

# Ken Rhodes, mainstay of Winston-Salem Jazz scene, has died

By Lynn Felder Winston-Salem Journal Sep 2, 2016



Ken Rhodes Trio in 2004: (from right) Ken Rhodes, John Wilson and Matt Kendrick.

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**K**en Rhodes, 71, a virtuoso pianist, composer and longtime regular on the Winston-Salem jazz scene, was found dead in his home on Wednesday, after a few months of deteriorating health.

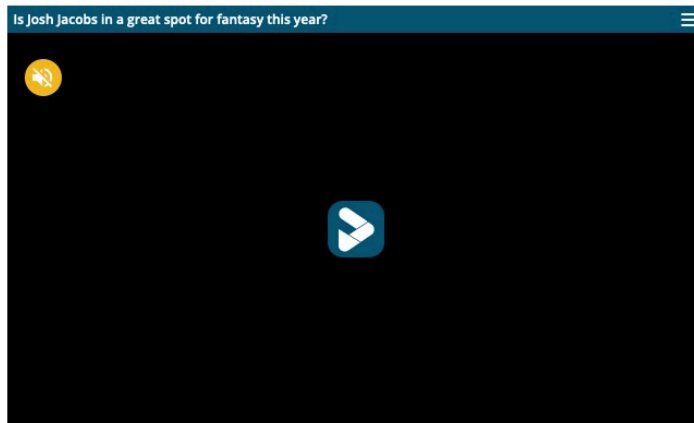
Born into a family of musicians in Memphis, Tenn., Rhodes started taking piano lessons at 6. He was reared in Chicago and led jazz trios throughout high school.

He received a master's degree in composition at the now-defunct (after 105 years) American Conservatory of Music in Chicago and went to the College-Conservatory of Music, University of Cincinnati to work on a doctorate degree in composition.

He had a career in Europe and taught at the Cincinnati conservatory before moving to Winston-Salem in 1987 to work as a resident accompanist and composer in the departments of Dance and Drama at UNC School of the Arts. He retired in 2013.



Joe Mount, a former UNCSA employee, met Rhodes in Cincinnati when Mount was studying for a master's degree in French horn and Rhodes was a doctoral student in composition, teaching undergraduates.



"I'm really sad to hear about his death," Mount said. "Ken was a brilliant, first-class musician, and we were really lucky to have him here in the Triad. ... Before coming here, he was well known in Cincinnati and was respected in Germany as a jazz artist."



He lived in Europe in the 1970s, working as a rehearsal pianist for the Augsburg Opera and a house musician for the Nuremberg Drama Theaters. He played with the Bavarian Radio Big Band and the Dusko Goykovich Quintet, and toured with a jazz trio that he led.

He wrote extensively in the classical milieu including one symphony.

Matt Kendrick, leader of the Matt Kendrick Trio and local jazz impresario, met Rhodes about 30 years ago.

"I was his bass player for the past 15 years," Kendrick said. "He was my friend. He introduced me to my wife. He was a well-read and intelligent person. I loved to talk to him. He was just a great pianist. I loved playing with him.

"He swung so good. He had an impeccable sense of swing, and he had a great grasp of harmony and knowledge of composition. ... I felt really thankful to be able to play with him."



Kendrick was in Rhodes' trio, and Rhodes played with the Matt Kendrick Trio, which has played for an open-mic night at Tate's Craft Cocktails for the past seven years.

Rhodes had been plagued with poor health for the past few years, suffering a stroke about 15 years ago and another about two years ago, according to his sister-in-law Sandie Rhodes. But he was always recovered sufficiently to continue playing — until about two months ago.

"On June 28, he showed up for our gig at Tate's and he was limping really bad and he wasn't playing as well as usual," Kendrick said. "The next week was the same way, and we grilled him pretty well to see if he was OK.

"He called me the next week and said he needed to take some time off to get better. I told him this is *your* gig. When you get better — it will be here for you — you can come back.

"He seemed to really like that, and that was the last time I talked to him."

Rhodes is survived by his mother, Peggy, 95, a violinist; brothers Chris Rhodes, a guitarist, and Robert, a classical pianist; his brother David, who predeceased him in May, was a renowned stringed-instrument builder. They all live in Asheville now. Rhodes' late father was a businessman who played the clarinet.

"Ken was encased in music all his life. From the time he was six months old, he could match tones. All of his life, he could not keep away from music," Peggy Rhodes said.

Rhodes recorded several widely circulated CDs, including "Profiles" on the Amayana label in 1974 in Germany and "The Ken Rhodes Trio Live at the Reynolda House Museum of American Art" in 2000, with Kendrick and Thomas Taylor.

In 1994, he played on Chris Murrell's debut album, "Reprise."

"He was a workman piano player," Kendrick said. "He'd check in with his lunch pail, and you'd get piano by the yard. I'm going to miss him a lot."

No memorial service is planned; Rhodes was a devout atheist. But the next open-mic night at Tate's will be dedicated to him. It will be 8-11 p.m. Tuesday at 279 W. Fourth St.