



Her magical hands, 2001

In 1981, the Alabama Historical Commission cited Snow Hill Institute as a significant landmark. This recognition led to the federal government officially registering the school in 1995 as an historic site due to Ms. Lee's efforts to reopen the school.

Among her other accomplishments, Ms. Lee was the assistant music director for Spike Lee's second film "School Daze." She also contributed music to Malcolm Lee's movie "The Best Man."

Among her numerous honors: Consuela Lee was inducted in 1992 into the Alabama Jazz Hall of Fame. She received the Governor's Arts Award and the Mary McCleod Bethune Award. In 2005, she received an award from the Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative at the Rosa Parks Museum in Montgomery, Ala.

Ms. Lee performed at Carnegie Hall, Town Hall, Lincoln Center and Cami Hall in New York and at the Hampton and Newport Jazz Festivals. She — along with her drummer, Sangoma Everett — performed in a jazz festival dedicated to women artists in Vicenza, Italy, in 2001.

Ms. Lee was one of the members of the Board of Directors for the Birmingham Youth Jazz. She and the late trumpeter Jothan Callins were founding members of the jazz group Quartet Alabama. They were also founding members of the 21st Century Jazz Congress along with other jazz musicians from Georgia, Michigan, Tennessee and Alabama. The 21st Century Jazz Congress' mission was to teach the true origins of jazz to youth and to encourage them to perform and preserve jazz.

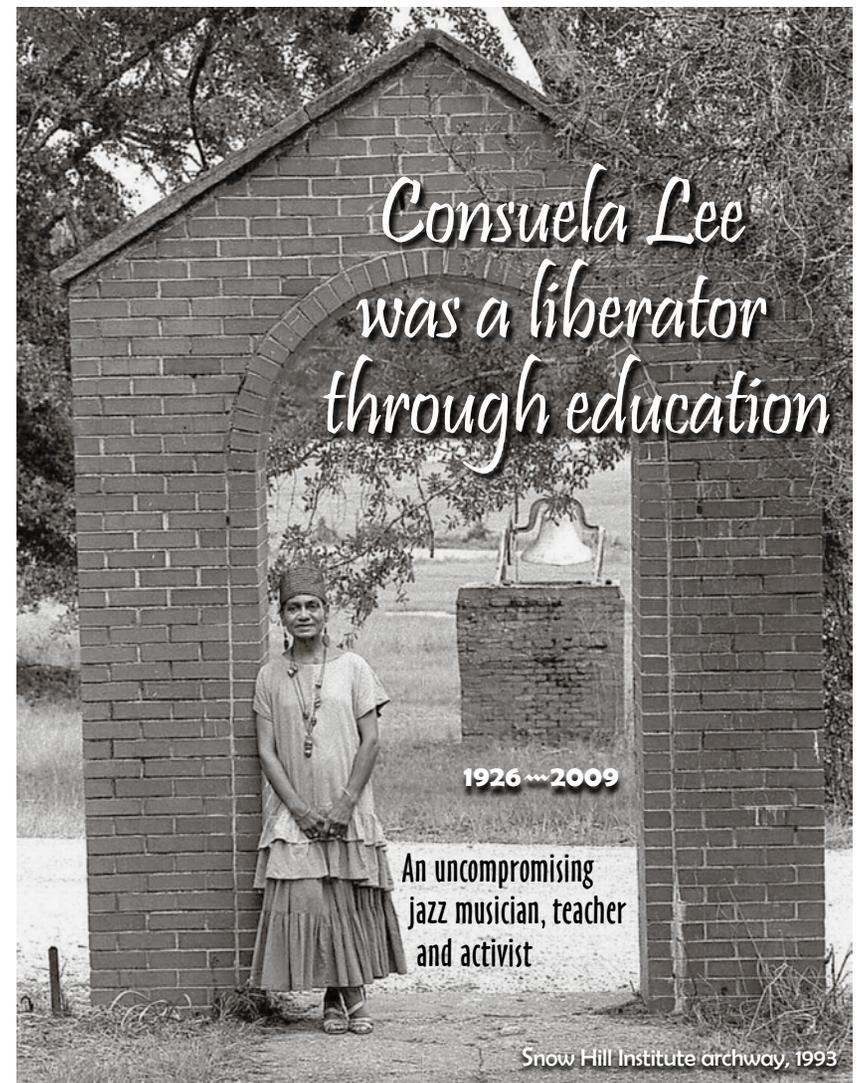
Consuela Lee was more than just "the world's greatest musician," as her brother, bassist Bill Lee, called her. She was a champion for the liberation of Black people, especially in rural areas. She commented in 2006: "The state of Alabama, and the corporate timber interests it is subservient to, have kept the Black community in semi-slavery conditions. Reparations must be paid for the crimes committed against the multi-generations of Black people in Alabama's Black Belt."

Ms. Lee is survived by her two children, Monica Moorehead of Jersey City, N.J., and Dr. Cameron Lee Moorehead of Atlanta, Ga.; five siblings, Arnold Lee of Camden, Ala.; Bill Lee and Cliff Lee of New York; A. Grace Lee Mims of Cleveland, Ohio; and Leonard Lee of Kalamazoo, Mich.; cousins, nieces, nephews; loving students, colleagues and admirers. Another brother, Clarence Lee, passed away in 2008.

Monica Moorehead wrote this obituary. Go to www.consuelalee.com for information on The Consuela Lee Foundation for Music Education.

With her children, Monica and Cameron Moorehead in Snow Hill, 2001

1993 and 2001 photos taken by Bill Hackwell



Consuela Lee, an African-American jazz pianist, composer, arranger and music educator, passed away on Dec. 26 in Atlanta, Ga. The aunt of filmmakers, Spike Lee and Malcolm Lee, she was 83 years old.

Ms. Lee dedicated her life to helping preserve for future generations the integrity of African-American culture, which she consistently traced to the resistance to slavery.

She was the founder of Springtree/Snow Hill Institute for the Performing Arts in Snow Hill, Ala., and its artistic director for almost 25 years. Snow Hill Normal and Industrial Institute was originally founded by William James Edwards, Ms. Lee's grandfather, 30 years after the legal end of slavery in 1893 to provide an education and vocational trades to impoverished rural Black people. Today, Wilcox County remains one of the poorest counties in Alabama.

Ms. Lee characterized the Alabama schools as a death sentence for Black children.

SHI permanently closed its doors in 1973 due to a desegregation edict. In 1979, Ms. Lee went door to door in the Snow Hill community to poll the residents on whether they wanted to see a school in their community. When the majority voted yes, she left her teaching job at Norfolk State University to reopen her grandfather's school as a performing arts center. Ms. Lee had vowed since the age of 12 that she would one day return home to teach in the Snow Hill community.

Springtree's main goal was to emphasize the contributions of African Americans to the creative arts, especially through the media of music, drama and dance. Children throughout Wilcox County, from pre-school to high school, were encouraged to attend Springtree after their regular classes during the school year and also during the summer months. Ms. Lee also took a job as an artist-in-residence and traveled to schools in various Alabama counties to teach music in schools that had no music programs.

From 1980 until 2003, Snow Hill Day Celebrations included musical programs that attracted the Alabama community, and Snow Hill alumni and supporters from throughout the country. These programs were carried out on shoestring budgets, mainly small grants. In 1993, to help commemorate the centennial of the founding of SHI, Spike Lee, legendary folk artist Odetta and other artists attended.

In later years, other major artists such as drummer Max Roach, vibraphonist Milt Jackson and actor Delroy Lindo came to Snow Hill to support Ms. Lee's work with the community.

Ms. Lee's students, particularly a group of xylophonists called Bright Glory, toured college campuses, film festivals and churches around the country to perform her arrangements of popular jazz selections written by Duke Ellington and other famous jazz composers. They appeared in 1988 on WABC's "Like It Is" TV show hosted by Gil Noble in New York City.



Consuela Lee and Bright Glory, 1988

Consuela Edmonia Lee, who succumbed Dec. 26 after a three-year battle with dementia/Alzheimer's disease, was born on Nov. 1, 1926, in Tallahassee, Fla., to Arnold W. and Alberta G. Lee. Her mother was the second child of SHI founder William James Edwards and Susie V. Edwards.

Ms. Lee's father was a cornet player and band director at Florida A&M. Her mother was a classical pianist and teacher.

When she was 3 years old, she moved to Snow Hill and began to play the piano. Lee became a child prodigy, playing classical music such as Chopin's etudes.

When her father brought home a recording of Louis Armstrong's 1927 "Struttin' with Some Barbecue," however, Ms. Lee fell in love with jazz. This love affair only ended with her death. Among her favorite artists



At 5 months old, 1927

were Nat King Cole, Oscar Peterson, Art Tatum, Dizzy Gillespie and Sarah Vaughn.

Following her graduation from SHI in 1944, Ms. Lee attended the historically Black college Fisk University in Nashville, Tenn. There she heard an instructor, Alphonso Seville, play jazz and soon afterward she became his pupil.

In a July 31, 2001, New York Press interview, Lee told columnist Alexander Cockburn, "When I got to Fisk, and this was the odd thing about Black colleges, they didn't want us to play jazz, which they thought quite a cut below Bach, Beethoven and Chopin and the boys. They wanted us to concentrate on the Europeans. Of course we'd play jazz anyway. One day I went into the music building, 18 at the time, and there was this guy sitting there, playing like Tatum. I just stood there looking at him. He asked me my name and said, 'Are you a music student? Aha, do you play jazz?' 'No, but I'm trying.' He was a medical student at Meharry, a Black medical school in Nashville. We introduced ourselves and from then on it was Alfonso Seville. The heck with Beethoven. I got a C in piano. My report came home, my mother said, 'Consuela, a C in piano?' That's all she said. She's a very gentle person. I can't say enough about Alfonso Seville's influence on me as a pianist." (<http://tiny.cc/dQN1b>)

Lee wrote and performed on her 2001 CD, Piano Voices, "Prince of Piano — Alfonso Seville" in tribute to her teacher.

Ms. Lee was a pioneer since during this period of jazz known as Bebop women jazz pianists were very rare.

Following her college graduation in 1948, Lee went to Florida to teach music. There she met and married basketball coach, Isaac Thomas Moorehead, in 1950. They divorced in 1990.

Ms. Lee received her master's degree in music theory and composition from Northwestern University in 1959 and studied at Peabody School of Music and Eastman School of Music.

At a Newark, N.J., nightclub, she unexpectedly accompanied her idol, singer Sarah Vaughn. In the early 1960s, Ms. Lee became choir director of the acclaimed Phillis Wheatley High School Glee Club in Houston, Texas.

In the early 1970s, Lee and three of her siblings, A. Grace Lee Mims, Bill Lee and Cliff Lee, formed the musical group, The Descendants of Mike and Phoebe, which performed spirituals and jazz on dozens of Black college campuses. Mike and Phoebe were enslaved in Alabama.

She taught at a number of historically Black colleges such as Alabama State, Hampton Institute, Talladega College and Norfolk State University.

Becoming more and more disillusioned with the restraints of college teaching, Ms. Lee decided that the time had come to move back to Snow Hill to teach. She wrote many songs and folk operas for her students and the Snow Hill community to perform.

Ms. Lee also led a legal campaign to help the community win control of the more than 1,400 timber-rich acres that Edwards had bought to begin the school. Corporate interests have been raking in lucrative profits from cutting timber while the Black community languishes in dire poverty.



At Fisk University in 1946