

Tribute | Region

Karl Berger, music pioneer

His mind and work will live on

by Tad Wise

WITH THE DEATH OF Karl Berger on Easter Sunday at the age of 88, Woodstock and the world lost not only a master musician but a prolific, ground-breaking, internationally renowned composer and educator whose pioneering concepts based in the commonality of all music changed the way music can be taught, heard and learned.

It all began in 1953 on a musician's transport bus in Karl's home town of Heidelberg, Germany. Ingrid, a very young singer already known in jazz clubs around Europe, was to perform that night with her band, but her piano player couldn't make the gig. Karl, a classically trained piano player projecting cool and charming confidence who loved jazz and had just started playing in local clubs, was eager to take his place. His future wife, mother of their two children and primary musical collaborator — trusted her instincts. With their performance that night, Karl and Ingrid began a lifelong relationship and an unparalleled musical odyssey destined to survive them both.

By 1963, with a Ph.D in musicology and philosophy, Karl was an assistant professor of philosophy who every morning was asked by Ingrid, "Where are you going, Karl Berger?"

"I am going to work," he'd reply to the woman he acknowledged as his teacher.

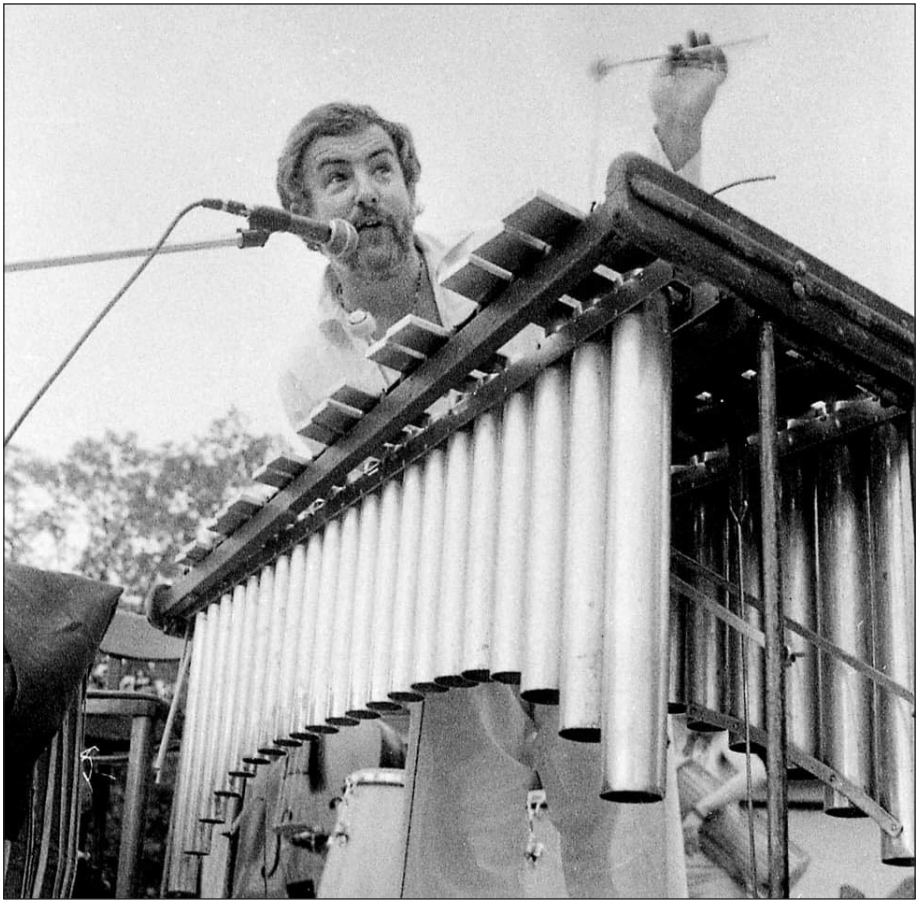
"That is not your work, KB," Ingrid would say. Every time.

Exactly what their work would be was revealed the instant the couple heard the opening bars of the Ornette Coleman Quartet's 1961 release: *This is Our Music*. Each turned to the other and said: "This is what we want to do."

Toward that end, Karl approached Don Cherry in a Parisian café in 1964 and said, "I'm Karl Berger, and I want to play with you."

Don looked him up and down and replied: "Rehearsal's at five." There and then, Karl was hired to play piano and vibraphone in a band with no common language except the music from around the world which Don had compiled while listening all but constantly, to a short-wave radio.

It was in 1966 that Don called Karl from New York City, summoning him



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Karl Berger.



Karl and Ingrid.

to play on "Symphony for Improvisers" -- soon hailed as one of the seminal free-jazz albums of the decade.

Don next introduced Karl and Ingrid to their foremost inspiration, Ornette Coleman, the American jazz saxophone player and Pulitzer Prize-winner known as the father of free jazz.

This meeting likely inspired Karl to teach musical improvisation to sixth graders in the New York City Young

Audiences public school program, seeking proof that profound musical ability is born into every human being before being tampered with by societal constraints.

"What is the common ground of all the music in the world that we can actually base this on?" Karl wondered in conversation with *The New York Times* in 2017. "Can we develop practices that are not based on any particular kind of music — practicing rhythm, practicing sound, but not designing the music that we are going to practice?"

Check out Woodstock

Unconvinced that "cold New York City" could ever embrace the radical optimism they shared with Ornette, Karl and Ingrid planned a return to Europe. They told Ornette. He responded, "No, you need to stay here, your music has to be heard."

They did, however, return to Europe, as Ingrid was pregnant with their second child. They returned in 1971, and musician Marion Brown turned history around. He drove them up to visit Woodstock, which they instantly adored.

Before the end of the year, Karl, Ingrid and Ornette Coleman signed papers

founding the Creative Music Foundation, and in 1972 the Berger family moved to the arts colony, where the very first Creative Music Studio kicked off in flutist Ilene Marder's living room.

Local musical heavyweights Jack DeJohnette, Dave Holland and Anthony Braxton gave generously and often of their time after CMS moved into its first home and headquarters, a vast barn on Witchtree Road. Here city-based jazz masters materialized beside local luminaries, astonishing student musicians who'd look up to find themselves playing alongside giants.

Such moments became the legend, lure, and gateway into the Creative Music Studio experience. Karl's steering of such ensembles placed him among a handful of pioneers shepherding the improvisatory orchestra as an emerging art form. These were student-based orchestras peppered with an occasional guiding artist.

In addition to DeJohnette, Holland and Braxton, other guiding artists eventually would include Don Cherry, Lee Konitz, The Art Ensemble of Chicago, Don Byron, Jamaaladeen Tacuma, Ava Mendoza, Nana Vasconcellos, John Lindberg, Cecil Taylor, Oliver Lake, John Cage, Charlie Hayden, Jimmy Giuffre, Pauline Oliveros, Marilyn Crispell, Tani Tabbal, Rick Cyro Baptista, Frederick Rzewski, Bob Moses, George Lewis, and Carla Bley.

During its first heyday (1973 through the mid-1980s), CMS moved into full-scale facilities in and around Woodstock, including a former soccer camp called Oehler's Mountain Lodge in West Hurley. "Intensives" became more focused, goals and side projects, more ambitious.

A sonic river moving ceaselessly through the Music Mind portal opened by the Bergers, never failed to demonstrate what Karl called "the principle of flow."

The phrase came into ubiquitous CMS use, circa 1985, after the Bergers made the first of three visits to teach at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado at the invitation of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (who gave Ingrid the name Sertso or "gold lake of understanding.")

Upon their return, it became difficult to establish where music ended and spiritual practice began.

Along the way, the very notion of "studying a specific instrument" flew out the window. Mornings began with exercises to clear the mind, find one's breath, find one's voice, then one's instrument. Ingrid and Karl taught a universal rhythmic language known as "Gamala Taki" facilitating cross-pollination among vastly diverse musical traditions. Workshops included learning to respond to music moving "faster than thought."

Karl got around

Aside from Karl's credentials as a five-time winner of the Downbeat Magazine Musicians Poll for his work on the vibraphone, Berger held high-level positions in several schools, including head of the music department and dean of jazz education at the University of Massachusetts/Dartmouth in the USA and professor of composition and dean of the music department/jazz at the Frankfurt Conservatory in Germany. He spent several years teaching at the New School in New York City.

Karl recorded no less than 26 albums under his own name. The extraordinary list of those he performed with, in addition to those previously mentioned, include Pharoah Sanders, Eric Dolphy, Ed Blackwell, Ornette Coleman, Sam Rivers, Gato Barbieri, Baikida Carroll, Steve Gorn, Bill Ylitalo, John McLaughlin, David Izenzon, Roswell Rudd, Henry Grimes, Slide Hampton, Abdullah Ibrahim, Gunther Schuller, James "Blood" Ulmer, Stu Martin, Steve Haas, Kurt Knuffke, Steve Lacey, Trilok Gurtu,

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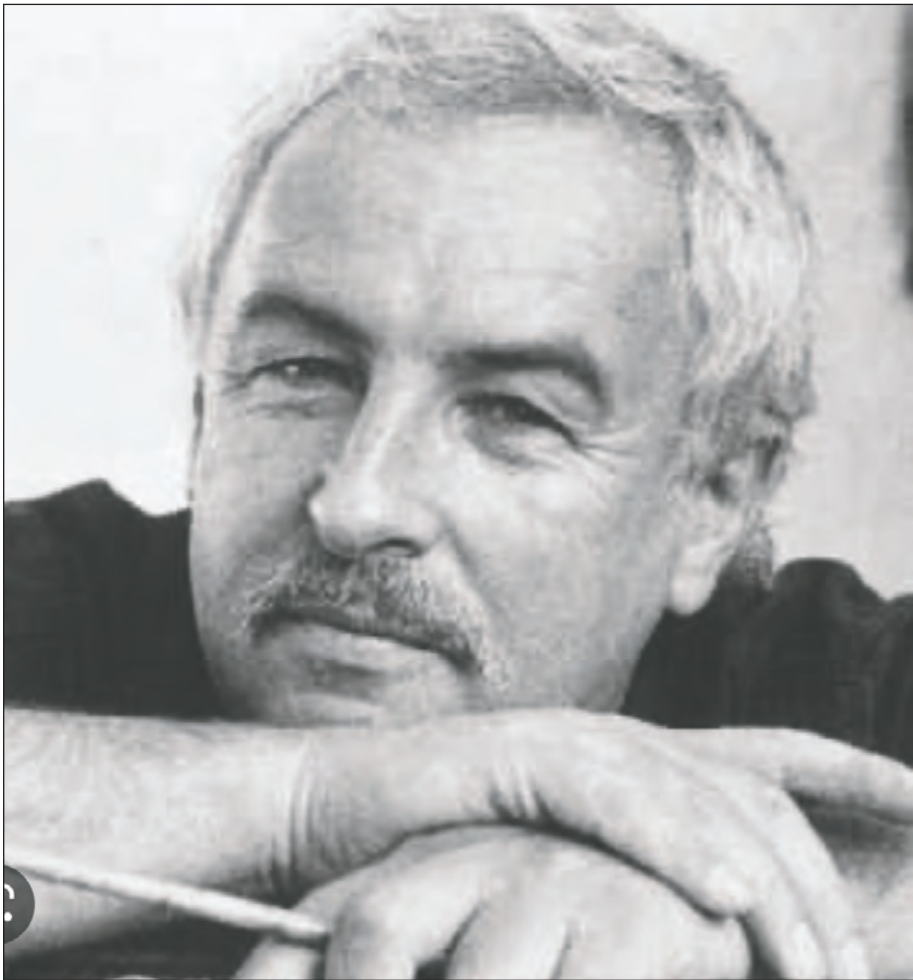
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Karl Berger.

Ivo Perlman, Carlos Ward, Ken Filiano, Michael Bisio, Kalaparusha Maurice McIntyre, Howard Johnson, Nene Cherry and others.

Close to his heart, Karl also recorded frequently with Ingrid, the heart and soul of CMS, who as an award-winning poet wrote lyrics for many of Karl's compositions

Karl never stopped. Only death itself could stop him.

Starting in the Eighties, the Bergers spent quite a bit of time in Turkey. In 2006, they brought eight other studio all-stars to an eleven-day CMS festival in Istanbul dedicated to the late saxophonist Ismet Siral, who'd studied at CMS in Woodstock.

In 1985-6 Karl and Ingrid embarked on an extensive European concert tour with a side trip to percussion festivals in New Dehli and Bombay featuring a duet with the African master drummer Baba Olatunji. Karl additionally travelled to the Philippines and Japan under the auspices of the Goethe-Institut. Ingrid traveled with him to Brazil and Africa in a trip hosted by Babatunde Olatunji.

Karl's near-supernatural intuitions next nurtured a side career as arranger for a variety of pop/rock/world music artists through his affiliation with record producer Bill Laswell. Once KB composed and conducted string



Karl Berger in action.

arrangements for Jeff Buckley's classic debut "Grace," a line formed eager for his talents. Natalie Merchant's "Ophelia" was next, then "Better Than Ezra," "Sly & Robbie, Swans, Coheed & Cambria, The Cardigans, Angelique Kidjo, Buckethhead, and Bootsie Collins. Contacted by Britney Spears' manager, who sought a string arrangement similar to that in "Eleanor Rigby," Karl coolly suggested he call George Martin.

New blood for CMS

It's often claimed that CMS was "reborn," which implies that it ceased to be following the recession of the late 1980s. This isn't entirely true. What is true, however, is that jazz aficionado Rob Saffer approached Karl in 2008

"Karl left a great legacy of teaching and created an environment for students that was as much a teaching of life as of music. I myself had the pleasure of meeting and working at the Studio with many extraordinary international musicians, and I am grateful for that. The creative consciousness never ends may he continue in peace."
— Jack DeJohnette

and offered to help bring CMS into the mainstream. Whether by coincidence or design, a triumphant turn of events would soon assure that outcome.

In 2012 Karl reinforced CMS's significant position in the history of modern American music through a digital archival project with Columbia University to preserve and make available recordings of exclusive historic performances by prominent innovators who had taught at and worked with CMS.

With this endeavor, also supported by the Grammy Foundation, hundreds of hours of archival recordings were digitized over several years by CMS recording engineer Ted Orr in the Sertso Recording Studio in Woodstock. Volume One received rave reviews from *Jazz Times* and from *Cadence Magazine*, which called it the best historical jazz record of 2014.

With a new board of directors in place, Karl handpicked Billy Martin (of Medeski Martin & Wood) after seeing him perform and teach, to be CMS executive director. Martin in turn, brought on New York City-based musician/composer/educator gabby fluke-mogulas program manager. Peter Apfelbaum and Steven Bernstein, an internationally respected pair of multi-instrumentalists who share a long history with CMS, became artistic directors,

Karl's memory will live on

Karl Berger's accomplishments have been explored in the 2018 feature documentary film, "Karl Berger: Music Mind," directed by Julian Benedikt. It's been described as "... an inside look into the creative process and unique approach toward music that makes Karl Berger one of a kind."

Robert E. Sweet wrote not one but two books on the Creative Music Studio: "Music Universe, Music Mind" and "All Kinds of Time: The Enduring Spirit of The Creative Music Studio." Most recently, long-time colleague and author Rick Maurer has set down remarkable

observations and anecdotes in Karl's own words in "The Music Mind Experience."

The inevitable shock awaiting the end of every human story is softened with the fact that Karl's mind interwoven with his extraordinary work will live on.

Karl is survived by Ingrid Sertso, his wife, vocalist and musical partner, and by his daughter Savia, a dancer and choreographer. His younger daughter, Eva, predeceased him. He is further survived by his many thousands of students, fans, fellow musicians, and friends around the world.

There will be a private memorial service at the KTD Tibetan Monastery in Woodstock, date to be announced. A public celebration of his life and music will be held at a later date.

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