

Christopher Crittenden Swansen

Died: December 4, 1995

Chris died of a brain tumor at age 56 on Monday, December 4, 1995 in Pittsville, Wisconsin, where he made his home and studio in an old school building in the north central part of the state about 185 miles east of Minneapolis.

Chris made many singular contributions to the world of music. For those of us who knew him, or knew of him, when we going through Dartmouth between 1957 and 1961 it wasn't always evident, through there were hints, that his musical future would be path-breaking.

Chris grew up in Milwaukee, where he went to Shorewood High School. He was class vice-president his sophomore year there, became a member of the honor society, and was on the school newspaper. He was also on the football, track, and tennis teams.

And he played in the orchestra and band.

At Dartmouth Chris majored in music, graduating with distinction in the field, and was a member of Beta Theta Pi fraternity. He was in Casque & Gauntlet his senior year. He was active with the Dartmouth Christian Union his sophomore year, and with the Jack-O-Lantern his junior year.

But it was in music that he made his mark. A trombonist, for all four years Chris played jazz with the Sultans, becoming its leader his junior and senior years. The same was the case with the Barbary Coast Band — four years playing, the last two leading.

And it was during our four years at Dartmouth that Chris' legend began to take shape.

Steve Willard, our classmate and Chris' friend (Chris called Steve, "Pitts," and the nickname stuck, to this day) offers this account of some of Chris' exploits.

Chris' older brother Sam played slide trombone for the Barbary Coast two years before our class (and Chris) arrived on campus. The leader of the group at that time was Mike Melvoin '59 (another musical legend, but that's another story). Melvoin, like Chris, was from Milwaukee, and knew about Sam's and Chris' musical training there, and speaking with authority told Pitts one day that, "I was pretty good, but Chris always heard everything."

Pitts evidently asked his buddy Chris about this one day, and says Chris told him it had something to do with the fact that his mother, a classically trained cellist, continued to play throughout the nine months before his birth. Pitts calls this "a delightful hypothesis."

Pitts remembers Chris with a special clarity. “Chris was of course the marvelous musician whom I was lucky enough to know throughout our four years at Dartmouth. He was the leader of the Barbary Coast big band and our 7-piece Sultans jazz group. His amazing natural musical talent was immediately obvious to everyone, but he somehow managed to keep other musicians from feeling intimidated by it. Music, music, music was the thing, not the personalities (or abilities) of the players. He was, of course a marvelous player himself, but also always a joyous, fun-loving, creative guy who made his musician friends feel that this was the way life should be.”

Pitts then tells this story. “Even among excellent musicians it was clear to me that Chris was miles beyond the others in sheer natural ability to hear what was going on in any music. He had absolute (‘perfect’) pitch regarding individually presented tones, itself a rare ability. I watched him instantly identify for our composition instructor all 10 random piano tones that had been played — simultaneously! — and held, for about 2 seconds. The instructor had intended to humble this guy who claimed to ‘have absolute pitch.’ Instead, he was blown away (like the rest of us) by the revelation of an ability he had never seen before.”

Pitts continues, on a roll about Chris. “Chris and I went to Europe (with horns, of course) the summer of our junior year and drove around in a rented 2CV Renault. He always knew exactly what the speedometer would indicate as our speed, simply by the sound of the engine (or by the tire sound if we were coasting). Steve Dale, another ’61, told me of the time that during a dictation class in music Chris reproduced perfectly all four parts of a Bach cantata after hearing it once. The simple fact is that the guy was amazing!”

To this day, as expressed in a July 2010 e-mail to the author for this remembrance, and 15 years after Chris’ death, the memory Pitts has of Chris is almost painful. “I have had only two mentors in my life - my father and Chris. With love and tears, here's to Chris, a great and inspiring friend. [signed] ‘Pitts’ (he gave me this nickname) Steve Willard '61.”

Our classmate Mike Mooney, also from Milwaukee, remembers Chris, and his wife Meg. “He and I went to high school together, and roomed together our freshman year in Middle Fayerweather,” Mike writes in a June 2010 e-mail. “I believe I even introduced him to Meg, who became his wife. They married within a few years of our graduation from Dartmouth. Her family was European, and I remember the astonishment and pleasure he took to think that they actually welcomed him, knowing that he was a musician, into their family. To the rest of us, of course, he was a lot of other things, because he was indeed a very, very bright guy and also a pretty good athlete.”

Mike says, “I seem to remember that he had a dual major — pre-med and music — that mirrored a decision he had to make upon graduation of which way his life was

going to go.”

Mike confirms the possible truthfulness of an anecdote about Chris the author recalls from our senior year. It was a well-circulated rumor at the time. The story goes that in his senior year Chris was in the middle of an interview with some medical school admissions officer, who asked why Chris had majored in music if he wanted to go on to medical school. That's when Chris walked out of the interview, evidently saying that's it, medicine's not for me. Thus ended a medical career, and began another. Chris chose music

After Dartmouth, Chris attended the Berkelee School of Music in Boston in 1961-1962, and played trombone and wrote for the Herb Pomeroy Orchestra. In 1963 he was the first jazz composer to attend Tanglewood, and in that year studied conducting with Gunther Schuller, Aaron Copeland and Yannis Xenakis.

Chris played with the pantheon of jazz greats in our era, including Phil Woods, Gary Burton, John McLaughlin, Eddie Gomez, and Joe Henderson. He also played with Stan Kenton and Maynard Ferguson. He fulfilled writing commissions from the BBC, Stan Getz, and the L.A. Orchestra, among others.

Chris' accomplishments also included directing, writing for and conducting the New York Improvisation Ensemble in New York City. He produced a film with photographer Tom Zimmerman about the ensemble that in 1967 won top honors at the Edinburgh Film Festival.

Chris made a real switch in about 1968 when he became involved in developing and playing, and composing for, what came to be known as the Moog Synthesizer a computer-based form of experimental music. In an article published years later (undated, but which appears in the 1986 25th Reunion Yearbook) in The Milwaukee Journal (by Arlene Eisenbise), Chris likened playing the synthesizer to “opening a box of paints.”

“It's up to the musician doing the painting to pick the colors and where he's going to place them, based on his discipline and his philosophy,” Chris said at the time.

In 1969, while composer in residence and musical director with the R.A. Moog Company in upstate New York, he gave the world premier of the instrument at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, then another in Paris at the Museum of Modern Art there, and followed that with 200 concerts and clinics throughout the U.S. He realized two solo synthesizer albums, “Pulaski Skyway” and “Album 2.”

At the time, Chris was referred to in press accounts as “a musical visionary.” His performances were accessible, though. Besides his own compositions, he made sure to include music by J.S. Bach, Paul McCartney, Simon and Garfunkel, and Blood, Sweat and Tears.

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Chris did more than play, and compose, and conduct. He started painting in 1988, both oil and watercolors, and sold his paintings to private collectors throughout the U.S. He taught electronic music.

From 1981-1995 he was also a videographer, editor and composer for a series of instructional videos that were shown on PBS.

His 1982 album with Phil Woods, "Piper at the Gates of Dawn," was nominated for a Grammy Award in the category "Best Jazz Group." His work includes "Sweet Thunder," and he wrote for and performed on the album "Crazy Horse, Phil Woods/Chris Swansen."

It's interesting to hear Chris describing the music he composed and played on the synthesizer.

"My music derives from as many sources as I can find and use electronically. The music is not limited by the instrument as almost any conceivable sound or tone color is possible on the synthesizer. Almost every style of composition and orchestration is used at one time or another, with an overall freedom given to rhythmic and harmonic components of the total structure. Jazz, rock, folk musics of many parts of the world, Indian scales and intervals, classical and romantic western forms and harmonies, serial techniques, and Grecian, Arabic and Chinese intervallic systems, as well as pure electronically derived forms and patterns all enter into my compositions."

Chris founded the Badger Music Company in 1974, and moved to Pittsville, Wisconsin, with his wife Meg. Their two children, Cully and Liesl, now grown, went to the local Pittsville schools, and played music there. He lived there until he died.