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CROSSROADS; For a Legendary Jazzman, the Music Has Stopped

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The small label above the buzzer Sal Mosca -- hardly draws attention to this three-story building on Fifth Avenue here. Few people notice the name, and even fewer would recognize it as one that appeared on the marquees of the biggest jazz clubs in New York and on landmark jazz records.

Sal Mosca played piano with such jazz legends as Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan and Miles Davis. He played in New York jazz clubs like Birdland and the Village Vanguard and gave solo concerts in Alice Tully Hall. But these days, Mr. Mosca is far from the limelight. For three years, he has not left his apartment, nor has he touched the Steinway grand piano where, between playing and teaching, he once spent 12 hours a day.

In 1997, at the height of his musical powers, Mr. Mosca stopped playing after surgery for colon cancer. His health has returned but his will to play -- to the bewilderment of his colleagues and fans -- has not.

Though he is capable of playing, and playing well, Mr. Mosca, 73, says he lacks the stamina for the extensive practice he requires of himself. So now he spends his days alone, pacing the music studio where he once taught 60 students a week and practiced five hours a day.

All that breaks the silence now are the car stereos booming down the street and the repetitive drone of the radio news. Sometimes the housekeeper who comes in the mornings hums a tune in the kitchen. But not Mr. Mosca. He never did practice music away from the piano, and he doesn't whistle in the shower or hum in the kitchen.

Mr. Mosca developed a way of playing with extraordinary freedom and spontaneity within strict and complex musical parameters. His playing, usually improvisations on old show tunes, avoided cliches and frequently meandered into unexpected tonalities, bringing real depth to the music.

Though he no longer plays, Mr. Mosca said: "It's all recorded up here. It's still fresh, and I carry it with me. I haven't lost a thing."

One recent fall morning, Mr. Mosca sat upstairs in his darkened studio. Once a sharp dresser, in dark turtlenecks and blazers, he now wears pajamas all day. He hasn't felt sunlight in years and his skin is pale. His weight has dropped and his beard is scruffy and overgrown. His hands, which still look large enough to palm a basketball, now hang at his sides, occasionally lighting a cigarette. "Music made life worth living," he said. "Now I get through the days as a person, not as a musician."

If it seems like Mr. Mosca has forgotten the world, the opposite is certainly not so. In December, Zinnia Records is releasing three CD's of his concerts. And he recently rejected an offer to play a concert in Belgium. Even after several years, there is still a buzz among his following speculating about why he quit his music. "He walks back and forth past that piano all day," said Don Messina, a longtime friend. "I say, 'Sal, what would happen if you just walked over to it and put your fingers on it?' But for whatever reason, he just won't do it. To me it's just mind-boggling that someone this great is still around and not being heard." Dick Hyman, the jazz pianist, grew up with Mr. Mosca in Mount Vernon. They played music together as teenagers and Mr. Hyman hired Mr. Mosca to play piano at his wedding in 1948.

"I've known guys who stopped playing entirely when they retired, and it has always puzzled me," Mr. Hyman said last month. "But they were technicians and studio players, not really devoted to creating, like Sal was. The others I can understand, but a fellow like Sal, I can't."

Mr. Hyman said he was sorry to hear of Mr. Mosca's inactivity, but added that it fit with his reputation as an uncompromising purist. "In a way I admire him for it," he said. "Sal was always a man of great principle. He knew what he wanted to do and what he liked and if he has decided not to play, I'm sure it's a matter of principle."

Mr. Mosca was perhaps the main protege of Lennie Tristano, the blind pianist and a cult figure among jazz aficionados. In liner notes for Mr. Mosca's 1977 album "Mosca Music," Mr. Tristano wrote that "of all the great people in jazz since the 1940's, Sal Mosca is one of the greatest."

Phil Schaap, a jazz historian, said Mr. Mosca played on several historically important records, including "Ezz-thetic" (Prestige) with Miles Davis and Max Roach, and had a heralded collaboration with the saxophonist Lee Konitz in the 1950's.

"He was under the sphere of Tristano, but he made a lasting historical impression in his own right," Mr. Schaap said. "He made a huge statement about musical wisdom and personalized identity."

In the 1950's, Mr. Mosca and Mr. Konitz headlined together, often playing opposite Charlie Parker at Birdland. The two were Mr. Tristano's main proteges and showed similar artistic potential. Mr. Konitz is now regarded as one of jazz's luminaries. He recently recovered from several heart operations and played at the Blue Note jazz club in Manhattan.

Reached at his Manhattan apartment, Mr. Konitz said: "Sal was a very special piano player and improviser and I'm very sorry he chose to retire early on in life. "He was a real improviser and that's a distinct difference to most jazz players," he said. "It's one of the tragedies that's hard to understand, how you can go from being so invested in the music and then give it up completely."

Mr. Mosca has two ex-wives and three children. His son Michael, the Mount Vernon police chief, said: "He won't come to my house or my sister's house for a meal. He just doesn't want to get out of there. I say, 'Don't you even want to sit down and play?' He says, 'Nope, I don't want to. I played the piano for 58 years. I don't want to do it anymore.' "

Mr. Mosca learned piano in the family's house on Eighth Avenue in Mount Vernon, studying artists like Fats Waller, Teddy Wilson and Art Tatum. He began playing for vaudeville acts at the nearby RKO Theater and for dancers at Tucci's restaurant on Fourth Avenue. "I played every nightclub on Boston Post Road, from the Bronx to Rye," Mr. Mosca said.

He turned down many offers that would likely have led to success. Playing opposite Lenny Bruce at The Den in Manhattan in the 50's, Mr. Mosca met many celebrities and actors. At that time, Orrin Keepnews, the jazz record producer, offered him a record deal. Mr. Keepnews had recently helped start successful solo careers for musicians like Bill Evans and Cannonball Adderley. But Mr. Mosca declined and would continue to decline offers to lead his own recording date.

"I never wanted to be caught in the web of commercial success," said Mr. Mosca, who felt that it would have distracted him from teaching and keeping an intimately personal stamp on his playing.

Now, Mr. Mosca seems content to be living out his days in obscurity. His mind is

still sharp and his thoughts are as penetrating as his music.

Jonathan Easton, a Manhattan psychoanalyst who studied music with Mr. Mosca for 10 years, said: "I believe it takes a delicate balance of emotional forces to facilitate the creation of art as extraordinary as Sal's, and that balance can be upset. "Many great artists are only able to maintain that balance for a short time," he continued. "Sal remained productive artistically for decades before withdrawing. Perhaps, from a psychoanalytic point of view, this is Sal Mosca's version of retirement."

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