

Colsons return to Chicago with new sounds



Adegoke Steve Colson and Iqua Colson bring their experimental music to Constellation on Saturday, Aug. 12, 2017. (Mikel Colson photo)



By **Howard Reich**
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Nearly 50 years ago, a promising young pianist from New Jersey began studying music at Northwestern University — and discovered sounds he'd never encountered before.

Not so much at school, where classical music predominated, but elsewhere in Evanston and Chicago, where musical revolutions were underway.

For just two years before Adegoke Steve Colson came here in 1967, a contingent of fearlessly innovative South Side artists had formed the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), a collective that was inventing radical new techniques, concepts and practices for composing and improvising music.

Even closer to campus, saxophonist [Fred Anderson](#) was making his Birdhouse venue in Evanston a nexus for new music and became an early mentor to Colson.

The creative ferment of that period transformed Colson, who will return to Chicago to co-lead a quintet with vocalist Iqua Colson, his wife, Saturday night at Constellation.

As he prepares for this engagement, memories of those early days come flooding back.

“I remember I saw a flyer for Fred Anderson, because he lived there in Evanston ... and we could go by and join his band,” says pianist Colson, who often sat in with the singular improviser.

“When I started playing with guys in the AACM. Sometimes (bassist) Fred Hopkins would show up, (drummer) Steve McCall would show up,” adds Colson, who formed a jazz band with fellow student Chico Freeman.

“Chico’s dad, Von Freeman, was a great saxophonist — I didn’t know anything about Chicago, so Chico would take me over to his dad’s house,” recalls Colson.

“We’d go down in the basement and practice. At the time, I was playing saxophone, and we’d sit there and listen to Von. He’d show us how he practiced. We’d go outside and start to shed, try to work on some things.

“It was a very good time.”

Colson, in other words, was augmenting his music training at Northwestern in a setting of equal importance for an emerging jazz musician: the clubs where creative Chicago musicians worked.

After graduating, Colson did student teaching under Lena McLin, the niece of gospel music pioneer Thomas A. Dorsey, and taught at Wendell Phillips High School alongside piano giant Willie Pickens.

From this immersion in the ways of Chicago jazz, Colson became an innovator himself, an early AACM member and a prolific collaborator with experimental Chicago vocalist and fellow Northwestern student he married in 1975, Iqua Colson.

In essence, pianist Colson was absorbing the uniqueness of avant-garde music made in Chicago.

“Chicago music was a totally different thing, in terms of how you would develop the music,” says Colson, citing as an example pianist and AACM co-founder Muhal Richard Abrams.

“Muhal would give a rendition of different styles that maybe have come and gone. You might have something that sounds like a New Orleans piece, and the next thing you’re doing Sun Ra.”

Similarly, jazz tradition, classical erudition and bold experimentation long have converged in Colson’s pianism. Bracing dissonance and unmistakable lyricism, rhythmic propulsion and passages of serenity somehow coexist in his work, as he showed in his solo album of 2015, “Tones For.”

That eminent pianist and MacArthur Fellow Vijay Iyer penned the recording’s liner notes tells you something about Colson’s stature in contemporary music.

“He is a creative musician who never fails to surprise me,” wrote Iyer. “What do his actions on this record tell us? They demonstrate that Mr. Colson sits at a crossroads of multiple streams in this music,” added Iyer, citing influences ranging from John Coltrane and Cecil Taylor to Abrams and Alice Coltrane to Abbey Lincoln and Harry Belafonte.

“It might seem implausible that one album could do all of these things at the same time,” added Iyer. “But this record offers us precisely that kind of impossible beauty — it is a genuine synthesis of these multiple tendencies in the history of creative music.”

What do the Colsons have planned for their Constellation performance?

“We’re trying to get with people whose approach we enjoy,” says Colson, who will be partnering with his longtime Chicago collaborators Dushun Mosley on drums and Harrison Bankhead on bass, plus Norman Palm playing trombone.

“You try and re-establish your ties with people. It’s good to have musicians where, when you get with them, you pick up right where you left off.”

Jeannie Tanner’s ‘Words & Music’

Early this year, Chicago singer-songwriter-trumpeter-bandleader Jeannie Tanner released the most important recording of her career, the double album “Words & Music,” in which several formidable Chicago singers sang compositions penned by Tanner.

Tanner will perform that repertoire with several of the singers on the recording, including Elaine Dame, Paul Marinaro, Tammy McCann and Typhanie Monique at 9:30 and 11:30 p.m. Friday; Alyssa Allgood, Andy Pratt, Abigail Riccards and Michele Thomas at 9:30 and 11:30 p.m. Saturday; at Andy’s Jazz Club, 11 E. Hubbard St.; \$15; 312-642-6805 or www.andysjazzclub.com.

When: 8:30 p.m. Saturday

Where: Constellation, 3111 N. Western Ave.

Tickets: \$20; www.constellation-chicago.com

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