

Mayor's brother, Robert Avalon, marched to his own music

When Robert Avalon died, he left unfinished his teaching and his work of composing contemporary classical music. He also left behind friends, those he helped, a partner, his parents and a brother, Houston Mayor Bill White
DAVID THEIS | July 25, 2004

You could tell the story of the late Robert Avalon's life from a variety of angles. There was Robert Avalon the obsessive composer, performer and promoter of modern classical music. There was Robert Avalon the music teacher, who sent two students from the barrios of Piedras Negras, Mexico, to the [High School for Performing and Visual Arts](#) in Houston (where he taught composition pro bono) and then to [the Juilliard School](#) -- despite having no formal training in music education himself. There was Robert Avalon, brother to and dedicated supporter of Mayor Bill White. There was Robert Avalon the openly gay man and longtime partner of [Wayne Dockery](#). And Robert Avalon the anti-materialist and Robert Avalon the charmer and Robert Avalon the self-promoter and Robert Avalon the inconsiderate and Robert Avalon the master of languages. ("He went to Prague for two weeks," his mother, [Gloria White](#), said recently, "and he came back speaking Czech.")

Avalon's reach was evident at the Celebration of Life held at [Cumberland Presbyterian Church](#) just after Avalon's shocking death April 30, when at age 47 he died of a pulmonary embolism (a blood clot in a lung) the day after being diagnosed with testicular cancer believed to be related to a cancerous tumor. The crowded church, home to the concert series that his [Foundation for Modern Music](#) put on every year, was filled with an unusually diverse crowd of whites, blacks, Latinos and Asians. They were bald and turbaned, old and young. The music performed was all Avalon's, and the pieces, from the [Sonata for Violin](#) and Piano to the [Sextet to Julia de Burgos](#), were given searing renditions by impassioned musicians. Then Robert Avalon himself appeared, in a video recorded during one of the many house concerts he gave since he moved to Houston in 1990.

In the video, Robert was his usual dapper self, with his combination of slight nerdiness and charisma. He seemed unusually serene, as if he really were speaking from beyond the grave.

The memorial concert was a great aesthetic success, but [Andrea White](#), Avalon's sister-in-law and wife of the mayor, probably spoke for many when she said she wished there had been some public testimonials regarding Robert's compelling character and his one-of-a-kind generosity. Instead, the ceremony was as severe and astringent as the opening notes of the sonata. Even the title of the gathering, "Celebration of Life," clashed with the austerity of the event.

Avalon's death came when he was at the height of his powers and when he still had much to do, so it was hard to feel consoled. His opera *Carlotta*, his would-be masterpiece, now may never be heard, and his planned symphonic work that was to be premiered in China this fall will never be written. So this was a bitter death, and people experienced that pain on a variety of levels. One friend, Avalon's longtime supporter [Bart Truxillo](#), provided Avalon with a Heights studio he could use for late-night composition sessions, rehearsals with the various groups Avalon brought together, as well as the occasional highly unorthodox concert. The studio, dubbed "[Rebecca Lodge](#)," also served as Truxillo's office. "Robert would bring in his HSPVA group to rehearse," Truxillo recalled later. "I'd look up from my desk, and there would be this magical thing going on with a ruby-faced girl singing her heart out. I know this sounds selfish, but I realize that I'm going to miss out on what would have been 10 more years of extraordinary Robert Avalon events."

When I showed up at the San Antonio apartment of Avalon's parents, Bill and Gloria White, to talk to them about Robert and his brother Bill, they were still in apparent grief.

"I've lost 15 pounds since he died," said his father, 80, a man who has lost much of his hearing but still retains a fierce moral strength. Gloria, 75, is somewhat stooped from the Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease that she shared with Robert. (Charcot-Marie-Tooth atrophies the muscles, usually in the hands and feet, and had long caused Robert to walk awkwardly.)

They had not looked forward to meeting with a reporter just weeks after their son's death, but they dutifully broke out boxes of newspaper clippings and performance programs dating to his high school years. When I said I would rather just talk to them about their son, whom I had met in January, they were visibly relieved. I think they were surprised by their own eagerness to tell his story.

Avalon was born Robert White in San Antonio in 1955. Bill and Gloria were public-school teachers, which meant they didn't have much money. They were determined that their two boys (Robert's brother Bill was 15 months older) would develop their own sense of self and that they would be able to pursue their hearts' desires. That meant, in their father's words, "We had plenty of books, but no air conditioning" in the home they built on two wooded acres outside of town.

Young Bill showed an early interest in music, so his parents bought him a used upright piano when he was 6, and he began lessons. The piano was a major expense, so his father told him, "I expect you to live up to your commitment" by practicing every day.

"This was no problem for Bill," the elder White said.

Gloria added that Bill was a promising student "who would learn every note in a mechanical way."

Young Bill White dreamed of a musical career and even of becoming a composer. He continued serious study until he turned 13 and became a page in the Texas Senate.

His brother Robert, even before taking a lesson, showed himself to be a quick study. His mother remembers a first-grade talent show in which Robert enjoyed perhaps his first public triumph when he played a medley of his own music.

"Everybody asked us, 'Who's his teacher?' and I told them he didn't have one," she said.

The brothers shared a bedroom, and each decorated his side of the room in a way that explained who he was and what he was going to be.

"Robert would decorate with paintings and art posters," his mother says, "and on the other side Bill had his encyclopedias and debate materials."

"I had a poster of Theodore Roosevelt over my bed," now-Mayor Bill White recalled in a recent interview. Both parents contributed to the boys' interest in classical music. Gloria took them to free concerts, and Bill played music with them. He played piano by ear, and he would join son Bill on the violin (which his parents bought by bartering books and clothes) and Robert on the banjo in an informal family band.

After his year as a Senate page, Bill lost interest in music, or rather, lost the practice time.

"I had been practicing two hours a day," he said.

When new interests cut into that time, he grew frustrated and quit playing. He didn't start again until decades later, when Robert began giving Bill's sons music lessons.

"They didn't care as much about music as we did," Bill says of his sons.

Robert, in the meantime, was discovering his calling. He was a hit in all of his artistic high school endeavors and was a National Merit Scholar semifinalist as well, but music remained his first love.

After graduating, Robert went to Washington University in St. Louis on a music scholarship but dropped out after a year and a half "because he didn't want to study chemistry," his father recalled. "He wanted to compose music." He added wistfully, "He'd made the dean's list that last semester, but he didn't even know it."

When Robert left Wash U, he was saying goodbye to the safety net that academia offers to most classical composers. He was also saying goodbye to a structured, predictable life. He was going to live by his wits and his passions or not at all.

Robert's choices in life had his parents, and especially his father, in near despair. Throughout the years, the elder Bill came up with schemes to add security to his younger son's life.

According to a profile of Robert that appeared in the Houston Post in 1991, Bill offered to take money out of his retirement account to open a laundry that Robert could manage. In the article, Robert reported his offense at the offer. To lead such a gray life, he said, "I would wilt. I would die."

Until his son's death, Bill kept imagining ways he could use his own retirement money to help keep Robert off the streets -- while Robert found alternative ways to pursue his dream. An amazingly convincing speaker, he talked noted music teachers into taking him on free (a gift he returned many times over to his own students).

He eventually left St. Louis for Washington, D.C., where his freelance composer's life never really took root.

At some point -- the exact time now seems lost to memory -- Robert came out as gay and changed his last name to Avalon, which was his mother's maiden name.

There's more than one answer as to why he changed his name, and both of them are probably right. The new name was "more beautiful and artistic," he told a reporter. His brother's take on the matter shows how optimistic Avalon was about his work. "There is already a ... composer named Robert White," Bill White said. "Robert didn't want there to be any confusion 100 years from now, when people looked him up, as to which Robert White was the composer of a certain piece."

Avalon's father was hurt by the name change. When I asked if he was also shocked to learn that his youngest son was gay, he became very emphatic.

"No, no, no, no, no," he said, staring straight into my eyes until I lowered them. Then his voice softened. "I knew from the time he was 5, from the way he sat on the floor with his legs tucked under him. It was naturally effeminate."

His brother said, "At the time I was just totally unfamiliar with the gay subculture."

His parents and brother came to accept his sexuality and always made him and Dockery feel comfortable.

His mother remembers being asked "if my youngest son was married yet. I would answer, 'No, the law doesn't allow it.'"

By the time he moved to Houston in 1990, Avalon had tasted success. He had performed his compositions with members of the San Antonio Symphony. He had also performed in Mexico City, Brussels and London. Once here he performed at the University of Houston and Rice University and began working seriously on his opera *Carlotta*. But classical music is a tough game for a freelance composer. Commissions are rare in the best of cases, and Avalon found it difficult to get larger institutions such as Houston Grand Opera or the Houston Symphony to even listen to his work. Even arranging to have it performed by ad hoc ensembles was very costly, and, as remained true for the rest of his life, Avalon made virtually no money. The Foundation for Modern Music, which he had taken over in the late '90s, was only beginning to pay him a \$1,000 monthly salary when he died.

Avalon was in fact almost uniquely uninterested in money when it came to his personal bank account.

"I've had a lot of wealthy patrons, and I've seen how the rich live," he said during our first talk. "I have a different kind of freedom than they do. I can stay up for 48 straight hours and compose music, then crash and not have to answer to anybody."

When I asked what he lived on, he said "My partner (Dockery) works for SBC, repairing pay phones. So we don't starve."

But he needed large sums of money to rent halls and hire musicians, so he became a rather relentless and successful fund-raiser. With his charisma and self-confidence, Avalon was able to sell himself to his patrons, who took up the cause of modern music as a way of helping Avalon personally. Indeed, his first official Houston support group was simply called the Friends of Robert Avalon.

Ann Sakowitz, a member of the Friends of Robert Avalon and later a supporter of the Foundation for Modern Music, said, "He was very nice and charismatic, and he lived for his music. People respected him for that."

Later in the '90s, Avalon wanted to record. He approached Barry Bowen, an attorney whose passion for 20th-century American music had led him to found the Foundation for Modern Music in 1986. Bowen's dream of producing modern-music recordings became reality when Art Gottschalk, who is now chair of composition and music theory in Rice University's Shepherd School of Music, suggested to Bowen that he buy Huey Meaux's record company. But Bowen had managed to make only a few classical records when Avalon approached him about making a recording. As Bowen remembers the meeting, "Robert was very innocent, in a way. He just wanted help in recording his music." Bowen put Avalon in touch with Gottschalk as a potential producer.

Gottschalk listened to Avalon's proposal -- that he assemble a symphony orchestra and produce a recording in Rice's Stude Hall -- then told Avalon how much his idea would cost.

"Normally I don't talk to people like that," Gottschalk says now. "I didn't think he'd have the wherewithal. Recording with American symphony musicians can cost \$1,000 a minute, which is why most people go to Eastern Europe. But darned if he didn't finagle a way to do it. I saw that he was quite the go-getter and that he could sell his vision."

So Avalon made a well-reviewed (though not extensively) orchestral album, which included 1986's Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 10, and 1998's Concerto for Flute, Harp and Strings, Op. 31. (This album, released in 2000, was his second. The year before he had recorded an album including his Sonata for Violin and Piano, Op. 6; Sonata for Flute and Piano, Op. 26; and *Sextet to Julia de Burgos*, Op. 21.)

By this time Avalon had taken over the Foundation for Modern Music from Bowen, who had never been interested in staging concerts. "The foundation was just a bunch of files in my file cabinet at that point," Bowen says.

Avalon was determined to change that. "He was desperate for his music to find a wider audience," Gottschalk says. And Avalon used FMM to achieve that goal, on an admittedly limited scale. (Most FMM concerts have about 200 people in attendance.) Gottschalk said he was somewhat cynical about Avalon's plans for FMM. "I thought it was just going to serve as his support system. But Robert put the lie to that."

That is, most FMM concerts did in fact include performances of Avalon's works. Often they featured more than one piece of his. But most FMM concerts spotlighted the work of two or three composers, and Avalon proved himself as passionate a promoter of the other composers' works as of his own.

Avalon and FMM (during his time there, there was no precise dividing line between the man and the entity) brought in composers from many different countries. Meanwhile, Avalon's personal career took on an ever-more-international cast. He led a Dutch chamber ensemble called the Robert Avalon Ensemble and, perhaps most strikingly, performed in London's prestigious Wigmore Hall. This might have been the highlight of his performing career.

He performed songs based on Wordsworth poems and on poems by Puerto Rican poet Julia de Burgos, and on a prayer written by the Rev. Mychal Judge, the Catholic priest who achieved posthumous fame on 9/11. Accompanied by singers and actors, he also performed four songs from *Carlotta*.

It's not clear today whether *Carlotta*, which is the nearest thing Avalon had to a life's work, will ever be presented to the public.

Carlotta was the wife of Maximilian, the Hapsburg prince who was executed after being installed in the essentially fictitious "Throne of Mexico" by Napoleon III. Carlotta eventually lost her mind and spent her last 60 years in an asylum.

The unfinished opera wanted to tell her story in a magical-realist style, in which she spoke from and transcended her insanity.

Avalon described a rather wild-sounding scene in which Carlotta kneels before the pope (she had gone to him pleading for help), and the pontiff is suddenly transformed into a jaguar god, who then proceeds to ravage poor Carlotta.

All of this sounded pretty wild, but it made perfect dramatic sense, given Avalon's rather matter-of-fact description of the scene.

he White/Avalon brothers seem to have had a rather intellectual relationship punctuated by an occasional fishing and camping trip with their dad. When I asked the mayor what he and his brother used to talk about, he brought up Mexican culture and Carlotta.

"He was fascinated by big ideas," White said. "We talked about Mexican culture being a combination of something very old and mysterious -- the native culture -- and European culture. How these cultures had come together there to create something new. Robert was trying to show that newness in *Carlotta*.

"He knew I'd understand what he was talking about."

But Avalon didn't confine his creativity or his intellect to making art. He involved himself in the lives of others in ways that suggest a maestro conducting an orchestra or, perhaps more aptly, a director staging an opera. The best example of this comes from his dealings with his Mexican godson, Rodolfo Morales. Morales was one of a few students from Piedras Negras who followed Avalon first to San Antonio, then to Houston. He's one of two, Alejandro Vela being the other, whom Avalon helped get into Juilliard and then into professional performing careers. Morales has now succeeded Avalon as the acting artistic director of FMM and was recently named piano director at HSPVA.

In Houston, Avalon found Morales a series of sponsors, and the teenage pianist from a struggling Mexican family found himself living in a River Oaks mansion and attending HSPVA, rudimentary English and all.

"I didn't even know what a 'quiz' was," Morales said recently, sitting with his wife, Donell, in their Montrose apartment. "I found out the hard way, when I took one without being prepared."

Avalon was Morales' instructor outside of school, and he was involved in almost every phase of the young man's life, "without any compensation, as far as I know." But Morales was not Avalon's puppet. Against his godfather's wishes, he left HSPVA his senior year and graduated instead from Interlochen Academy in Michigan. Later, Morales decided to give up music altogether. "I thought it was too much sacrifice for too little reward." Instead he planned to return to Mexico to study political science.

At this point, Avalon "interfered," Morales said with a sly smile. Avalon took Morales to an arts festival in Plano, where Yoheved Kaplinsky of Juilliard was giving a master class.

"Robert introduced me to her -- he knew her because he had already helped Alejandro Vela get into Juilliard -- and I played for her right there. I said to myself, 'Why am I doing this?' She said, 'You shouldn't be following your plans. Why don't you come to Juilliard?'"

"Robert was very persuasive. He got me to reconsider."

But Avalon also molded Morales' life in less conventional ways. In the mid-1990s, he had become friends with Donell Hill, a Houston artist who in 1994 had achieved notoriety during an exhibition of her erotically spiritual paintings in San Antonio. The gallery was owned by an order of nuns, and an image of an angel having sex on an altar had fired the wrath of Catholics from the archbishop on down. When Avalon read about the controversy, he decided that Hill was someone he wanted to know.

They became friends. Later, when Morales was preparing to leave for Juilliard, Avalon approached Hill with a highly original request. Hill tells it like this:

"Robert said, 'I have this kid from Mexico who's going to Juilliard. But he's not ready. He's so green. The city will eat him alive. I need your help.' "

In short, Avalon wanted Hill to "teach him which fork to eat with" and to perform other more sophisticated types of initiations as well.

"I said, 'Robert, I should slap your face. I'm old enough to be his mother.' " (She is 25 years older than Morales, who is now 27.)

Still, she was intrigued and agreed to hear Morales perform. Avalon knew that his protégé was technically very proficient, but he also wanted him to play with more passion, to play "more than the notes." So he figured the "initiation" would help in this regard as well.

After hearing Morales perform, Hill couldn't quite say no. She started teaching him table etiquette, and the relationship went on from there. By the time Morales left for Juilliard, she was his companion as well as Avalon's partner in keeping him there. They staged fund-raising concerts to pay his \$25,000 annual costs.

Morales showed considerable promise at Juilliard, and several of his sponsors began pressuring him to move to Europe after graduation. "But he wanted to marry me," Hill said.

"I went to Robert and told him, 'People are going to think I'm holding him back. He needs to be free to pursue his career.' I didn't think I would be enough for him. But Robert said that I would be 'the wind beneath his wings,' when I was afraid of being the noose around his neck."

Two years ago they married at Rebecca Lodge.

Hill and Avalon became ever-closer friends while Morales was at Juilliard. Like many others, she took on his cause of modern music "even though I'm just now starting to like it."

Hill speaks authoritatively on how demanding and inconsiderate Avalon could be in the service of modern music. "There was nothing he wouldn't ask you for," she says. "When you'd tell him he was asking too much, he'd say, 'Oh, I didn't know I was making you tired.' "

Once Avalon was so downright rude that Hill has to laugh at the memory.

He was planning a fund-raising dinner and asked Hill to hand-draw the invitations. After she had put in a good 10 hours on the project, she turned to Avalon and said, "I just thought of somebody I want to invite (to the dinner to be

her guest). But he turned to me and said, 'I'm sorry, Donell, you're not invited. It's for benefactors.'" When he saw how hurt she was, Avalon said, " 'But I'll make dinner for you tonight.' And so he fixed my dinner."

Hill was among those who saw that Avalon was physically going downhill the last month of his life. "After the last (FMM) concert, he came to me. He looked very childlike and said, 'How about one of those great hugs of yours?' When I put my hands around him, I was shocked at how thin he was. He said, 'Want to spin my chakras?' so I worked my way up his back. When I got to his heart, I said, 'What's this here, Robert?'

"He said, 'You know where my pain is.' "

throughout his life, Avalon had been an odd hybrid of self-abuser and health fanatic. He was an early convert to healthy eating and exercise and never smoked or drank, but in other ways he took dreadful care of himself. He would talk about staying up 48 hours in a row to compose, then blandly add, "I suppose that might not be good for me."

In the Post article, he described his work jags more floridly. And, in retrospect, chillingly. "A chemical change takes place and makes me feel invulnerable and on the verge of death simultaneously. It's an adrenal rush, and it's very, very powerful. I feel my heart beating faster, I sweat. I'm almost possessed."

Others commented on how maniacally he drove himself. Jesse Randolph, who had just signed on as executive director of FMM two weeks before Avalon's death, talked of coming in to find him looking worse and worse, of how "he was burning the candle at both ends and in the middle, going from one project to another without taking time to eat. I'd tell him, 'Why don't you go home? This will all be here tomorrow.' "

But that wasn't true for Avalon himself.

After about a month of losing weight and feeling ill, Avalon went to see a doctor. Dockery says Avalon hated everything to do with conventional medicine but agreed to be tested after he and Dockery felt a solid mass lodged in his chest. The doctor's visit revealed that he had a tumor in his scrotum. "It took forever" to get the biopsy's bad news that Avalon had testicular cancer.

The day of his diagnosis, Avalon remained upbeat, telling both Dockery and his brother that he was "going to beat it." Knowing his strength of will, they believed him. But the cancer had already metastasized and spread through his vascular system and had already begun cutting off the flow of blood to his lungs and heart. The day after the diagnosis, while working with Randolph, Avalon collapsed to the floor, the victim of an apparent heart attack. His heart did in fact stop beating for 45 minutes, but even after it resumed beating, Avalon remained unconscious. That night at Park Plaza Hospital, he suffered the pulmonary embolism -- the fatal lack of blood in his lungs and heart -- that ended his life.

With earlier detection of his cancer, Avalon might have survived. But Dockery says, "I'm not sure he would've wanted to live with chemotherapy and doctors. He hated traditional medicine so much." Dockery also wonders if Robert feared that the Charcot-Marie-Tooth syndrome would cost him the ability to play the piano.

I know I was struck by how frail his handshake was, especially for a pianist.

Robert Avalon left behind a rich vein of memories -- he already sounds like an urban version of a Texas tall tale -- but what about the music? How good was it?

There's a range of opinion. Composers in the academy generally don't get excited about it. "It's very conservative and very pleasant," Gottschalk said.

But Rodolfo Morales said, "He had five or six pieces that deserve to be in the standard repertoire of 20th-century music." Among them he names the Sonata for Violin and Piano, which seems to be Avalon's best-regarded piece.

Gary Chamness, president of the FMM board and an amateur musician himself, described Avalon's work as "a wonderful combination of vitality and originality" that is both modern, yet also "lyrical and romantic."

Chamness said, "People cringe at the words 'modern music' because they picture a cerebral music that doesn't connect with ordinary listeners. Robert didn't do that. He used dissonance, but it (his music) wasn't an exercise in dissonance."

Bill White has the last word about his brother. "He thought of (playing) music as a form of communication and expression, not just as a skill," the mayor said. "Musicians held him in awe." Then he added, "It would've been wonderful to have seen him get more recognition."

White recalled a conversation with his brother in which they discussed two of their heroes, Mozart and Schubert.

"`They died in their 30s and worked themselves to death,' Robert said. `That's not sad, because they died doing what they wanted to do.' I said, `But Schubert didn't get the satisfaction of recognition in his lifetime.'"

"Robert answered, `The players, the musicians and vocalists, thought his music was great. That's who Schubert wrote for.'"

At that moment in our interview, an aide came to the door to call the mayor away to a lunch meeting. As he stood and buttoned his jacket, he said, "I'd put him right up there with the company he respected."

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