

Howard Levy Full Bio

The Early Years

Howard Levy began playing piano at age 8. He started improvising after his 3rd piano lesson, and would often improvise for 30 minutes or more. His parents enrolled him in the prep division of the Manhattan School of Music, where he studied piano for 4 years with Jean Graham, and also studied music theory. When Howard was 11, The Manhattan School recommended that he study composition with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. A place for him was guaranteed, but neither he nor his parents wanted him to disrupt his life at age 11 and move to Europe for a year.

Howard had a deep love for classical music, but around age 12 he started to become interested in many other styles of music - pop, folk, rock and roll, then Blues and Jazz. While in high school in New York City, Howard won his school's "Lincoln Center Award", given to the outstanding musician in the school. He also studied Bach on the pipe organ for 2 years. This was a major influence that has continued to this day. 4 years ago, Howard received his high school's "Distinguished Alumni" Award.

While in high school, he composed "Extension Chord", an odd- time meter Jazz piece using Indian rhythmic formulas. He eventually recorded this in 2008, with German bass clarinetist Michael Riessler and French accordionist Jean-Louis Matinier on their Enja CD "Silver and Black".

Howard attended Northwestern University, where he played piano in the university's Jazz Band, led by jazz musicians Bunky Green and Rufus Reid. There he wrote many jazz compositions, including the title track of the CD "Tonight and Tomorrow", which was named one of the 100 top Jazz CD's of 2010 by Downbeat Magazine.

Howard also developed a love for the Blues, and began to play the 10-hole diatonic harmonica at the age of 18 as a freshman at Northwestern. He loved the instrument, but was frustrated that he couldn't play all the notes on it. Playing standard blues licks, etc, was not enough. After a few months, he figured out how to obtain the missing notes, not realizing that he was the first person to make the diatonic harmonica a fully chromatic instrument. Northwestern's Alumni Magazine did a feature story about Howard, focusing on this achievement and his revolutionary harmonica playing.
<http://www.northwestern.edu/magazine/fall2015/alumnilife/howard-levy-harmonica-master.html>

Over the years, Howard has taught thousands of musicians his special harmonica techniques through private lessons, clinics and seminars, 2 instructional videos, and his online school, <https://artistworks.com/harmonica-lessons-howard-levy>.

Career in Chicago

After attending Northwestern for 2 years, Howard moved back to New York where he played piano in an off - Broadway musical written by New York Times theater critic Eric

Bentley. He also started playing saxophone, guitar, mandolin, flute, and percussion. He moved back to Chicago 2 years later, began a lifelong study of World Music, and started his professional musical career playing solo concerts as well as with many different groups. He became music director and chief composer for the Latin/Jazz group Chévere de Chicago, co-founded The Balkan Rhythm Band (Bulgarian and Macedonian music), toured and recorded with famed singer/songwriters Steve Goodman, John Prine, and Bonnie Koloc, led his own Jazz quintet, played with many of Chicago's top Jazz artists, and had a thriving career as a studio musician, playing music for over 1,000 TV and Radio commercials. He also performed with Latin Jazz great Tito Puente, which led to him playing piano and harmonica for several years with Cuban sax and clarinet master Paquito D'Rivera.

In 1986, Howard won a Joseph Jefferson Award for Best Music for a Play, composing and performing the music for Bertolt Brecht's "Puntila and His Hired Man", starring William Peterson, Amy Morton, and Dennis Arndt. He also produced Bonnie Koloc's album "With You on My Side" and released "Harmonica Jazz", the first jazz album ever recorded by a diatonic harmonica player. In 1997 he co-composed and performed the music for singer/songwriter Bonnie Koloc's musical "Tales from Trashmania". Howard also composed music for several short films, and arranged and recorded the theme music for PBS TV's "Sneak Previews".

The Flecktones, Touring, Recordings, etc.

From 1988- 1992, Howard was a member of Bela Fleck and the Flecktones. He recorded 4 CD's with the band, and since then he has taken part in reunion tours and recordings, including 2 Grammy - Winning recordings in 1996 and 2011. Howard shared the 2011 Grammy Award for Best Instrumental Composition with Bela Fleck for "Life in 11". While in this band, Howard developed the unique ability to play piano and harmonica simultaneously, sounding like 2 people.

Over the years, Howard has recorded on over 300 CD's and DVD's in many styles of music, produced over 20 CD's, and played on 5 Hollywood movie soundtracks. His harmonica is featured prominently in "A Family Thing" starring Robert Duvall and James Earl Jones. Among the prominent artists that Howard has recorded and/or performed with are: Dolly Parton, Kenny Loggins, Bobby McFerrin, Donald Fagen (Steely Dan), Victor Wooten, Paul Simon, Paquito D'Rivera, Kurt Elling, Spyro Gyra, Styx, Chuck Mangione, Pete Seeger, Charlie Mariano, Alan Jackson, and Tom Paxton.

In 1999, Howard MC'd and performed Bach's music at Chicago's Ravinia Festival, for "Bach-analia" a concert organized by Mervon Mehta. He performed Bach's Bb Partita on harmonica, with a tap dancer, trombonist, and harpsichordist, and also played Bach's Em Flute Sonata on harmonica.

In 1998, Howard performed Astor Piazzolla's "Five Tango Sensations" on harmonica with the Pro Arte String Quintet at Ravinia, in a concert that also featured Chicago Symphony principal oboist Alex Klein and soprano saxophonist Branford Marsalis. He has performed these pieces many times since then, and in 2016 released a CD, "Tango and Jazz", with a live performance of this suite.

Howard has a long history of playing “world music”. He was a member of the African/Jazz group Paul Berliner and Kudu, co-founded The Balkan Rhythm Band, toured internationally with Lebanese oud player and composer Rabih About Khalil, and for more than 20 years has toured and recorded with the world music/jazz group Trio Globo (cellist Eugene Friesen and percussionist Glen Velez).

As a pianist/harmonicist with groups like The Flecktones, Paquito D’Rivera, Trio Globo, and under his own name, Howard has played all over the world- Carnegie Hall, Millennium Park (Chicago), The Berlin Jazz Festival, Montreal Jazz Festival, Newport Jazz Festival in New York, The Hollywood Bowl Jazz Festival, The Esplanade (Singapore), Spoleto Festival (Charleston,SC), Symphony Space (New York), The Rochester Jazz Festival, The Donaueschingen Music Festival, and many projects for German Radio in Baden Baden, Stuttgart, Koln, Hamburg, Rudolstadt, etc.

In 2004, Howard established Balkan Samba Records. He has recoded, produced, and released 12 CD’s and a DVD on this label, covering a wide range of musical styles. www.balkansamba.com

Appearances with Symphony Orchestras, Radio, and TV

As a harmonica player, he has performed his “Concerto for Diatonic Harmonica and Orchestra” and other music with orchestras in the US, Europe and Asia. These include: The Chicago Sinfonietta, The Bayerischer Rundfunk Orkester (Munich), The Haydn Orchestra of Bolzano, Italy, The Czech National Symphony (Prague), The Evanston (IL) Symphony Orchestra, The Illinois Philharmonic, The Wichita (Kansas) Symphony, The Lawrence University Orchestra, The Hohner Akkordeonorkester1927 in Germany and Austria, The Hong Kong Harmonica Orchestra, and **many** others.

Howard has played harmonica 3 times with The Chicago Symphony- once for a piece by contemporary Hungarian composer Gyorgy Kurtag, once playing the music from “The Sundowners” in a movie music concert with conductor/composer John Williams, and as a featured soloist in The CSO Brass 2015 Holiday Concert.

From 1996 to 2015, Howard was a featured guest several times a year on Garrison Keillor’s NPR radio show “A Prairie Home Companion”, making at least 50 appearances on the show all over the US and Europe.

Stories about Howard have appeared on NPR’s [“Weekend Edition”](#), [“All Things Considered”](#), WBUR Boston’s [“On Point”](#).

He has been a guest several times on Chicago’s WTTW TV’s “Chicago Tonight” with Phil Ponce, has performed on Chicago’s classical music station WFMT, and made numerous appearances on Chicago’s WGN Radio 720.

He has also performed on **The Tonight Show** hosted by Johnny Carson and Jay Leno, and on **Late Night** with Jimmy Fallon.

Teaching, Clinics, Workshops

Howard has extensive experience as a teacher of piano, harmonica, and improvisational techniques. In 2014, Howard presented a clinic at the JEN Convention entitled “The Ins and Outs of John Coltrane’s Giant Steps”. He showed how this famous and revolutionary jazz composition is actually a musical fractal, comparing it to the art of MC Escher and utilizing graphics as well as musical examples to make its structure easier for musicians to understand and improvise on. There is a recording of Howard playing Giant Steps on piano on Trio Globo’s “Steering by the Stars” CD.

He has given workshops and clinics on Jazz piano, improvisation, and harmonica at Harvard, Berklee College of Music, Univ. of Massachusetts in Lowell, Northwestern U, Oberlin College, Roosevelt University (Chicago), Lawrence University, Coastal Carolina Univ, The Hochschule fur Musik und Theater (Hamburg, Germany), and others.

Howard has been a judge at several festivals- The 1994 Jacksonville Jazz Festival piano competition; many harmonica festivals in the US, Europe, and Asia, the latest one being the 2016 Asia Pacific Harmonica Festival in Taiwan, where he was also a featured performer.

Since 2009 Howard has been the teacher at an online harmonica school for ArtistWorks, which has thousands of students from all over the world. He also put out 2 harmonica instructional videos- “New Directions for Harmonica” (1991) and “Out of the Box, Vol. 1” (2006).