated with 1975's funk masterwork, *Got to Get Your Own*, for the (soon-to-be bankrupt) Cadet label. Anchored by legendary drummer Bernard Purdie, and lavished with two dozen of NYC's top session musicians and singers, Wilson thought the LP's burning title track would be his signature dancefloor moment. "I thought I was gonna hit it big like Stevie Wonder," Wilson told me.

Instead, he was left to wonder about retirement, as Hammond organ gigs vanished, synthesizers became tech royalty, DJs dealt disco hits, and rappers grabbed the mic into the 1980s and '90s. But in hip-hop, the art of the sample has a way of introducing what's coming, while simultaneously taking one down memory lane. Wilson provided a perfect example of this process when a passage from his 1971 track "We're in Love" gave producer DJ Premier the core sample for "Memory Lane (Sittin' In Da Park)," a track off Nas' 1994 debut, *Illmatic*. Wilson was also one of several recruits on rapper Guru's Jazzmatazz sessions and tours, and when jazz record labels re-issued their back catalogs for a new generation hungry for "old" breakbeats, his athletic mastery of the groove floated to the top.

As a leader, Wilson performed well into his 70s, and recorded at least 17 full-length albums, their artwork showcasing his infectious smile. "Reuben was exceptional and had everything together," says his longtime collaborator Bernard Purdie in a phone interview. "I never saw him play a regular piano, but he played the hell out of the organ."

He is predeceased by his first wife, singer Faye Emma Smith Wilson; survived by their son, musician Roderick Wilson; by his second wife, Daphne and their son, musician Reuben Reuel.

"The organ will tell on you quicker than any instrument I know," Wilson told me once. "When you sit down to play that bad boy, however you feel — that's exactly the way it's gonna come out."

By Matt Rogers

Order of Service

Processional

Selection

Scripture Readings

Prayer

Selection

Acknowledgements

Remarks

Obituary

Selection

Eulogy

Committal

Viewing

Recessional

FINAL DISPOSITION:
Oxford Hills Crematory
Chester, New York

I'm Free

**Don't grieve for me, for now I'm free,
I'm following the path God laid for me.
I took his hand when I heard his call,
I turned my back and left it all.**

**I could not stay another day,
To laugh, to love, to work, to play.
Tasks left undone must stay that way,
I've found that peace at the close of the day.**

**If my parting has left a void,
Then fill it with remembered joy.
A friendship shared, a laugh, a kiss,
Ah yes, these things I too will miss.**

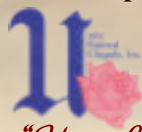
**Be not burdened with times of sorrow,
I wish you the sunshine of tomorrow.
My Life's been full, I savoured much,
Good friends, good times, a loved one's touch,**

**Perhaps my time seemed all too brief,
Don't lengthen it now with undue grief.
Lift up your heart and share with me,
God wanted me now, He set me free.**

Acknowledgement

The family acknowledges with deep appreciation all acts of kindness extended to them during this bereavement hour. May God bless you for all your thoughtfulness and concern.

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3