

In Memoriam: Andre Lewis
The man behind Mandré
by Melissa A. Weber aka DJ Soul Sister
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Unedited, original version, with text not included in the published [Wax Poetics](#) story:

Andre Lewis, an architect of soulful synthesized sounds, founder of techno-funk, bandleader of Maxayn, mastermind of Mandré, and musical innovator responsible for more of today's music than you think, took his final "Solar Flight," having passed away in Shreveport, Louisiana, on January 31.

Lewis is best known for his involvement with the early-1970s fire-breathing soul-rock hybrid Maxayn, which featured his "lifelong friend" and musical collaborator Maxayn Lewis, as well as with his late 1970s-early 1980s future funk project known as Mandré. Criminally under-recognized are his contributions as a pioneer in recording synthesizers, and the facts that he was one of the first musicians to record with a Roland 808 drum machine, was the first American recording artist to introduce the Roland drum synthesizer; and not only helped, but was responsible for designing the circuitry for Roger Linn's LinnDrum digital drum machine.

"Andre was talking about MIDI and layering sound before anyone else," Maxayn said. "He was on the cutting edge."

He also had an intuition about the technology of the future. Most of his predictions would come to pass.

"We were looking at one of the first synthesizers, which in those days was huge - took up the whole room," Maxayn recalled. "Andre said, 'I didn't wanna say this back there, but one day you'll be able to carry that around in your pocket, and it'll be powerful.'"

Because he was also a beta tester for Roland musical instruments, he would get instruments that no one else had, and he'd get them first.

"Every day we were receiving equipment. And we would have what I called parties," Maxayn remembered. "I'd make food and all of the biggest artists would come through our house and check out our instruments. Chick Corea, Stanley Clarke, you name it. We had the first generation of synthesizers. You couldn't go to a store to get them. You'd have to come to our parties. And that's what Roland wanted us to do."

While Lewis' musicianship was highly regarded, he had to fight Roger Linn to get credit for his work on developing the LinnDrum, made popular by Prince, who used them on most of his 1980s recordings.

"I'd be in bed and wake up and Roger was there, asking Andre how to fix something that he couldn't make work," Maxayn said. "Then Roger would leave, and he'd come back again, minutes later, needing more of Andre's help. When Roger got (the LinnDrum) produced by Akai, he tried to cut Andre out of it. It's common knowledge in the industry about what happened."

Born in Nebraska, Michael Andre Lewis was a child prodigy who led his own Mike Lewis Quartet at age fifteen, and then led his Andre Lewis and the New Breed, which included future members of the Electric Flag as well as Hank Redd, who would go on to work with Stevie Wonder. He wound up

joining the band of his childhood friend Buddy Miles, and appeared on several of his albums, including *Them Changes*.

While on a Chicago tour stop in Miles' band, Lewis met Maxayn backstage at a Bobby "Blue" Band concert that she opened for.

"He looked like he was from another planet, dressed in the leather, dyed velvet, knee high boots," Maxayn joked. "Donny Hathaway ... was at the show and said 'I would really love to produce you.' He gives me his card. Then Andre, who knew Donny, comes up and says, 'Donny's cool and can do nice things with you. But I'll do some really *different* things with you.' He didn't have a card, but said, 'you'll hear from me.' And he wound up following me around the country. <laughs>"

Lewis' groundbreaking work with synthesizers began to take shape with the three albums that he and Maxayn's band released under the name Maxayn for Capricorn Records: *Maxayn* (1972), *Mindful* (1973), and *Bail Out for Fun* (1974).

"Then Andre wanted to try some other things with synthesized music and techno-funk. That whole genre of music should be credited to him," Maxayn said. Enter the three brilliantly space-aged and intergalactic-sounding albums he recorded under the name Mandré: *Mandr * (1977), *Two* (1978), and *M3000* (1979), released for perhaps the most unlikely of labels, Motown Records, who promoted the group as being "funkier than Parliament."

The concept was, as Maxayn describes, "controversial." Andre was to perform in a futuristic mask because "he thought the music sounded other-worldly. He was to be the Masked Marauder, a mystery man sent from space to create peace on Earth through the (sound) frequencies." Bill Whitton custom-designed a mask to fit Andre's face and make it easier for breathing during performances, despite Motown's reluctance in having it built.

The self-debut spawned the fully-synthesized hit, "Solar Flight (Opus I)," which is considered to be a Loft dance classic and was also used as a theme song for *Wide World of Sports* with Howard Cosell. Music writer A. Scott Galloway describes it as "a magical ride rivaling like-songs of the day from Dexter Wansel's 'Life on Mars' to Bobby Lyle's 'The Genie.'"

"The [Mandr ] records were well received by the public," says Maxayn. "Berry Gordy really liked it a lot, but it wasn't a R&B act. Motown understood the importance, but had no idea how to market him."

And despite the custom-built mask, highly-conceptualized albums, and a second hit in 1979 with "Freakin's Fine," Mandr  never toured and only performed live a couple of times.

Still highly-regarded in the industry, Lewis toured and recorded regularly with Frank Zappa, Roky Erickson, The Who, Labelle, and Johnny "Guitar" Watson, among others. Miles Davis even told him, when he was wanting to form a rock band, that he wanted to have "some guys like me in the band, who could play."

In 1982, he recorded and released his final Mandr  album, *4*, for his own Future Groove label, singing and playing all clavinet, organ, piano, bass, vocoder and Roland synthesizers on most tracks, four of which included the word "freak" in the title. The only Mandr  album to be reissued (Rush Hour Recordings in 2010), *4* would also be the hardest Mandr  LP to find due to a *freak* accident.

“A smoke alarm at the pressing plant set off sprinklers and it ruined the whole run,” Maxayn said. “Only a few of those copies made it out, and the ones that could be salvaged made it to the record stores.”

Maxayn recalls not only a love of music, but a deep sense of humor that fueled Lewis.

“We were in San Diego, and he walked up to Jimmy Smith – to challenge him!

'Let's have an organ shoot-out.'

Jimmy says, 'And who would you be?'

'I'm Andre Lewis.'

And Jimmy says, 'oh, I've been hearing about you for years. I been wantin' to meet you!'

So they wind up having an amazing Hammond B-3 showdown that happened at the University of California in San Diego. It was the most amazing show you've ever seen, but it wasn't recorded.”

Maxayn, who remains active as a vocal coach and performer, is currently planning a musical “celebration of life” in March or April, 2012, that will be held at the Maverick Flats, the club where the Maxayn band first performed in L.A., as well as the place where Soul Train recruited many of its dancers. Musicians are already signing up to take part in the homegoing celebration that, if Lewis has his way, will be “Light Years” out of this world.

DJ Soul Sister, New Orleans

With gratitude to Maxayn Lewis, A. Scott Galloway, and the Masked Marauder