They call him the Gentle Giant, a man whose musical talents soar well above his physical stature. Perhaps most known for his robust and soulful tenor saxophone and flute playing, Yusef Lateef is also a pioneer in the world of double reed jazz playing. He is one of the firsts to feature the oboe as a soloing instrument in jazz and has introduced many non-western single and double reed instruments to the genre. Multi-instrumentalist, composer, author, educator, and scholar: the man is greater than the sum of his many, many parts.

Dr. Yusef Lateef was born William Emanuel Huddleston in Chattanooga, Tennessee on October 9, 1920. He grew up in Detroit, his family relocating there in 1925, and began to play the tenor saxophone during his teenage years. Detroit was a hotbed of jazz in the 1930s and Lateef grew up musically alongside such luminaries as Hank, Thad, and Elvin Jones; Barry Harris; Donald Byrd; Paul Chambers; and Kenny Burrell. He began to work professionally in his late teens and went on to have an international career—a career that now spans over seven decades. In 1950, William [then known by his stage name, William (Bill) Evans] converted to the Ahmadiyya movement of Islam and adopted the name Yusef Lateef (fittingly, “Lateef” means gentle). Alongside his own work as a group leader, he was also a member of many other iconic groups of the 1960s, playing with Charles Mingus, Cannonball Adderley, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie and Babatunde Olatunji.

Throughout his career, Dr. Lateef has developed an innovative palette of sounds by skillfully exploring a wide range of woodwinds both as a performer and composer. Alongside his tenor saxophone stylings, listeners have been treated to a veritable kaleidoscope of sounds that Lateef seemingly charms out of his instruments, some of which are rarely heard in a jazz setting. Among a variety of flutes (both bamboo and metal) and the arghul (a single reed, traditional arabic instrument), he also incorporates double reed instruments into his timbral arsenal, namely the oboe, the bassoon, and the shehnai (an oboe-type instrument native to India that traditionally uses a quadruple reed—one blade vibrating in pairs).

Dr. Lateef began experimenting with the oboe early in his career. I had the great pleasure and honour of speaking with him about this over the telephone, on a balmy September evening. When asked...
how he came to pick up the oboe, Lateef replied, “my high school teacher suggested I try to play the oboe, I didn’t take him up on it until nine years after high school.”

He went on to study the instrument with Ronald Odmark, then oboist of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, and embarked on a journey that allowed him to develop one of the most distinctive and soulful voices on the instrument in a jazz setting.

The first recording Lateef did on oboe as a leader was a piece aptly named “Oboe Blues” featured on the album *The Dreamer*, recorded in 1959. According to Lateef, “some writers believe that the oboe made its first appearance on *Cry!* *Tender*, but that came afterwards.”

Dr. Lateef can be heard on oboe on many of his recordings, on such pieces as “Salt Water Blues” (*The Three Faces of Yusef Lateef*, 1960); “Iqbal” (*The Centaur and the Phoenix*, 1961), a stunning composition named after his daughter; and on a gorgeous rendition of the Leroy Carr standard “In The Evening” (*The Complete Yusef Lateef*, 1967), to name but a few.

As a sideman, he also recorded on oboe with the Doug Watkins Quintet (*Soulnik*, 1960) and as part of The Cannonball Adderley Sextet, of which he was a member during the early sixties. Notable tracks with Cannonball’s band include “Syn-anthesia”, a Lateef original (*The Cannonball Adderley Sextet in New York*, 1962) and “Brother John” (*Nippon Soul*, 1963), a piece penned by Lateef in dedication to fellow tenor saxophonist John Coltrane. When asked if Cannonball specifically requested he play oboe, Lateef explained: “he suggested I play whatever instrument I like (...) he gave me that freedom.”

I asked Mr. Lateef about his bassoon studies, which came some time after he had picked up the oboe. He mentioned that he had taken lessons with a bassoon teacher at a music store in New York City. To the best of this author’s knowledge the only recording featuring Lateef on bassoon can be found on his 1963 recording called *Jazz 'Round the World*, on a track titled “India.” It is interesting to note that while the album *Contemplation* (1960) features a striking profile image of Lateef with a bassoon, he does not play the instrument on this album! He is solely featured here on tenor saxophone (still very much worth a listen!).

**The Centaur and The Phoenix**

There is one album that is of particular interest with regards to double reed playing among Dr. Lateef’s wide-ranging and extensive list of recordings: *The Centaur and The Phoenix*. Recorded in 1960 and released in 1961 on the Riverside label (reissued on CD in 1992), this recording stands out for a number of reasons: first, the nonet features both the oboe and the bassoon: Lateef is heard on oboe (along with tenor sax, flute and arghubl) and fellow reed man Hosea Taylor is featured on bassoon.

Not only is the orchestration outstanding in that it features both the oboe and bassoon in a jazz ensemble, but Taylor can also be heard improvising on two tracks (*Apathy* and *Iqbal*). Along with Lateef and Taylor, the group features
a stellar cast of players: Clark Terry and Richard Williams on trumpet (and flugelhorn), Curtis Fuller on trombone, Tate Huston on baritone sax, Joe Zawinul on piano, Ben Tucker on bass, and Lex Humphries on drums.

Hosea Taylor (or Josea Taylor as he is exceptionally referred to on the credits of *The Centaur and The Phoenix*) is an alto saxophone player and woodwind doubler (he also plays both flute along with bassoon) whom Lateef met when the former was studying at the University of Michigan. Taylor can also be heard playing bassoon on a more experimental track on Freddie Hubbard’s 1966 album, *Blue Spirits*.

The inspired and inspiring playing on *The Centaur and The Phoenix* is brought together through a collection of pieces penned by three individuals with widely varying backgrounds, but whose works, interwoven throughout this masterpiece, create a narrative that flows naturally from one sonic landscape to the other.

As Chris Albertson explains in the liner notes, the “rich, compelling orchestral colorings created by this group stem from scores by a trio of writers that includes, in addition to Lateef himself, two fresh and striking talents, each—for quite dissimilar reasons—making a first appearance on the jazz scene. Kenny Barron is a most promising 17-year old Philadelphian; his own hard-swinging *Revelation* and his soft ballad arrangement of *Every Day I Fall in Love* are the first recorded examples of his work. Charles Mills, who contributed the remarkable *The Centaur and The Phoenix* and the lyric *Summer Song*, is a highly regarded contemporary composer who has become attracted to jazz largely through a growing interest in the music of Lateef (to whom the title piece of this album is dedicated ‘with friendship and admiration.’”

**Autophysiopsychic Music**

Although listeners would dub Dr. Lateef’s music as jazz (or occasionally world music), Lateef refers to his work as autophysiopsychic music, a term he has created to convey “music which comes from one’s physical, mental and spiritual self.” He has also developed a pedagogical method around the concept of autophysiopsychic music, and inspired countless students through his many years of teaching at various colleges and institutions—most notably at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. A lifelong scholar, Lateef pursued academic studies despite a busy performance and touring career and obtained a bachelor’s degree in music (flute studies) in 1969 from the Manhattan School of Music (where he studied with Harold Jones and John Wummer) where he also obtained a Master’s degree in
Music Education in 1970. In 1975, he was awarded a Ph.D. in Education from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. During the early ‘80s Dr. Lateef was invited to be a research fellow at the Center for Nigerian Cultural Studies at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria—a stint that allowed him to focus his research on the Fulani flute.

A Man of Many Talents

The ever industrious Dr. Lateef is a man of many talents whose forms of expression extend to regions far and wide and whose means of exploration appear to have no boundaries. He is the author of a number of books, from literary works such as Night in the Garden of Love, Rain... Shapes, and Spheres to pedagogical works like Method on How to Perform Autophysiopsychic Music, Repository of Scales and Melodic Patterns, and Flute Book of the Blues. Other publications include a wide range of high school and college-level Stage Band compositions, the Yusef Lateef Songbook (featuring seventy-seven of his original compositions, spanning six decades), and a growing list of chamber music and orchestral works.

In recent years, Lateef has made available prints of his original artwork to the public, works that he so poetically describes as “images inspired by the beautiful nature we may often take for granted. These natural realities have been translated with the language spoken by pen and brush as seen with my heart’s eye.” These prints can be seen and purchased on his website, along with the publications mentioned above (www.yuseflateef.com).

Chamber Music & Orchestral Works

This past April, Lateef performed a concert at Roulette, in Brooklyn, celebrating his seventy-five years of music. At the age of ninety-two (he turned ninety-three in October), Lateef performed on tenor sax, vocals, oboe, c flute, alto flute, bamboo flute, shehnai, pneumatic bamboo flute, moan flute, and piano. The momentous event also premiered three of Dr. Lateef’s new chamber music pieces: String Quartet No. 2, Trio in December (for soprano, alto and baritone saxophone), and Autophysiopsychic Variations for Piano. The evening’s music was recorded and has now been released on YAL records, Lateef’s own record label.

Dr. Lateef has been writing music for classical ensembles for some time. His Symphony No.1 (a.k.a. Tahira) for orchestra was premiered and recorded by the NDR Radio Orchestra of Hamburg in 1974 along with a tone poem, Lalit, commissioned by the same orchestra.

In 1993, his four-movement tone poem, The African American Epic Suite for orchestra and quintet, was recorded by the Cologne Radio Orchestra under the direction of David de Villiers. This stunning work features Lateef and his quintet counterparts on a variety of western and world...
instruments. Along with tenor sax and flutes, Lateef performs on the algaita, an oboe-type double reed instrument native to western Africa. The piece was later performed by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra in 1998 and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in 2001.

While Symphony No. 2 and Symphony No. 3 (I’m Grateful) have yet to be performed, Dr. Lateef is currently working on Symphony no. 4 (Ayesha). When asked about this latter piece, Lateef offers some insight into his compositional process. The piece, he explains, explores the “six elements in music: the minor second, the major second, the minor third, the major third, the fourth and the augmented fourth,” and the maestro is looking at interesting ways of combining these elements, for instance, by placing them “in chromatic major thirds.”

As he speaks of his latest composition, Lateef’s voice conveys the same passion heard in his playing, a passion and dedication that continues to endure and blossom well into his seventy-fifth year of music-making.

Dr. Lateef’s kindness, wisdom, and soulfulness continue to infuse the music that has been inspiring generations of musicians and listeners alike. He is a true pioneer, not only in the world of double reed playing in jazz, or rather, autophysiopsychic music, but also as a performer, composer, educator, and philosopher at large.

About the Author

Melissa Pipe is a baritone saxophonist and bassoonist who lives in Montreal, Canada.

Endnotes

1 According to article on the shehnai, http://field-of-reeds.net/ethno_oboes.html, 2013
2 Telephone conversation with Dr. Lateef, September 24, 2013
4 Telephone conversation with Dr. Lateef, September 24, 2013
5 Chris Albertson, liner notes from The Centaur and The Phoenix, Berkeley: Riverside Records, 1961
8 Telephone conversation with Dr. Lateef, September 24, 2013

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Albertson, Chris. Liner notes from The Centaur and The Phoenix, Berkeley: Riverside Records, 1961

Discography of Albums Mentioned in this Article

Cannonball Adderley *Nippon Soul*, Riverside Records, 1963
Doug Watkins Quintet *Soulnik*, Prestige/New Jazz, 1960
Yusef Lateef *The Dreamer*, Savoy Records, 1959
Yusef Lateef *Cry! Tender*, Prestige/New Jazz, 1959
Yusef Lateef *The Three Faces of Yusef Lateef*, Riverside Records, 1960
Yusef Lateef *Contemplation*, Vee Jay Records, recorded in 1960 (released in 1974)
Yusef Lateef *The Centaur and the Phoenix*, Riverside Records, 1961
Yusef Lateef *Jazz 'Round the World*, Impulse!, 1963
Yusef Lateef *Original Compositions, Live at Roulette*, YAL Records, 2013

A Note From the Author
After the interview, Dr. Lateef sent a nice surprise—his wife, Ayesha, recorded a short video of him playing oboe just after we spoke on the phone. Follow the link below to view the video:

http://idrs.colorado.edu/Mov/Doublered/DR36.4/yuseflateef.MOV