

Tomorrow Has Been Cancelled: The Brief and Brilliant Life of Gary McFarland

BY TODD MATTHEWS

Despite an impressive career as a musician, composer, and record producer, the jazz-pop figure Gary McFarland has remained a footnote in music. Born in Los Angeles in 1933, and raised in Grants Pass, Oregon, McFarland was a significant figure on the orchestral jazz and pop scene during the 1960s. He composed, performed, and recorded music with Anita O'Day, Bob Brookmeyer, Gerry Mulligan, Thad Jones, Bill Evans, Eddie Gomez, Sadao Watanabe, Clark Terry, Zoot Sims, Phil Woods, and Johnny Hodges. In 1968, he teamed with guitarist Gabor Szabo and vibraphonist Cal Tjader to create Skye Records. And his career is highlighted by two notable albums: the pop-influenced bossa nova *Soft Samba* (Verve, 1964), which was praised by mainstream audiences, but panned by jazz critics; and *America the Beautiful: An Account of Its Disappearance* (Skye, 1969): with songs such as "Due To a Lack of Interest, Tomorrow Has Been Cancelled," "Suburbia: Two Poodles and a Plastic Jesus," and "Last Rites for the Promised Land," the album is an emotionally charged masterwork for which critics raved.

McFarland died in 1971 due to strange circumstances: he ingested a drink laced with liquid methadone at a New York City bar. To this day, the details surrounding his death remain a mystery.

Seattle filmmaker Kristian St. Clair has been working on a film about McFarland since 2000. Currently in the final stages of post-production, *This Is Gary McFarland* includes rare footage

and photographs of the late composer and musician, as well as interviews with McFarland's family and closest musical friends. The film is St. Clair's attempt to bring his enthusiasm for (and justice to) McFarland onto the screen.



Composer and vibraphonist Gary McFarland

PHOTO COURTESY OF KRISTIAN ST. CLAIR

EARSHOT JAZZ: Who was Gary McFarland and why do you think audiences should know about him?

KRISTIAN ST. CLAIR: If you just stick to the jazz history, he's sort of a footnote as this rising-star arranger and composer who gained an initial following in the jazz world with the Gerry Mulligan big band, and then came out with a series of his own large-scale orchestral jazz albums. That's pretty much where

he got his initial jazz following. But he always really liked pop music, and in the mid-1960s he began to shift more toward pop-oriented recordings, which at the time were dismissed as easy listening. But he never gave up jazz altogether. That's pretty much why you'll find he's forgotten today. He kind of snubbed his original jazz fans, and no one ever really caught on with what he was doing with pop music because he died too early.

EARSHOT: His music has jazz, orchestral, and pop elements. How would you describe his audience?

ST. CLAIR: I think initially his audience was definitely the *Down Beat* magazine crowd. That's certainly where he got his original burst of fame. However, he had his largest success with *Soft Samba*, his first album to catch on with a wider audience outside of jazz. At the same time, that was the album that kind of enraged jazz fans. If you read the reviews of that album, they're amazingly hostile. It was because of that album, though, that he was able to tour with a jazz combo that had Phil Woods, and Sadao

Watanabe—it was one of Watanabe's first professional gigs in the United States.

EARSHOT: What was the difference between *Soft Samba*, which was panned, and *America the Beautiful*, which was praised?

ST. CLAIR: I think *Soft Samba* was the natural outgrowth of music that he felt a natural inclination toward, which was bossa nova, as much as it was just Gary trying to break out into a larger audience.

America the Beautiful combined everything, more than most of his albums. It has the rock element, the swing-jazz element—it's just all there. To that point, I think that was his most definitive musical statement. After that album, he arranged strings for Steve Kuhn, and he was working on a three-part suite for the Thad Jones big band, part of which was recorded after he died. I don't think he ever necessarily turned his back on jazz, but he was definitely a musically restless spirit. And he did have an innate sense of pop music. There's no doubt about that. I think that's why his music transcends jazz. There is this pop melody sense in Gary's music that I think is completely lacking in a lot of jazz. It makes his music very timeless. I listen to it today, and I'm always sort of amazed at how timeless it sounds. It's pretty prescient when you consider what music is today, and the DJ crowd and Electronica—a lot of his music predates that.

EARSHOT: What were the signature sounds of his compositions and the music he performed?

ST. CLAIR: There were probably a couple. His most instantly recognizable songs are on albums like *Soft Samba* or *The In Sound*, where he hummed along with the vibraphone. That was definitely his signature sound at the time. If you listen to his writings for big band, he definitely has these voicings. You hear them

and think, 'That's McFarland.' He always cited Gerry Mulligan, Miles Davis, and Duke Ellington as his biggest influences. There is this spacious sound to his music that I think probably comes from a West Coast influence—and Gerry Mulligan, in particular. You could say that influence also came from the fact that his primary instrument was the vibraphone. I think it's a combination of all those things.

EARSHOT: Do you think that because he settled on the vibraphone—which is an unusual instrument with a unique sound—it contributed to his signature sound?

ST. CLAIR: He picked the vibraphone because he thought it was easy to play. He was this guy who was sort of bumming around. He was from Grants Pass, Oregon, and he was bumming around Southern California. He wasn't sure what he wanted to do with himself. He was in his early twenties when he was drafted. While he's in the Army, he tries to play a bunch of musical instruments, and finally settles on the vibraphone—not because he liked it, but because it was easy to play. But he was a good vibraphonist. He was no virtuoso like Milt Jackson or Bobby Hutcherson, but he was good. He definitely had a natural talent, but he never pursued it in the classical sense of composition study or anything like that. He went to Berklee for one semester and dropped out. I guess he just figured that

he got what he needed. I think he got the bare minimum he needed to write, and then went off with it. Gary really is about as self-taught as you can be for that medium of jazz. Basically, he's an arranger-composer with a minimum skill-set. But that's why his music is so unique and original.

EARSHOT: How did you first learn about Gary McFarland?

ST. CLAIR: When I was in college and exploring jazz, I came across this Gil Evans Impulse album. It was a 1970s re-issue. It was a Gil Evans album coupled with Gary McFarland's *Profiles* album. I didn't know who Gary McFarland was. I bought it for the Gil Evans album. But I listened to the *Profiles* album, and I was pretty blown away. It's an album that is now considered strictly jazz, but it kind of transcends jazz. After that, I pretty much bought every album of Gary's that I came across.

EARSHOT: Why did you decide to make a movie about Gary McFarland?

ST. CLAIR: I've always wanted to make filmmaking my vocation, and I was looking for a subject after some failed projects. I had the records, Gary seemed like a cool guy, and that was it. It struck me as a pretty good story. He was this sort of largely self-taught person for whom everything sort of fell into place.



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I definitely think he tried hard, but he also got a lot of lucky breaks. Some of that was born out of his talent, but he also had this personality that just naturally made people want to help him out. And of course, there was his mysterious death. That was obviously an intriguing part of the story.



PHOTO COURTESY OF KRISTIAN ST. CLAIR

McFarland with trumpeter Clark Terry.

EARSHOT: What was the reaction from McFarland's family, as well as the other musicians with whom he worked, when you approached them about making a film?

ST. CLAIR: They were kind of surprised. They asked, "How do you know about Gary McFarland?" They were just very, very happy. Everyone welcomed me with open arms. I was always pretty surprised about that. For Gary's widow, I said, "Why don't I edit some of the footage that I shot already?" I did that, she liked it, and that was all. I'll always be grateful to his family. The more it went along, the more I thought, "Wow, this is pretty heavy. His family is trusting me with his legacy." I think the musicians and the family realized that just seeing me passionate about his music was enough for them. The musicians loved Gary. They were very glad he could potentially get his due. There's still a long haul with the film. There's not huge name recognition with Gary McFarland. But it's a great story. And his personality comes through in the film. I think that's another great asset to the film. There's a lot of humor. His brother said Gary would have been

at home on the set of *MASH*, and that's totally true. He had a very sardonic humor, which comes through in his music. I'm still surprised no one has really caught onto Gary. Everyone is discovering all these forgotten music people, and Gary is definitely one of those people who is ripe for rediscovery.

EARSHOT: Was there something about Gary that you came across while making the film that really surprised you?

ST. CLAIR: I'm constantly rediscovering things to like and appreciate in his music. I'll listen to new music now, and then I'll listen to Gary's music, and I'll just be surprised at how forward thinking and prescient a lot of his music is.

EARSHOT: Describe the circumstances surrounding Gary's death?

ST. CLAIR: When I first started the film, it was always said that he died of a methadone overdose in a bar. When I went to New York City for my first group of interviews, it took me forever to even nail down the exact bar. Everyone said it was a different bar. Some guy left his methadone, and Gary took it, drank it, and died. Gary definitely had substance abuse issues, so I wasn't necessarily surprised that happened. But then I interviewed Gene Lees, and he said Gary was murdered, that he was poisoned. It was a malicious prank. Someone put methadone in his drink without telling him, and he died of a heart attack. Those are pretty much the pervading thoughts about his death. I dug about as deep as you possibly could. I do know the methadone came from Mason Hoffenberg, co-author of the novel *Candy*, with Terry Southern. The frustrating thing was that everyone that was there was either dead or didn't want to talk about it. The whole thing is very strange. And Gary wasn't with his usual crowd of people when he died. It was almost like a perfect storm of shady characters that happened to be in the bar when he was there. It's really anyone's guess.

EARSHOT: Did the police investigate Gary's death?

ST. CLAIR: No. There was no police report. It's common knowledge that Gary died of a methadone overdose, but the death certificate says the cause of death was a fatty liver. He may have had a fatty liver, but that's not what he died from.

EARSHOT: Have you ever imagined what Gary would have gone on to do had he not died so young?

ST. CLAIR: I think he never would have given up his jazz roots, and I think he would have returned to that. But also, I think he would have ended up being the go-to person for a lot of pop projects. Kind of like how you see Deodato arranging strings for an album by Bjork. I think the same thing would have happened for Gary McFarland. His string writing is very unique and original. It completely lends itself to pop.

EARSHOT: There was a period there where critics and the jazz community panned his work. Do you think he ended up in a favorable light in the jazz world?

ST. CLAIR: I think now when people go back and listen to his work, yes. As it has been left standing, he's just pretty much forgotten or dismissed. Whenever he pops up in any jazz book, it's always just a footnote to the Gerry Mulligan recordings. They'll even say that he squandered his talents on lightweight pop projects. That couldn't be further from the truth if you listened to him. But that's where it stands. Obviously, if that's the only press he's getting, it's not really going to drive people to listen to his music.

EARSHOT: Do you ever wonder what he would think about somebody making a film about him?

ST. CLAIR: I think he would just love seeing all of his old friends and family. I think he would be happy that someone was paying serious attention to his pop music because that never happened in his lifetime.

For more information about Kristian St. Clair's film about Gary McFarland, visit <http://www.thisisgarymcfarland.com>.