

Toots Thielemans – chromatic harmonica, guitar

Born Jean Baptiste Frédéric Isidore Thielemans on April 29, 1922 in the Marolles district of Brussels, he played the accordion from the age of three (eventually as an entertainer in his parents' cafe) and the harmonica as a teenager, discovering jazz at 18 after hearing Louis Armstrong on record.

In the early 1940s, inspired by his fellow Belgian Django Reinhardt, Thielemans also took up the guitar (adopting the nickname "Toots" in this period), performed with Edith Piaf, toured with the American swing giant Benny Goodman's European band in 1950, and then moved to the US to perform with a Charlie Parker bebop band that included Miles Davis, and become a member of Shearing's popular quintet.

He led the expressive and intelligent Man Bites Harmonica! session in 1951, in classy American company that included the saxophonist Pepper Adams and the pianist Kenny Drew.

In this period, Thielemans also shuttled between the US and Sweden, and in Stockholm in 1961 recorded his much-covered jazz waltz Bluesette – a lilting, ostensibly unjazzy, but subtly blues-inflected theme originally delivered by the composer's guitar line and pure-toned whistling in unison, a personal sound that became a brand.

Toots Thielemans became famous as a master of two techniques that have otherwise made hardly a mark on jazz history – whistling, and playing the harmonica. The Belgian was no novelty turn, however, but a remarkable musician who adapted the advanced harmonies, hairtrigger accents and nimble melodies of the bebop idiom to a 19th-century Austrian instrument originally intended for the more leisurely rhythms of folk music, and who matched his jazz virtuosity with considerable emotional expressiveness and warmth.

Thielemans recorded with some of the most popular – and technically demanding – artists in jazz, including the bass-guitar virtuoso Jaco Pastorius, the piano maestros Herbie Hancock, Oscar Peterson, George Shearing, Fred Hersch and Kenny Werner, the innovative pop-jazz bandleader Quincy Jones, and the guitar star Pat Metheny. That richly accordion-toned, wittily pitch-bending and sometimes ravishingly romantic harmonica sound (he played a custom-built chromatic instrument that allowed him to roam through three octaves) featured on the soundtracks of movies including *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and *The Sugarland Express* (1974) – and brought a steady stream of studio work, including the Sesame Street theme tune, high-profile commercials, and appearances on albums by Paul Simon, Billy Joel and Johnny Mathis, among others.

Thielemans frequently worked with Quincy Jones and in the 1970s issued a stream of inventively contemporary albums including the dynamic *Images* with the pianist Joanne Brackeen. He partnered Peterson, Dizzy Gillespie and the popular Cuban Latin-jazz saxophonist Paquito D'Rivera at the Montreux jazz festival in the 70s and early 80s, played with the pianist Bill Evans's trio on *Affinity* in 1979 (one of his favourite sessions) and also made a superb bop-oriented 1980 live album with Peterson's sidemen Joe Pass and Niels-Henning Orsted Pedersen on guitar and bass.

Thielemans led both European and American quartets – the former featuring pianists Rob Franken then Michel Herr, bassists Rob Langereis, Theo De Jong then Michel Hatzigeorgiou and drummer Bruno Castellucci, the latter featuring the elite Evans-inspired piano trio of Fred Hersch, the bassist Marc Johnson and drummers Joey Baron then Adam Nussbaum. That group featured on Toots' 1988 Concord recording *Only Trust Your Heart*, a jewel of a session contemporary enough to include Wayne Shorter's *Speak No Evil* and creative enough to impart characteristic twists to Thelonious Monk's classic *Little Rootie Tootie*.

In 1992 Thielemans performed on Metheny's intimate *Secret Story*, and on his own *Brasil Project* vol. I & II, with Brazilian stars including Caetano Veloso, Ivan Lins, Milton Nascimento and Gilberto Gil.

Still possessed of his old wit and lyrical elegance into the 21st century, Thielemans made a sequence of fine recordings with a sensitive group including the Dutch bassist Hein Van de Geyn and the pianist Karel Boehlee.

In 2001, Belgium's King Albert II bestowed on him the title "Baron," making him Baron Jean "Toots" Thielemans.

In 2009, the US National Endowment for the Arts made him a Jazz Master.

His 90th birthday guests at Lincoln Center in 2012 included Herbie Hancock and the Brazilian singer-pianist Eliane Elias.

Because of health issues that led to show cancellations, Thielemans announced his retirement on 12 March 2014, cancelling all scheduled concerts.

Toots Thielemans passed away peacefully in Belgium on August 22, 2016, at the age of 94.