

# OBITUARIES

ARCHIE ALLEYNE MUSICIAN, 82

## 'Mr. Swing' was a mentor to young talent

Influential jazz drummer fought against racial obstacles to land career-defining gig at influential Toronto bar, the Town Tavern

EDWARD BROWN

When Billie Holiday performed in Toronto, she knew who she wanted to provide the beat beneath her voice: Archie Alleyne, the drummer of choice for touring jazz greats. During his lengthy career, the pioneering musician not only helped to break down colour barriers in the city – becoming the first black performer to take the stage in many whites-only venues – but also mentored young black musicians and spoke up publicly on their behalf.

"Mr. Swing," as he was known, died on June 8 in Toronto at 82 as a result of prostate cancer, according to his long-time partner, Elvira Fernandes.

"Archie had so many of the right instincts when it came to playing the beat and keeping it steady and just providing the accompaniment you need without drowning you out," said Joe Sealy, an award-winning jazz pianist who had performed with him since the early 1980s. "There was no one better than Archie."

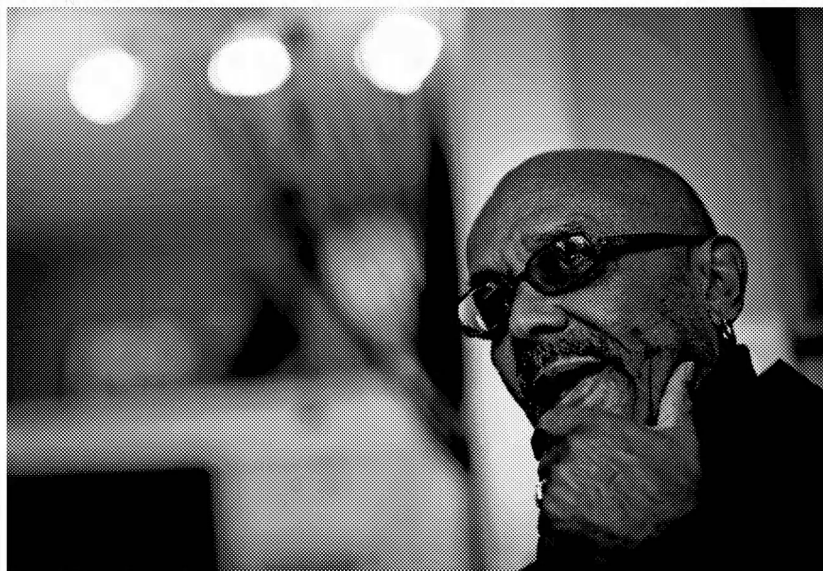
Archibald Alexander Alleyne was born on Jan. 7, 1933, the only child of Archie and Jessie (née Guppy) Alleyne, a biracial couple. Archie senior, whose parents had both emigrated from the Caribbean, worked as a railroad porter and spent long periods away from home. In his absence, Jessie's relatives would help her care for her son, particularly after he contracted polio at age four. The boy had to spend months in hospital and he was unable to walk for a time, but physiotherapy helped him resume a normal life.

Young Archie's formative years were spent in the busy Kensington Market, at the time a crowded Jewish enclave that was also home to the city's small black community. On the Sabbath, Archie would earn a dime here and there, doing work that his Jewish neighbours were prohibited from performing on that day for religious reasons.

His lifelong friend Richard Blackman was there with him every step of the way. "When you grow up with Jewish guys, they're just like brothers. If you knew them when you were a kid, you know them when you see them now," said Mr. Blackman, a retired Toronto garment worker.

The first sign that music might be Archie's future came when he was 10. He accompanied a friend to a piano lesson and was enthralled, begging his parents to let him take lessons, too. They could afford only 15 cents a week for lessons, which he took from Edmund Ricketts, a well-known member of the black community who played and taught many instruments. He introduced Archie to the piano, then to the trumpet.

Lessons ended when Archie couldn't afford an instrument. So he borrowed his father's whisk broom – a key tool for railroad porters – and with a pair of sticks began tapping out rhythms. Eventually, he acquired a used snare drum and cymbal. The self-education of one of the best hard-bop drummers in Canada had begun,



Archie Alleyne helped teach young Canadians about the African roots of jazz. FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL



Jazz singer Billie Holiday with Mr. Alleyne on the drums in her last show at the Town Tavern on Aug. 10, 1957. ERIK CHRISTENSEN FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

though he never learned to read music.

"When Archie got into the drums, that's all he wanted to do," Mr. Blackman recalled. "Drumming was his whole life. Next thing you know, he's working at the Town Tavern."

It didn't happen quite that quickly, of course. While his parents believed he was attending a cabinet-making course at Central Technical School and earning a diploma, the teenager was playing hooky, listening to jazz records and practising at the home of friend and fellow percussionist Ron Rully.

At 17, Archie landed his first paying gig at a teen social in a church basement. His father told his son to get a job, but it was tough going for someone who left school without finishing Grade 7. He found day jobs in the garment trade, but his real work was happening at night, performing at parties and social events. He would play until the wee hours,

go to bed around 3 a.m. and be up by 7 a.m. for his day job.

As opportunities began to emerge for Mr. Alleyne, so, too, did racial obstacles. Black musicians were routinely denied rehearsal space by white landlords. Most jazz venues were closed to black audiences. And nightclub owners required that performers belong to the Toronto Musicians' Association, which did not admit black people. In 1944, band leader Cy McLean, a mentor of Mr. Alleyne, became the first black member of the musicians' union. Mr. Alleyne became a member in 1953.

At 22, Mr. Alleyne was hired as house drummer at one of the city's leading clubs, the Town Tavern, whose owners were considering adding jazz on a trial basis. Mr. Alleyne was tapped to put together a sextet; the Town's foray into jazz proved successful and gave him a steady gig for 11 years. Celebrated American musicians were booked and he per-

formed with stars such as Ms. Holiday and jazz saxophonists Ben Webster and Lester Young.

The late-night jazz scene introduced Mr. Alleyne to Toronto's underbelly, complete with loan sharks, bookies, drug dealers, bootleggers and other undesirables. After playing the late set at the Parkside Tavern, he routinely accepted a lift home from a mob enforcer who frequented the establishment.

Mr. Alleyne also played in pit bands as part of live CBC television broadcasts, toured parts of Canada and entered the recording studio many times. A 1957 engagement with Ms. Holiday at the Stratford Festival was recorded live and released years later by Baldwin Street Music. He also played in U.S. clubs and went on the road with jazz pianist Marian McPartland, with stops throughout the U.S. Midwest.

At the Town Tavern, Mr. Alleyne met a patron, Airi Mantyla, a Russian beauty of Finnish descent. They married in 1963 and had three daughters, Tyrra, Trinaa and Tessama, and adopted a son, Ronnie. The couple divorced after 15 years.

In 1967, Mr. Alleyne was severely injured in a car accident. After lengthy rehabilitation, he resumed performing but his heart was no longer in jazz. In 1969, he shifted away from music, becoming a partner in a new restaurant, the Underground Railroad, along with Howard Matthews, Doug Cole, and former Argonauts Dave Mann and John Henry Jackson. The soul food restaurant was first of its kind in Toronto, and the partners took an active role in its operation.

In 1983, Mr. Alleyne married writer Katherine (Kitty) Black, a regular at the Underground, with whom he had a son, Aaron. Mr. Alleyne was interested in documenting the lives of black Canadian musicians, and the couple interviewed dozens of performers, recording their experiences. Before anything could be done

with their material, Kitty became ill, fell into a coma and died in 1999.

Mr. Alleyne and Mr. Matthews sold their share of the business to the others partners in 1982, and the drummer returned to his first love. He joined vibraphonist Frank Wright, pianist Connie Maynard and bassist Billy Best to form the Alleyne-Wright Quartet. But he noticed that a change had taken place in the club scene; in the past, a significant number of jazz-club patrons were black – now the audiences were mainly white. He rubbed some people the wrong way when he voiced his opinion that blacks weren't supporting their own. "Take it or leave it. I call it as I see it," he said in response to criticism for his blunt views.

In 1983, he publicly challenged a decision by the Canada Council for the Arts to stop subsidizing jazz recordings, at a time when the council's federal financing had increased. Mr. Alleyne believed the move would have a significant impact on black musicians, a view supported by the Toronto Musicians' Association and by Gerald Parker, head of the recorded sound collection at the National Library of Canada.

The subject drew media attention and the funding for jazz recordings was reinstated, which Mr. Alleyne attributed to his advocacy.

A six-week tour of African cities in 1989 with the Oliver Jones Trio galvanized his desire to educate young Canadians about the African roots of jazz and contemporary music such as hip-hop. Within a year of his return to Canada, he had written and produced a theatre show aimed at young audiences, *The Evolution of Jazz*.

In 2001, he started the Evolution of Jazz Ensemble to give young people what he had lacked as a budding musician: rehearsal and performance opportunities. Two years later, on his 70th birthday, the Archie Alleyne Scholarship Fund was launched to provide financial aid to music students at Toronto-area postsecondary institutions.

He was named a member of the Order of Canada in 2011 and, until a year ago, performed with his award-winning sextet, Kollage.

Mr. Alleyne leaves Ms. Fernandes; daughters Tyrra, Trinaa and Tessama; sons Ronnie and Aaron; and eight grandchildren. In the past decade, Mr. Alleyne's focus was on bringing together the past and the future. Ms. Fernandes believes one of the things motivating him was a desire to give back to the black community.

"He never forgot his own struggles or those of his parents," she said. "He believed if he let people know the contribution others had made advancing the cause, then his struggles would have been worth it."

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