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## Consuela Lee, jazz musician, Snow Hill Institute music educator dies in a hospital in Georgia

By: Monica Moorehead

Consuela Lee, an African-American jazz pianist, composer, arranger and music educator, passed away peacefully on Dec. 26 at Emory Hospital in Atlanta, GA. An aunt of filmmakers, Spike Lee and Malcolm Lee, she was 83 years old. Ms. Lee had dedicated her life to preserving the integrity of African-American

culture for future generations.

Before Ms. Lee moved to Atlanta in January 2007, she was the founder and artistic director of Springtree/Snow Hill Institute for the Performing Arts in Snow Hill, Alabama for almost 25 years. Snow Hill Normal and Industrial Institute was originally founded by William James Edwards in 1893 to provide an

education and vocational trades to impoverished, rural Black people, 30 years following the legal end of slavery. Today, Wilcox County remains one of the poorest counties in Alabama.

Edwards attended Tuskegee Institute and was a protege of its founder and president, Booker T. Washington. Ms. Lee was a granddaughter of Edwards and a

1944 graduate of SHI.

SHI permanently closed its doors in 1973 due to a desegregation edict. In 1979, Ms. Lee went door to door in the Snow Hill community to poll the residents on whether they wanted to see a school in their community. When the majority voted yes, Ms. Lee left her home in Virginia Beach, Va. to reopen her grandfather's school as a performing arts center. Ms. Lee had stated on more than one occasion that her vision since the age of 12 was to return home to work in the Snow Hill community.

The main goal of Springtree was to emphasize the contributions of African Americans to the creative arts, especially through the mediums of music, drama and dance. Children throughout Wilcox County from pre-school to high school were encouraged to attend Springtree following their regular classes during the school year and also during the summer months.

On Aug. 9, 1980, the first Snow Hill Day Celebration program was held at Wallace Buttrick Hall, the main campus building. Thus began an annual tradition of musical programs that attracted the Alabama community, Snow Hill alumni and supporters throughout the country. In 1993, to help commemorate the centennial of SHI, Spike Lee, legendary folk artist, Odetta, and other artists attended. In the latter years, other major artists such as drummer Max Roach, xylophonist Milt Jackson and actor Delroy Lindo came to Snow Hill to support Ms. Lee's work with the community.

Ms. Lee's students, particularly a group of xylophonists called Bright Glory, toured college campuses, film festivals and churches around the country to perform Ms. Lee's arrangements of popular jazz selections written by Duke Ellington and other famous jazz composers. The Celebration held in the summer of 2003 was the last, due to Ms. Lee's declining health.

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# Jazz was in her blood....

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Ms. Lee, who finally succumbed Dec. 26 to a three-year battle with dementia/Alzheimer's disease, was born in Tallahassee, Fla., on Nov. 1, 1926 to Arnold W. and Alberta G. Lee. She was the third of seven children. Her mother was the second child of SHI founder, William James Edwards and his spouse, Susie V. Edwards. Both of Ms. Lee's parents were musicians—her father was a comet player and band director at Florida A&M and her mother was a concert pianist.

When she was three years, Ms. Lee and her two older brothers, Arnold, Jr. and Clarence, were moved by their parents to Snow Hill, in the heart of Alabama's Black Belt. Ms. Lee started to play the piano at the age of three thanks to her

mother. Lee became a child prodigy playing classical music such as Chopin's etudes. When her father brought home a recording of Louis Armstrong's 1927 Struttin' with Some Barbecue, however, Ms. Lee fell in love with jazz; this love affair never ended. Among her favorite artists were Nat King Cole, Oscar Peterson, Art Tatum, Dizzy Gillespie and Sara Vaughn.

Following her graduation from SHI in 1944, Ms. Lee attended the historically Black college, Fisk University, in Nashville, Tennessee. There she heard an instructor, Alphonso Seville, play jazz.

In a July 31, 2001 New York Press interview, Lee told columnist Alexander Cockburn regarding Seville, "When I got to Fisk, and this was the odd thing about Black colleges, they didn't want us to play jazz, which they thought quite a cut below Bach, Beethoven and Chopin and the boys. They wanted us to concentrate on the Europeans. Of course we'd play jazz anyway. One day I went into the music building, 18 at the time, and there was this guy sitting there, playing like Tatum. I just stood there looking at him. He asked me my name and said, 'Are you a music student? Aha, do you play jazz?' 'No, but I'm trying.' He was a medical student at Meharry, a Black medical school in Nashville. We introduced ourselves and from then on it was Alfonso Seville. The heck with Beethoven. I got a C in piano. My report came home, my mother said, 'Consuela, a C in piano?' That's all she said. She's a very gentle person. I can't say enough about Alfonso Seville's influence on me as a pianist." Lee wrote and

performed on her 2001 CD, Piano Voices, "Prince of Piano—Alfonso Seville" in tribute to her teacher. ([www.mapleshaderecords.com](http://www.mapleshaderecords.com) <<http://www.mapleshaderecords.com>> )

Following her college graduation in 1948, Lee went to Florida to teach music. There she met and married basketball coach, Isaac Thomas Moorehead, in 1950. They divorced in 1990.

Ms. Lee continued her studies while teaching and playing the piano in nightclubs. At one upstate New York nightclub, she accompanied Sara Vaughn. She received her master's degree in music theory and composition from Northwestern University in 1959 and studied at Peabody School of Music and Eastman School of Music. In the early 1960s, Ms. Lee became choir director of the award-winning, Phillis Wheatley High School Glee Club in Houston, Tex. Ms. Lee taught theory and composition at a number of historical Black colleges such as Alabama State, Hampton Institute, Talladega College and Norfolk State University.

In the early 1970s, Lee and three of her siblings, A. Grace Lee Mims, Bill Lee and Cliff Lee, formed the musical group, The Descendants of Mike and Phoebe, which performed spirituals and jazz on dozens of Black college campuses. Mike and Phoebe were enslaved in Alabama.

Becoming more and more disillusioned with college teaching, Ms. Lee decided that the time had come to move back to Snow Hill to teach. She wrote many songs and folk operas for her students and the Snow Hill community to perform. Ms. Lee also led a 25-year legal campaign to help the community

win control of the more than 1400 timber-rich acres that Edwards bought to begin the school.

In 1981, the Alabama Historical Commission cited Snow Hill Institute as a significant landmark. Ms. Lee's determination led to the federal government officially registering the school in 1995 as an historic site.

Among her other accomplishments, she became the assistant music director in Spike Lee's second film, "School Daze". She also contributed music to the movie, "The Best Man", directed by Malcolm Lee. Amongst her numerous honors, she was inducted into the Alabama Jazz Hall of Fame and received the Governor's Arts Award, the Mary McCleod Bethune Award and an award from the Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative. She has performed at Carnegie Hall, Town Hall and Cami Hall in New York and also at the Hampton and Newport Jazz Festivals.

Upon hearing of his sister's death, bassist Bill Lee, commented, "She was the world's greatest musician."

Ms. Lee is survived by her two children, Monica Moorehead, of Jersey City, N.J. and Dr. Cameron Lee Moorehead, of Atlanta, Ga.; five siblings, Arnold Lee, of Camden, Ala., Bill Lee and Cliff Lee, of New York; A. Grace Lee Mims, of Cleveland, Ohio and Leonard Lee of Kalamazoo, Mich., and many cousins, nieces and nephews. A memorial for Consuela Lee is scheduled for Sunday, Jan. 17 in Snow Hill. Email: [mmashcat@verizon.net](mailto:mmashcat@verizon.net) <<mailto:mmashcat@verizon.net>> for more information. Go to [www.consuelalee.com](http://www.consuelalee.com) <<http://www.consuelalee.com>>



Consuela Lee in 1993



Consuela Lee and children

—Photos by Bill Hackwell