

# THE MUSICAL ART OF LEO MEIERSDORFF

By Scott Yanow



**Leo Meiersdorff (1934-94) was a true rarity, an artist who spent much of his career as a jazz painter. His colorful depictions of jazz musicians have a distinctive personality that conveys the joy and excitement of the music. His widow Jennifer Meiersdorff, who represents the Leo Meiersdorff Estate, agrees and says, “Many musicians have told me that he captured the energy and feel of jazz in his work.”**

**Born in Berlin, Germany on Dec. 14, 1934, Leo Meiersdorff was creative from an early age. Always interested in painting, he got in trouble with his parents once for painting with shoe polish on the walls. His relationship with his parents was often difficult for, while they wanted him to eventually become a doctor or a lawyer, he was much more interested in art and music, learning to play piano. One time when he was a teenager and performing with his newly formed jazz combo at a concert, his angry father found him and dragged him off the stage.**

**Despite that, young Leo went his own way. He studied art at the Berlin Art Academy (Hochschule für Bildende Künste), raising money by working on a herring trawler in the North Sea and as a merchant seaman since his parents refused to support him. He became a master student of the Expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka in Austria and was also inspired by Max Pechstein and his art professor, Karl-Schmidt Rottluff, both influential members of Die Brücke (The Bridge), a movement that impacted modern art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.**

**Meiersdorff, who listened to jazz on the Armed Forces Radio and led his own jazz combo in Berlin, reached the turning point of his life in 1957. When there was a contest to design a poster for an upcoming “Jazz at the Philharmonic” concert presented by Norman Granz, he entered the competition and won, beating out one of his own professors! He was mesmerized by the music that he heard at the JATP concert and soon visited the United States for the first time.**

**Leo Meiersdorff, who became a permanent resident of the U.S. in 1966, spent several years alternating between living in Southern California, New York City and back in Germany. As an artist he became quite prolific, often using watercolors or ink in his expressionistic figural paintings with his art being featured in galleries on both coasts. Whether it was seeing Thelonious Monk in New York, portraying Dizzy Gillespie in several paintings, hanging out at the legendary Slug’s club, or spending time at Shelly’s Manne-Hole in Hollywood (he designed a logo for the club), Meiersdorff pursued both his art work and his love for jazz. He became a friend of producer Hank O’Neal, designing over 15 album jackets for O’Neal’s Chiaroscuro label and several for Concord. His most famous artwork, which later became the cover for the Blue Note classic Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Consummation record, depicts a cornetist (dressed in blue) and a drummer (wearing a red jacket) deep in musical flight with their backs toward the viewer.**

**A producer for the first New Orleans Jazz Festival spotted one of his paintings in a gallery on Lexington Avenue in 1969, contacted him, and hired Meiersdorff to be the festival’s art director. Loving the atmosphere of New Orleans, Meiersdorff lived and worked in New Orleans during 1969-79 including occasionally playing music (on piano and trombone) and having his own short-lived label which resulted in an album by trumpeter George Finola. It was an extremely busy decade for the artist. He often produced as many as 125 works of art in a**

month, from drawings to large watercolors. He also created a work that was commissioned by Duke Ellington (around 1969). Jennifer Meiersdorff summarizes this period: "It has been noted when Leo arrived to New Orleans, color arrived. It was a profound turning point for the New Orleans art scene."

Jennifer met Leo in 1980, shortly after he had moved to Lake Arrowhead in Southern California. "Leo's art appeared in numerous one-man and group shows. He painted in a variety of media, most notably in watercolor and ink, on both coasts as well as New Orleans, where Leo made his home for ten years before returning to the West Coast. By the time I met him; he was in his forties and had stopped playing music due to health issues related to diabetes. He continued to fill the demand for his work to galleries up and down the West Coast and internationally, while still retaining his New Orleans connections. Leo was a very funny and highly intelligent man. He always had lots of stories and made friends everywhere he went. The most important thing that he taught me was to get to know people from all walks of life and not to be afraid to do so as everyone has something to offer. Leo had many friends—mostly musicians, but following his way of life—he befriended everyone." Meiersdorff remained quite busy during the 1980s including fulfilling a commission from Herb Alpert to create six large paintings for the entry way of A&M Records, and working on many projects for vineyards, restaurants and jazz clubs. Woody Herman had a short-lived club in New Orleans at the Grand Hyatt Regency Plaza and Meiersdorff travelled back to New Orleans to paint a huge 165 -foot mural for the bandleader.

Leo Meiersdorff passed away on June 26, 1994 at the age of 59 from the effects of diabetes. Twenty-three years have passed but his fame as a jazz artist has only grown. With his works scattered around the world and occasional copyright infringements in the form of unauthorized or altered prints popping up, Jennifer Meiersdorff decided that something needed to be done. She started a website, opened up a Facebook site for Leo and organized his work. "I had returned to teaching and later remarried. Because Leo did not have any children or siblings, it was up to my husband and I to take care of his artistic legacy. Over the years, numerous people have contacted me and shared Leo's artwork; many are early Expressionist works that I had never seen before. In his life, in addition to the paintings, he designed thousands of projects and nearly a hundred record covers, including many that were uncredited. My goal is to introduce his work to a new generation."

The Leo Meiersdorff Estate has been licensing some of his works to support a variety of organizations including those involved in jazz education. The television industry has licensed artwork to use in the background including NBC Universal's "Chicago Fire", "The Flash" (Warner Bros.) and the second season of CBS' "NCIS: New Orleans." In 2015, there were exhibits of many of his jazz paintings and posters at the Monterey Jazz Festival and Jazz at Filoli. This summer The Jazz Loft, a museum in Stony Brook, Long Island that is devoted solely to jazz, is having a Leo Meiersdorff exhibition that will feature Jennifer giving a presentation about his life and art, along with a performance by a big band.

"That will be a lot of fun and something that Leo would have enjoyed," says Jennifer. "I hope that all of this activity will lead to him being recognized for his contributions to both the art and jazz worlds."

More information about Leo Meiersdorff's life and art can be found at [www.leomeiersdorff.com](http://www.leomeiersdorff.com) and [www.meiersdorffenterprises.com](http://www.meiersdorffenterprises.com).

Article courtesy of Scott Yanow, veteran jazz journalist and critic: [www.scottyanow.com](http://www.scottyanow.com)