

Stephen Rich Merriman—Musician Biography

Stephen Rich Merriman (b. 1946) grew up in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He started piano at age seven. After studying classical piano with Ruth Hayden for 4 years, followed by an intensive year with Frances Bacon and Christopher Loring at the *Longy School of Music* in Cambridge, he set out, at age 12, on his own. From then on he embarked on teaching himself harmony, composition and playing skills, including improvisation. Gaining some traction on a musical career by his early twenties, he became part of the very exciting music scene of the late 60s through the late 70s, working as a studio pianist and arranger in Boston and New York.

In Boston, *Intermedia Sound* (originally Petrucci & Atwell) at 331 Newbury Street was the premiere recording studio in the late 60s—the first to offer Ampex 2”-tape 16-track Dolby recording. Stephen did session and arranging work there with Maria Muldaur, Martin Mull, Nancy Michaels (whose album *First Impressions* was released on Warner/Reprise in January, 1969), Jeff (“Skunk”) Baxter (later of Steely Dan), Paul McNeil (who recorded an album called *Let It Rain*), David Grisman, Peter Rowan (many of these sessions were produced by John Nagy of “Earth Opera” fame), Livingston Taylor, the Batteau Brothers, Peter Johnson, and Carly Simon (the latter recorded and engineered by Eddie Kramer at Jimi Hendrix’s iconic *Electric Lady* studio in New York during the fall of 1969).

Stephen also taught piano, numbering among his students Loudon Wainwright III and Livingston Taylor and Tim Crouse (a reporter for *Rolling Stone Magazine*). He performed live, as back-up pianist/accompanist for Neil Sedaka (at the old *Paul’s Mall* nightclub in Boston), the comedian Pat Paulson (also at *Paul’s Mall*), the Batteau Brothers, Nancy Michaels, Joel Zoss, and Peter Johnson (who had an opening act spot for a memorable Van Morrison concert at *Symphony Hall*, Boston in 1972).

In late 1969 Stephen paired up with reedman John Payne (who had worked with Van Morrison and David Bromberg) as “The Smallest Band in Town.” This ensemble-duo played mostly at the *Club Casablanca* in Cambridge, with a notable stint at the *Jazz Workshop* (the Boston nightspot for jazz at the time) in January, 1971. He also recorded as part of a piano-percussion duo, first with David Humphries on conga drum, then Bob Fish on tabla. He rehearsed regularly with bassist John Neves, and the two had a memorable nightclub engagement which was broadcast live on WBUR-FM. He also served as piano accompanist to vocalist Amy Skolnick, and handled accompanist and arrangement duties for vocalists Susan Cartoun (in conjunction with Claudio Roditi and John Neves) and Tanja Solnik. Locally, Stephen opened as a solo

pianist for Blood, Sweat and Tears (at *Paul's Mall*, Boston), Stan Getz (at *Sandy's* in Beverly, Mass.), The Buddy Rich Big Band (also at *Sandy's*), and the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Big Band (at *The Performance Center*, at the time a great venue located in what is now called The Garage, in Harvard Square, Cambridge).

In the mid-70s Stephen was a member of The New England Jazz Quartet (with Berklee veterans Mike Scott, tenor saxophone; Gil Graham, percussion; Larry Fishman, upright bass) and also headed the Merriman Trio (with Tim Wells and James Rubin sharing bass assignments), and Dan Morgan (a percussion major at B.U. School for the Arts) on drums. These two groups played regular summer gigs in Newport, Rhode Island, and college concerts and nightspots from New England south to North Carolina, and west to Michigan. They also appeared as featured performers on PBS (Public Television).

Stephen also cultivated a career as solo composer-pianist, which continues to this day. During the 1970s he played the college campus circuit, with occasional nightclub appearances, and was a frequent live radio performer on a number of FM stations, including Boston's WHRB, WGBH, WERS and WBUR. Two LP's of his solo piano work were recorded and released on Avon Hill Records: *In My Own Time* (1975) and *The Seasons: A Portrait of the Life Cycle* (1978). The recordings were both successful, the former being featured on international *Voice of America* short-wave broadcasts, and the latter being featured on Robert J. Lurtsema's show, *Morning Pro Musica*, on WGBH and other NPR network affiliates on the morning of the winter solstice in 1978.

In May, 1980, during final exam week at Harvard University (where he was completing a master's degree in counseling), Stephen performed on the show *5 Live All Night* (WCVB-TV) hosted by Matt Siegel (at about 3AM!). This was his last public performance for fifteen years. Thereafter, although Stephen continued to play and compose privately for his own enjoyment, he devoted himself to a career as counselor/ psychotherapist, (very) eventually earning a Ph.D. in Health and Human Services at Columbia Pacific University. He established psychotherapy practices in Eastern and Western Massachusetts, where he specialized in the treatment of addictions and dissociative disorders, as well as helping visual artists and musicians work constructively with their issues around creativity (www.fourriverscounseling.com).

In the mid-1990s Stephen started to resurface publicly as a musician, playing out one night a week at a Harvard Square cafe called *The Left Bank* for about eighteen months. In 1997 he also played weekly at *The Green Emporium*, a fashionable dinner spot in Colrain, Western Massachusetts.

From 2000-03 Stephen was active in a jazz quintet in Western Mass. called *The Illiterati*, which played together every couple of weeks and had a number of public performances over a period of three years.

He continued to play solo piano in various venues. In December 2005, while on a trip to Paris, he sat in at *Le Baiser Salé*, a redoubtable jazz club. A subsequent trip to London had him sitting in at *Brown's Tavern* (as well as hanging out as *Ray's Jazz Cafe* on Charring Cross Lane). In February 2006, Stephen performed as part of a duo with psychiatrist David Mann (calling themselves "*HeadCats*") at the *Zeitgeist Gallery* in Cambridge, Mass. He also played, for about two years (2006-7), a regular Sunday brunch gig at the legendary *Club Passim*, in Harvard Square, Cambridge.

In August, 2007 Stephen relocated to San Francisco, where he had a number of regular gigs as a solo jazz pianist, including *Café Euro*, (Geary Blvd at 26th Avenue), *Simple Pleasures Café* (3334 Balboa Street), *Bazaar Cafe* (5932 California Street), and the *Garden House Cafe* (3117 Clement Street)—all in the Outer Richmond. He also had a regular playing gig at *Sheba's Piano Lounge*, on the Fillmore (1419 Fillmore, San Francisco).

After a three-year stint in San Francisco, Stephen relocated to Western Massachusetts, where he currently resides. Longstanding solo piano gigs include *Flavors of Cook Farm* (Hadley Mass.) where he has played a regular weekly gig for 7 years, *Sam's Pizzeria and Cafe* in Northampton, Mass. where he is into his fourth year of playing a Sunday lunch gig from 12 -2 pm, *Alina's Ristorante* in Hadley, Mass. where he played a regular Saturday evening gig for 2 1/2 years (consisting of a single 4 1/2 hour set—no break!!), and the storied *Green Street Cafe* (Northampton, Mass.) where he played a Thursday lunchtime gig for the last year that the Cafe was in existence. He also has become a regular fixture at the weekly *Vermont Jazz Center Jazz Jams* in Brattleboro, Vermont, where he has been polishing up his skills in impromptu "fake book" playing, combined with some serious playing with various rhythm sections and ensembles (a very helpful offset to all the solo playing he does).

In 2006, Stephen released a CD entitled *Modal Soul: Keyboard Jazz & Contemporary Piano for Contemplation & Delight*. This recording drew on a number of his compositions written between 1968 and 2006, featuring lots of split keyboard playing. The overall effect was a contrapuntal adventure in which the whole turned out to be greater than the sum of its (very interesting) parts. (*Modal Soul* is available through CDbaby.com, and downloadable through iTunes and other digital music download services.)

Not long after *Modal Soul* was released, the poet Johnn O'Sullivan did a re-release (in CD format) of an earlier LP that he and Stephen had collaborated on

in the 1970s, called “SEEDS.” This work combines spoken-word poetry by Johnn with set compositions and pianistic improvisations by Stephen, the result of which is a delightful, remarkable and moving example of psychical interplay. (“SEEDS” is available through CDbaby.com)

More CD recordings are in the works.

Most recently Stephen has become focused, once again, more on composing. He recently got ambushed by a creative surge that resulted in a tune/song/composition devoted to the inimitable jazz trumpet player Lee Morgan. Entitled “Requiem for Lee,” the tune seeks to honor and memorialize the legacy of Lee Morgan’s unique combination of exuberant, joie-de-vivre playing along with his compelling compositional gifts.

Note: To listen to a recording of “Requiem for Lee,” please go to:

<https://soundcloud.com/user-103266658/requiem-for-lee>

Stephen continues on into life's “later innings” deriving as much satisfaction from, and finding as much joy in, composing and playing piano-based works, as he ever has during the 62 years since he took his first piano lesson (March 11th, 1954). Over that span nearly 100 compositions, both set pieces as well as jazz compositions (created both as stand-alone pieces and vehicles for jazz improvisation and interpretation, along with a four-movement piano suite entitled *The Seasons: A Portrait of the Life Cycle*) have been ushered into existence. At the age of 70, it is a great satisfaction to him to realize that he plays and composes at least as well as he ever has—and quite possibly even better!.

He can be reached at:

Email: serenity@merrinotes.com

Web: merrinotes.com

Mobile: 617-251-7770