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Lee Young Dies at 94; Jazz Man and Producer

By [DOUGLAS MARTIN](#)

Lee Young, who emerged from a family with musical roots deep in New Orleans jazz, drummed for greats like Ellington and Basie, became a pioneering black man in music's executive suites — and survived his musician brother, Lester, by a half century — died on July 31 at his home in Los Angeles. He was 94.

The death was confirmed by his grandson Wren Brown.

In contrast to his brother, whose debilitating battle with alcohol and personal demons is almost as well known to jazz fans as his saxophone solos, Lee Young, a teetotaler, lived a long life of accomplishment in both performance and the music business.

His recollections, from touring in a carnival act as a child with Lester and their sister, Irma, in the 1920s; to playing drums and cutting his first records with Fats Waller in the 1930s; to helping forge a vibrant jazz scene in Los Angeles in the 1940s, were recorded by the oral history program of the University of California, Los Angeles.

His experiences included teaching [Mickey Rooney](#) to play drums for a movie and becoming the first black — and for several years the only one — to be a regular studio musician in Hollywood. He played drums and conducted for Nat King Cole.

Mr. Young played on literally thousands of records, said Phil Schaap, the jazz historian.

As a record producer, Mr. Young developed a reputation for knowing in advance what would sell, and discovered [Steely Dan](#), the jazz fusion-rock band.

Mr. Schaap called Mr. Young “a most significant figure in jazz who directly connected us to the music's early glories: the birth of jazz in New Orleans, the jazz age, the swing era and bebop.” Mr. Schaap also said that Mr. Young, who led an integrated band when that was unusual, was “a hero in the fight for integration.”

Leonidas Raymond Young was born in New Orleans on March 7, 1914, to parents who were both musicians and teachers. His father had learned to play instruments including the violin, trombone and bass as he traveled the deep South at the time jazz was sprouting in New Orleans.

Mr. Young's father was a stern taskmaster, drilling music into his children by putting notes on a blackboard before they even started school. He made them into a novelty dancing act for traveling carnivals until they learned to play instruments. Lee, the youngest, had visited more than 30 states by the time he was 8.

Lee was different from Lester as a youth. Lester would practice his saxophone for hours; Lee would rather sneak off to play ball. Lester begged off some of the vaudeville gigs, particularly longer stays in cities like Minneapolis and Phoenix.

The family finally settled in Los Angeles, where Lee and his sister entertained at the dance marathons that were the rage during the Depression. By this time, Lee was performing most often as a drummer, having switched from the trombone; Lester had decided to specialize in saxophone instead of drums.

Lee attended high schools in Los Angeles. He began playing with Mutt Carey, a trumpeter and bandleader who had gotten his start in New Orleans, and also toured with [Ethel Waters](#). He made his first records at 23 as Fats Waller's drummer. He played with [Lionel Hampton](#) and others, and started his own orchestra, actually a smaller combo. His brother joined the band in 1941, and its stature grew exponentially. They toured for the U.S.O., broadcast with [Billie Holiday](#) and were a hit in New York.

LA Weekly said in 2004 that Mr. Young for years was the only black staff musician at a major studio. Mr. Schaap wrote that Mr. Young got his job by turning down a chance to be Stan Kenton's drummer at a time when Kenton led the nation's hottest band.

In 1953 Mr. Young became Nat King Cole's drummer and conductor, Mr. Schaap said. From this pinnacle of the music world, he had new insights into the business side of music, and decided to join it. He produced for Vee-Jay, Motown and ABC/Dunhill Records.

Around 1937, Mr. Young met a teenager named Norman Granz on a tennis court and began playing against him regularly. Granz was enthralled when Mr. Young introduced him to jazz and went on to create Jazz at the Philharmonic, the all-star touring group that took the music out of smoky bars to jam in the concert halls; Mr. Young and his brother can be heard on some of the recorded jam sessions.

Lester Young died in 1959; Irma died in 1993. Lee Young is survived by his wife, Geraldine; his daughter, Rosalind Brown of Los Angeles; his son, Lee Jr., of Los Angeles; his half-sister, Vivian Johnson of Louisiana; six grandchildren; and nine great-grandchildren.

Mr. Young was interviewed for a book, "Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles" (1999) and said that when the music industry was segregated, white musicians were paid for seven nights of work, even though they were given one day off, while blacks had to work all seven days for their pay.

"I just loved to play so much, I went to different clubs and told the guys that if they wanted a night off, I would play in their place," Mr. Young said. "So I got a chance to play all kinds of music, because I used to let these guys off."

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