



Photo by Michael Coakes/Coakes Studio

Ramsey Lewis

Jazz Legend

After more than seven decades, he still revels in adding new twists to his repertoire.

Composer and pianist Ramsey Lewis has been a musician for seventy-two of his seventy-six years (at this writing, in 2011). He represents the great diversity of music for which Chicago is so renowned. Lewis began captivating fans with his first album, Ramsey Lewis and the Gentlemen of Swing, by the Ramsey Lewis Trio. His chart toppers include “The In Crowd,” “Hang On Sloopy,” and “Wade in the Water.”

A lifelong Chicagoan, Lewis has garnered three Grammy Awards and seven gold records. He was awarded the prestigious Lincoln Academy of Illinois “Laureate” in 1997 and was the recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Masters Award in January, 2007. In addition to recording albums and performing live, Lewis is the artistic director of the Ravinia Festival’s jazz series. He tours regularly with his quintet, featuring Henry Johnson on guitar, Joshua Ramos on bass, Charles Heath on drums, and Tim Gant on keyboards.

I started taking lessons at age four. My father was the choir director at our church and, at his request, I began playing for the gospel choir at age nine. From the ages of four to fifteen, I was immersed in both gospel music and European classical music. Gospel music still is very important to me. I have about 800 songs on my iPod under the title “Sunday Morning Music,” but I play them on other days of the week, too. A couple of titles that stick with me are Thomas A. Dorsey’s “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” and “Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior.”

As a creative person, you are always changing. Your basic fingerprint is always there, but your interpretation of life’s experiences affects how you live life – and how you create. People, events, and activities in your life resonate deeply, whether they are positive or negative. They affect your artistic expression and your being. Life is full of both blessings and lessons, and it’s important to see the value in all of your experiences.

I started writing long-form music about five years ago, and it requires a different kind of creative process than writing melodic songs, many of which are just a few minutes in length. A few years ago, Ravinia Festival Chief Executive Officer Welz Kauffman suggested I compose a special piece in honor of Abraham

Lincoln's 200th birthday. It was daunting at first, but I did it by immersing myself in Lincoln. I visited the Lincoln Museum in Springfield and the Chicago History Museum to learn as much as I could about the man.

When I finally sat down to compose "Proclamation of Hope," it was like writing to pictures in my mind. Once I did the work, it wasn't so difficult. But that's how life is, isn't it? You believe the hill is higher than it actually is.

After performing the piece at Ravinia in June 2009, I was invited to do so at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Public television also broadcast the concert. It was all quite momentous. [Note: In writing about "Proclamation of Hope" the *Chicago Tribune* said, "What Lewis originally intended as a celebration of black music in America and Lincoln's role in igniting it eventually blossomed into an exploration of the links between Presidents Lincoln and Obama."]

Another long-form work yielded a meaningful moment that turned on a light for me. It happened in connection with a collaboration between the Joffrey Ballet and myself. When one of my sons came backstage after a performance, he said he'd realized that it was the first time I'd ever received a standing ovation without playing any of my hits. At most of my concerts, that's what the crowd wants to hear.

I was inspired by my wife of twenty years, Jan, in composing music to be performed by the Joffrey. In terms of long-form pieces, I'm not sure how far I could have gone down that road if it hadn't been for her. She is not only my muse; she is my sounding board. I titled that piece of music "To Know Her Is to Love Her."

Ramsey Lewis was interviewed by telephone on May 9, 2011. His birthday is May 27, 1935.

Favorites

BOOKS

A Course in Miracles by Dr. Helen Schucman, which describes a philosophy of forgiveness including practical lessons and applications for the practice of forgiveness in daily life; *The Miracle of Mindfulness* by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn, which is a classic volume written in 1974 that can help anyone to develop the mindfulness skills necessary to slow down and start living life in the present moment; and *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace . . . One School at a Time* by David Oliver Relin and Greg Mortenson.

PERFORMERS

Opera singer Renée Fleming; pianist and composer Vladimir Horowitz; jazz saxophonist and composer Charlie Parker; and jazz pianist Art Tatum.

PLACE

The place within oneself; that's where the kingdom of heaven lies.

QUOTATION

"Wherever you go, there you are."

— JON KABAT-ZINN, MEDITATION MASTER,
FROM THE TITLE OF HIS CLASSIC BOOK