Interviews

Dianne Reeves
Jazz At Lincoln Center
February 15-16

Bobby Broom
Dizzy’s Club, February 20

Matthew Shipp
Dizzy’s Club, February 25

Joe Magnarelli
Small’s, February 17

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(Interview begins on page 6)

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Matthew Shipp
“In And Out Of The Moment”

By Eric Nemeyer

JI: Some artists have mentioned that rather than prepare for a moment, they prepare for being in the moment.

MS: Well, I prepare for being out of the moment. [laughs] In a sense, I like to think of the self of myself as always just outside of even the precincts of my body, and the performance, and any of this that constitutes the jazz world—or this world in general. Maybe on a circle above that—that could create circles that come down through space time.

JI: There are certain strictures and structures that exist in the forms, a series of chord changes, harmonic, melodic elements of the composition.

MS: I try to melt all the materials down. On one level, it all comes from one continuum. There’s one thing that holds all musical space-time together, or space-time in general—especially if you think of the Universe as coming out of the big bang. It’s all coming out of the dimensionalist point. If you’re trying to get back to the beginning of it all, and you situate yourself there, then it’s all the same, it’s all a variation on a theme. You can melt all the materials down to a basic set of parameters that can then be inter-exchanged and interweaved in all different types of ways, and all different types of frequencies because it’s coming from the same nexus, or the same nodal point. I’ve been thinking in these terms ever since I was a teenager, and wanted to have an original musical identity. I wanted to be a musician and also wanted to have an original style on my instrument. I’ve always felt that to do that, you had to get to who you are—and then once you deal with who you are, you’re dealing with what everything is.

“...trying to get back to the beginning of it all, and you situate yourself there, then it’s all the same, it’s all a variation on a theme. You can melt all the materials down to a basic set of parameters that can then be inter-exchanged and interweaved in all different types of ways, and all different types of frequencies because it’s coming from the same nexus, or the same nodal point. I’ve been thinking in these terms ever since I was a teenager, and wanted to have an original musical identity. I wanted to be a musician and also wanted to have an original style on my instrument. I’ve always felt that to do that, you had to get to who you are—and then once you deal with who you are, you’re dealing with what everything is.”

JI: What kinds of music were you working on when you were searching for your path?

MS: I think as a teen I was interested in what any young jazz musician would have been interested in.

As a pianist, you have the three post-Miles [Davis] pianists: Herbie [Hancock], Chick [Corea], and Keith [Jarrett] - that paradigm. I wasn’t interested in it per se. I knew it was there. I actually look at that paradigm as problematic.

JI: Why is that?

MS: When you’re a teenager you’re just gathering materials and you know you want to get somewhere, but you don’t really know. You’re trying to gather a lot of experiences and hoping that it will come together in a way that will thrust you somewhere—and you’re not exactly sure what that “where” is...because that “where” is a process, and the end part is part of the process. You don’t know where it’s going to be. I did know that I wanted to have my own universe—and walk in my own universe in the way that say Thelonious Monk did. In a similar way, I had my own idiosyncratic way of playing the piano. This is not calculation either. I knew this was inside of me. The whole Herbie, Chick and Keith thing is such a ‘70s [1970s] thing. I’m not saying that what they did is not great. It’s just such a 70s thing. I knew it was inside of me. The whole Herbie, Chick and Keith thing is such a ‘70s [1970s] thing. I’m not saying that what they did is not great. It’s just such a 70s thing. I knew in my way of wanting to step outside of that ... that was such a powerful paradigm. But, if you’re going to bypass that in any way ... that has such a powerful effect on people’s psychologies, that people are going to have a hard time perceiving you, if you don’t somehow come out of that. I always thought of myself as coming out of various strands. I’ve always loved Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell—

but I’ve never wanted to play bebop, per se. I admire Bud Powell too much to try to actually do that. Bud Powell’s way of playing is as idiosyncratic as Monk’s. People don’t think of it that way, because it is probably a little easier to copy it in some ways. But it is as idiosyncratic. Actually that effect can never ever, ever be duplicated—because he’s not really playing bebop. He’s playing brain-waves on the piano and it just happens to go through a period that was called bebop. It’s really it’s own world. So Monk and Bud Powell were the people I really idolized. Then I really idolized Duke Ellington’s piano playing. I also really admired Lennie Tristano, and Bill Evans to some degree. I knew that McCoy Tyner was another person, because I was also into the Coltrane universe. But, I knew that I didn’t want to be a McCoy Tyner type of player. I didn’t want to end up getting a gig with Pharoah Sanders. I really didn’t want to be in the Herbie-Chick-Keith post-Miles paradigm. There wasn’t anything outside of that. There are models like Andrew Hill and Cecil Taylor—who are other iconoclastic players, who have gone their own way. But I knew that if I was seen in that lineage, also, that that’s a prison. So I guess I really just wanted to keep putting a lot of ideas into the hopper of the mind — but at the same time trying to discover what makes me tick, which is an extra-musical thing that has nothing to do with music. Finding out what makes you tick—that’s your world view, your way of seeing things. And, you hope that there is some intersection between your world view, your own electromagnetic mind field, and the actual materials of music.

JI: Beyond whatever the approach to music and the musical vocabulary is, those players involved in the aforementioned paradigm that you referenced have been able to connect with audiences. How has the consideration of connecting with an audience influenced your approach, if at all?

MS: First of all, they played with Miles Davis.

JI: So, you’re saying that they’ve got charisma pre-sold, and doors opened by virtue of their prior connection.

MS: There is no marketing thing for any young jazz musician, nowadays, that is like that. Playing with Miles Davis was an important thing. Even someone like Brad Mehldau, can’t quite get the advantage like they got the advantage. It was something that was open to those guys that just doesn’t exist anymore. I actually read an interview in the Chicago Tribune where Herbie Hancock was talking about this - where he mentioned that no matter what jazz musicians have happening, the doors are not opening for them like they were for him and his generation. The 70s was a different time. Nowadays there is just so much “noise” out here, and so many different alternatives for people to get information that there’s just no centralized way for jazz musicians to get their identity out there. Things are dispersed. We don’t have the opportunities that people of that time had—or the centralized image of who they were. There’s no way for a musician to get that now. That’s not what music is about of course. But, it’s important to understand the ways of existing out here. Also,

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Joe Magnarelli

Hear Joe at Small’s, February 17
Joe Magnarelli
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Interview By Eric Nemeyer

Jazz Inside Magazine: What were your musical activities like growing up in Syracuse?

Joe Magnarelli: Well, my dad was a comedian — not a professional comedian, well, kind of a professional comedian. He had a radio show, did a lot of theatre around the Syracuse, New York area, and he was always the comedic relief. Between the ages of 12 and 22, I was completely into playing competitive basketball. I wasn’t really in the music scene, although I did go to Fredonia State, which had a Music Program, but I wasn’t an amusic major. I wanted to play basketball but I got cut my junior year. I didn’t really get connected till I was about 23 or 24 — around 1984. I was totally a late bloomer, but I was always practicing piano. In fact, I had more professional jobs on piano when I was between the ages of 17 and 22 than I had on trumpet — but they weren’t jazz situations. They were mostly accompanying singing and playing in churches. When I was in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, I had a fantastic trumpet teacher who really taught me good fundamentals on the trumpet. I really practiced hard at that time, but I didn’t play much through high school or college. Maybe about my junior year in college is when I started to practicing more.

J: What was the tipping point that pushed you over the edge to pursue a professional career as a trumpet player?

J: I’m not sure if anybody really told me anything, although I did work with a lot of great people. ... back then you were just shown the way on the bandstand. I did lessons with various cats, but ... hearing these great musicians in person, by living in New York all these years —that’s your lesson.”

J: What were some of the challenges that you were experiencing?

J: New York was different back then because in the late 80’s, early 90’s a lot of the masters were still alive. I used to go hear Junior Cook, Dizzy Reece and C Sharp at Auggie’s. There were all these great older musicians — Woody Shaw and Freddie Hubbard — so I never felt like I was really getting anywhere playing in the jazz industry. I just felt blessed that I was there and learning and listening to these guys. Plus you have to remember that back then recording was not like it is now. There were companies who recorded musicians and you had to wait in line. Now anybody can record a CD and put it out there so that whole aspect of the business has changed completely.

J: What were some of the advice or words of wisdom that you were receiving from mentors that had a significant impact on your playing and to take this gig at the Darien Dinner Theater. That was my chance to move to New York. So that’s what I did. My first year and a half in New York was spent playing shows. I got involved with A Chorus Line at the time, but then I had heard about a Lionel Hampton audition through some guys I met playing these shows - other young cats who were playing jazz. I got a chance to audition for Lionel Hampton’s Big Band in ‘87, and I won the audition. I was with him for two years and started meeting more people and getting in different bands. I played with Jack McDuff, ‘89 through ‘91.

J: How did things work for you when you moved to New York?

J: Well, you know, I actually came down to New York in 1982. That summer of ‘82 I just practiced all day long. I started to get into Fats Navarro records and then eventually into Blue Mitchell and Kenny Dorham records. So from 1982 to 1985 I was in Syracuse. I got a day job and practiced as much as I could. I wasn’t interested in anything else other than practicing the trumpet - not even hanging out. I was playing gigs outside of Syracuse, and then in 1985 I left.
Joe Magnarelli

hearing these great musicians in person, by living in New York all these years - that’s your lesson. You know, going to hear Tom Harrell at Bradley’s, maybe there was four or five engagements he had there and I was there probably four to five nights each engagement — all three sets! That’s the learning experience! Going and hearing Clifford Jordan and then Woody Shaw and Eddie Harris. Just incredible experience! And that’s your lesson.

"if I sit home and I start practicing what I’m going to play on a particular tune and then I go to the gig, that’s what I play on the gig. I feel hindered, creatively. But when I sit at the piano and play those things, and I hadn’t played them on trumpet yet, then I go to the gig, I feel something different comes out ... like my creativity is on a good level, it’s in a good place."

J: Talk about some of the gigs that really stood out for you with some of these great players.

JM: I think playing with Charles Davis in the 90’s. That was a real learning experience because he really knew Kenny Dorham’s music and also Dizzy’s music. He knew a lot of ins and outs in the music that really helped me. I worked a little bit with Louis Hayes and some gigs with Jimmy Cobb once. It’s just things like that where either you’re going to fold because you’re going to say, “Wow! I can never be that great.” Or you just say, like, “Wow, man. I want to keep practicing and get better so I have more opportunities like these.”

J: How has your study and practice routine changed over the years since you’ve been in New York?

JM: Well, I guess since I’ve been here I’ve edited out a lot of the bullshit. I just try to work on the essentials. I just try to listen to certain players and the way they play and try to copy what they do and work it out for myself.

J: What’s your approach to writing?

JM: I wish it was more regular, but it’s more of an occasional thing. I start writing stuff when I know there’s a record date coming up.

J: You’ve done several recordings. Why don’t you talk a little bit about how your first recording came about?

JM: I had been hounding Gerry Teekens with Criss Cross Records for two years. I actually had a gig with Grant Stewart, Spike Wilner and Jimmy Lovelace on the East Side. We played every Thursday night and one week, Gerry Teekens walked in and heard me play. The next fall he gave me a record date, which was really great—an exciting moment for me.

J: What kind of discoveries did you make about the music business and record industry as a result of your business association with him?

JM: I was so into just trying to sound good on the records and do the right thing musically that I didn’t study the business as much as I should have then. Gerry wasn’t really into the business part of it either. Gerry was more into recording good music, putting it out, and moving on. He didn’t really push his artists to get them recognized. His philosophy was, “I recorded you. I’m going to distribute these CDs all over the world, and that’s enough.” In a way, it’s a lot better than nothing. I learned more from the record business these last two years—with my last record on Reservoir and doing my own thing here with the strings.

J: Talk about your new recording with strings, My Old Flame

JM: I think the record came out very well, and I think the reason why it came out well is because of the experience that I gained recording for other labels. I kind of knew what it would be like in the studio. Everything went very smooth and everybody had a good time. I think that shows on the recording. It was definitely a learning experience though. I mean you don’t realize how much responsibility you really do have when people start calling you and need to know answers. You have to make sure all the funds are correct and everybody gets what they’re supposed to. It’s a lot to do while thinking about your own playing. What I did learn is that I don’t really want to be a record producer for my own records. I want somebody else to produce them because I want to just think about the music, but I couldn’t do that this time. I had to plan rehearsals and get new string players and get music to people. It just got crazy, and I couldn’t really concentrate on my own playing, but luckily I’ve been practicing for this date for almost a year, so I felt like I had put in my time. Basically I learned the complete Bird with Strings record—all of Bird’s solos. I learned a whole bunch of Louie Armstrong’s solos too because I knew if I got Marty Sheller to write the string parts, the strings would be hip and beautiful and I just wanted to be able to go into a situation where my phrasing was cool and it felt good. Plus, I memorized all the scores. When Marty sent the scores to me, I memorized them on piano so I could play the scores like I was playing a tune. I felt confident going in.

J: How does teaching impact your artistry?

JM: I’m teaching at Rutgers and New Jersey City University. I feel like I need to practice to try to stay one step ahead of my students. I like teaching because it gives me reason to “shed” and learn tunes and concepts. A couple of my students are really into writing tunes in odd meters, and I’ve never really been into that. So I love the teaching for that reason. It inspires me. Young kids have a lot of positive energy and they’re dreaming about their lives and you can feed off that.

J: Talk about some of the artists you’ve been performing with.

JM: Lately I’ve been playing a little bit with Ralph Bowen, which is another great experience for me. Living in New York at this time and being the age that I am, a lot of my peers are just some of the baddest cats out there. So, playing with them is a beautiful thing. It’s (Continued on page 12)
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Joe Magnarelli

(Continued from page 10)

exciting for me and it also keeps me focused on trying to get better and trying to play on a higher level. I sub a lot with the Village Vanguard Band. So, there’s learning that music, learning Thad’s music and Jim McNeely’s music. There’s a lot of opportunity here in New York just by hanging out with your peers. The gig that changed my career and my life was playing with Ray Barretto. He was really the first person that gave me a real jazz gig, even though it was Latin jazz. We traveled all around the world playing the best venues, and we played our own stuff. We played my tunes, Robert Rodriguez’s tunes, Myron Walden’s tunes. That gig was when I thought to myself, “Yeah, I can—not only do it but I can survive in this business doing what I do…”

JI: Having facility on piano is so important when you’re playing another instrument.

JM: Oh, yeah. Well, I find as a trumpet player—if I sit home and I start practicing what I’m going to play on a particular tune and then I go to the gig, that’s what I play on the gig. I feel hindered, creatively. But when I sit at the piano and play those things, and I hadn’t played them on trumpet yet, then I go to the gig, I feel something different comes out … like my creativity is on a good level, it’s in a good place. There’s something about not working it out on the trumpet, having it in your head and having it played out on the piano for a long time that gives it a certain amount of freshness that I really dig.

JI: Tell us about your association with Marty Sheller who arranged the music for your album, My Old Flame.

JM: I met him about five or six years ago. I didn’t know much about him, but as soon as I met him and I played in his band, with his music, his nonet music, octet music … I started to realize what a great writer he was, as well as a great person. He was nice enough to lend me his scores to the octet music, and I studied his scores. Basically I was studying with him. So when I got this idea about doing a record, a string record, he was my first and only choice. He had written the Woody Shaw version of “We Will Be Together Again” back in the 70’s, or early 80’s. That was one of the first things I heard when I was young. So that’s been in my head for years. I just felt really lucky to know Marty at this time and have an opportunity to do this with him. He’s a great musician. He’s a really bad dude, man.

Matthew Shipp

(Continued from page 6)

JI: How have you experienced or bypassed the impact that the marketplace and or peer pressure can have on your creating music?

MS: I don’t listen much to my peers. For instance, I know Dave Douglas well. I’ve never listened to a Dave Douglas ever. My musical personality was very established by the time I was 22 or 23. I’m very focused in who I am and what I do, and I don’t really care what anybody else is doing. I mean, I work with a record label, so that’s kind of a weird thing to say. I do hear a lot of things in that capacity. But, to use a post-Clinton term, I have the ability to compartmentalize [laughs]. I don’t really listen to what other musicians are doing. I don’t care because I’m really centered in what I’m doing, and I’m a centered individual. And, this business is so difficult. If critics like something that Dave Douglas does, or Brad Mehldau does, it is not going to influence me to do something like they do just because they have had success with it.

JI: Given that you take a more abstract approach to music...

MS: Well, I don’t take an abstract approach to getting gigs [laughs]

JI: Once on stage, though… Your associations have been with artists who are noted for more exploratory approaches like bassist William Parker, Mat Maneri. How do you take that abstract approach and make it more accessible or otherwise make more people aware of it?

MS: If you look at Monk as the model, his music was as abstract as anything. Yet, they were able to sell the idea of Monk. He had a name, a look, a way of being that all fit his music—and was able to enter into the general cultural mien by virtue of its freshness, it’s beauty, it’s power, and the fact that there was a personality behind it. So somebody like myself had to be able to do something like that on some level. I’m not trying to compare myself to Monk. But, I had to be able to do something like that in some way. Whatever my thought in modern society is, I have to be able to figure it out, so I can build a network—so I can be that within society, but stay true to the actual music that I play, and not compromise that in any way. I just want to find a way to make people realize that maybe they should listen to this—because it does serve some purpose within society. So I have to be able to sell this idea. How do you do that? That’s a matter of luck, ingenuity on my part, and my music actually being able to reach the people—people who then in turn will help out, and try to make byways out here, to find places and ways I fit within the society. Within the language of jazz—even though it’s an American music—is not given the chance to really fit in society.

JI: Could you talk about your association with William Parker.

MS: I met him when I moved to New York in 1984. I had heard him on records, and I knew he was a kindred soul who I wanted to play with. He is seven or eight years older than me. He is a bridge between generations. I knew he had played with Don Cherry. He was playing with Cecil Taylor at the time. So he was playing with a generation older than me. He was also playing with people like Billy Bang, Frank Lowe, Jameel Moondoc—people that were peers in his age group—and me. I felt a kinship to his language. I met him on the street when I first moved here. I just stopped him and talked to him, and he was very gracious. He could have had an attitude, like “who are you…I play with Cecil Taylor.” But he was very cool. He heard a tape of mine, and then we just started playing together, and we built up a very close friendship and musical relationship over the years. He has been one of the most important people in my life.

JI: What kinds of suggestions or advice from William Parker had your received that have made an impact on your approach?

MS: When I moved to New York, I was fully formed in what I do. Not that I haven’t improved a lot or changed, but I was who I was. We talked more about non-musical things. The thing about William that is so great is that he is his own academy. Even though he studied with a number of heavyweights for short periods of time—Richard Davis, Jimmy Garrison—he’s really a self-made musician. He really put his own information together. He started playing as a teenager. He would listen to records for hours, and take a broom, hold it like an upright bass, and play bass lines. He didn’t know anything about the bass then, but he was developing a kinesthetic connection between what he heard on the record and the physicality of it, and the mental processing of the whole thing—just by playing a game as a kid. To me that is so great and so profound because kids really learn through play. He developed a concept in his head about how he learned to play bass before he even started studying. He’s a very deep, deep human being. I’m not going to blow him up to be a saint. When you get to know William, there are a lot of intense paradoxes that make him even more interesting. If anybody knows my discography, he’s been a huge part of my musical universe and my universe in general.

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Saturday, January 5
- Christian Sands Quartet; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
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- Chris Botti; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Sunday, January 6
- High Wire Trio featuring Christian Sands; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Camila Meza & The Nectar Orchestra; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Chris Botti; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Monday, January 7
- Mingus Big Band: Celebrating 10 Years at Jazz Standard; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Saylor Project; Francisco Mela’s Ancestors; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Tuesday, January 8
- Bill Charlap: Portraits in Jazz — Solo Piano; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Ben Williams & Friends; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Wednesday, January 9
- Corcoran Holt Quintet; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Bill Charlap: Portraits in Jazz — Bill Charlap/Jon Faddis Duo; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Ben Williams & Friends; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Thursday, January 10
- Bill Charlap: Portraits in Jazz with Sean Smith & Bill Stewart; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
### Friday, January 18
- George Coleman Quintet; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Eddie Palmieri; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

### Saturday, January 19
- George Coleman Quintet; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Eddie Palmieri; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

### Sunday, January 20
- George Coleman Quintet; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Eddie Palmieri; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

### Monday, January 21
- Jazz at Lincoln Center Youth Orchestra; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’dwy
- Mingus Big Band; Celebrating 10 Years at Jazz Standard; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Keyon Herold; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

### Tuesday, January 22
- Tatiana Eva-Marie: Django Birthday Celebration; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’dwy
- Vijay Iyer Trio; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Keyon Herold; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

### Wednesday, January 23
- Sharon Clark Quartet; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’dwy

### Thursday, January 24
- The Cookers; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’dwy
- Life Of A Legend: Carmen De La Vallade, Dancer, actor, choreographer, and 2017 Kennedy Center Honors recipient. Carmen de LaVallade celebrates her love for jazz in this special Life of a Legend performance; 7PM, Appel Room, Jazz at Lincoln Center, 60th & Broadway
- Vijay Iyer Sextet; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.

### Friday, January 25
- Vijay Iyer Sextet; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Life Of A Legend: Carmen De La Vallade, Dancer, actor, choreographer, and 2017 Kennedy Center Honors recipient. Carmen de LaVallade celebrates her love for jazz in this special Life of a Legend performance; 7PM, Appel Room, Jazz at Lincoln Center, 60th & Broadway

### Saturday, January 26
- Vijay Iyer Sextet; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Wadada Leo Smith: America’s National Parks, 7PM, 9:30 PM, Appel Room, Jazz at Lincoln Center, 60th & Broadway

### Sunday, January 27
- Vijay Iyer’s Ritual Ensemble; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.

### Monday, January 28
- Monday Nights with WBGO: Valery Ponomarev Jazz Big Band; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’dwy
- Mingus Big Band; Celebrating 10 Years at Jazz Standard; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.

### Tuesday, January 29
- Andy Milne & Unison featuring La Tanya Hall; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’dwy
- Nabaté Iles’s Eclectic Excursions; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.

### Wednesday, January 30
- Shenel Johns Sings Dianne Reeves, Diana Ross, and Dinah Shore; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’dwy
- Pat Bianchi Quartet; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.

### Thursday, January 31
- Songs of Freedom with music direction by Ulysses Owens, Jr. featuring René Marie, Theo Bleckmann, & Alicia Olatuja; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’dwy
- Jimmy Cobb’s 90th Birthday Celebration; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.

### Friday, February 1
- Songs Of Freedom With Ulysses Owens, Jr. & Friends; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’dwy
- Jimmy Cobb’s 90th Birthday Celebration; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.

### Saturday, February 2
- Songs Of Freedom With Ulysses Owens, Jr. & Friends; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’dwy
- Jimmy Cobb’s 90th Birthday Celebration; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.

### Sunday, February 3
- Songs Of Freedom With Ulysses Owens, Jr. & Friends; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’dwy

### Monday, February 4
- Joe Fiedler’s Open Sesame; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’dwy
- Vanguard Jazz Orchestra: Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.

### Tuesday, February 5
- Joel Ross Good Vibes; Dizzy’s, Jazz At Lincoln Ctr, 60th & B’dwy

(Continued on page 16)
George-Cables
Appearing at Village Vanguard, February 5-10
© Eric Nemeyer
Wednesday, February 6
- Troy Roberts Organ Trio With Special Guest Chris Potter; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- George Cables Trio - George Cables, Piano; Dezron Douglas, Bass; Victor Lewis, Drums; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.

Thursday, February 7
- Freddy Cole Quintet: Songs For Lovers; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- George Cables Trio - George Cables, Piano; Dezron Douglas, Bass; Victor Lewis, Drums; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.

Friday, February 8
- Freddy Cole Quintet: Songs For Lovers; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- The Clayton Brothers Quintet; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- George Cables Trio - George Cables, Piano; Dezron Douglas, Bass; Victor Lewis, Drums; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- John Pizzarelli Trio; Birdland, 315 W. 44th St.

Saturday, February 9
- Freddy Cole Quintet: Songs For Lovers; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- The Clayton Brothers Quintet; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- George Cables Trio - George Cables, Piano; Dezron Douglas, Bass; Victor Lewis, Drums; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- John Pizzarelli Trio; Birdland, 315 W. 44th St.
- Ron Carter’s Blue Note Winter Residency; Gideon King & City Blog; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Sunday, February 10
- Freddy Cole Quintet: Songs For Lovers; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Jazz For Kids; The Clayton Brothers Quintet; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- George Cables Trio - George Cables, Piano; Dezron Douglas, Bass; Victor Lewis, Drums; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- Scott Reeves Jazz Orchestra; The Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra; Birdland, 315 W. 44th St.
- Ron Carter’s Blue Note Winter Residency; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Monday, February 11
- Brussels Jazz Orchestra & Tutu Pucaane: We Have A Dream; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Mingus Big Band: Celebrating 10 Years At Jazz Standard; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Vanguard Jazz Orchestra; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- Ronnie Burage & Holographic Principle; Jonathan Barber Quartet; Jon Elbaz Trio “After-hours”; Small’s, 183 W. 10th St.
- Lorna Dallas; Birdland, 315 W. 44th St.
- Wallace Roney Quintet - February Residency; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Tuesday, February 12
- Brussels Jazz Orchestra & Tutu Pucaane: We Have A Dream; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Vanguard Jazz Orchestra; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- Catherine Russell and Her Septet, 315 W. 44th St.
- Thundercat; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Wednesday, February 13
- Brian Charette; Music For Organ Sextette; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Double Date With Tiernay & Kate: From Django To Joni; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Vanguard Jazz Orchestra; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- John Stetch & Vuralnavarche; Dave Pietro Quartet; Dave Whitfield Trio “After-hours”; Small’s, 183 W. 10th St.
- Thundercat; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Thursday, February 14
- Valentine’s Day; Kim Nalley Sings Love Songs; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Double Date With Tiernay & Kate: From Django To Joni; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Vanguard Jazz Orchestra; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- Phil Stewart Quartet; chiff-rao Original Sextet; Jonathan Thomas Trio “After-hours”; Small’s, 183 W. 10th St.
- Catherine Russell and Her Septet: Alone Together; Birdland, 315 W. 44th St.
- Thundercat; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Friday, February 15
- Kim Nalley: Love Songs; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Dianne Reeves, 2018 NEA Jazz Master; Valentine’s Day weekend, 9PM, Rose Theatre, Jazz at Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Mingus Big Band: Celebrating 10 Years At Jazz Standard; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Vanguard Jazz Orchestra; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- Michael Weiss Quartet; Alexander Claffy Quintet; JD Allen “After-hours”; Small’s, 183 W. 10th St.
- Catherine Russell and Her Septet: Alone Together; Birdland, 315 W. 44th St.
- Thundercat; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Saturday, February 16
- Kim Nalley: Love Songs; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Dianne Reeves, 2018 NEA Jazz Master; Valentine’s Day weekend, 9PM, Rose Theatre, Jazz at Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Mingus Big Band: Celebrating 10 Years At Jazz Standard; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Vanguard Jazz Orchestra; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- Smalls Showcase: Dean Tsr Saxophone Chor; Michael Weiss Quartet; Alexander Claffy Quintet; Brooklyn Circle; Small’s, 183 W. 10th St.
- Catherine Russell and Her Septet: Alone Together; Birdland, 315 W. 44th St.
- Thundercat; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Sunday, February 17
- Kim Nalley: Love Songs; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Jazz For Kids; Mingus Big Band: Celebrating 10 Years At Jazz Standard; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Vanguard Jazz Orchestra; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- Vocal Masterclass with Marion Cowings; Emanuelle Tozzi Quintet; Bill Goodwin Trio; Joe Magnarelli Group; Ben Ziegler Trio “After-hours”; Small’s, 183 W. 10th St.
- Birdland Latin Jazz Orchestra; Birdland, 315 W. 44th St.
- Thundercat; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Monday, February 18
- Juilliard Jazz Ensembles; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Mingus Orchestra: Celebrating 10 Years At Jazz Standard; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Vanguard Jazz Orchestra; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- Ari Hoenig Trio; Joel Frahm Trio; Sean Mason Trio “After-hours”; Small’s, 183 W. 10th St.
- Judi Silvano and The Zephyr Band; Birdland, 315 W. 44th St.
- Wallace Roney Quintet - February Residency; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Tuesday, February 19
- John Chin Quartet; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Godwin Louis; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Steve Nelson Quartet; Frank Lacy’s Tromboniverse; Malik McLaunre Trio “After-hours”; Small’s, 183 W. 10th St.
- Saxophone Summit with Joe Lovano, Dave Liebman, and Greg Osby; Birdland, 315 W. 44th St.
- David Sabaon; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

(Continued on page 17)
Some people’s idea of free speech is that they are free to say what they like, but if anyone says anything back that is an outrage. – Winston Churchill

Wednesday, February 20
- Bobby Broom Organ-Sation: Soul Fingers; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- An Evening With Branford Marsalis: Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th
- Dayna Stephens Quartet - Dayna Stephens, Saxophone; Aaron Parks, Piano; Ben Street, Bass; Greg Hutchinson, Drums; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- Rob Bargad’s Reunion 7tet; Harold Mabern Trio; Micah Thomas Trio “After-hours”; Small’s, 183 W. 10th St.
- Saxophone Summit with Joe Lovano, Dave Liebman, and Greg Osby; Birdland, 315 W. 44th St.
- David Sanborn; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Thursday, February 21
- David Binney’s Angelino Quartet; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Spanish Harlem Orchestra; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Dayna Stephens Quartet - Dayna Stephens, Saxophone; Aaron Parks, Piano; Ben Street, Bass; Greg Hutchinson, Drums; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- David Sanborn; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Friday, February 22
- Warren Wolf Quartet Featuring Joe Locke; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Spanish Harlem Orchestra; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Dayna Stephens Quartet - Dayna Stephens, Saxophone; Aaron Parks, Piano; Ben Street, Bass; Greg Hutchinson, Drums; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- Saxophone Summit with Joe Lovano, Dave Liebman, and Greg Osby; Birdland, 315 W. 44th St.
- David Sanborn; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Saturday, February 23
- Warren Wolf Quartet Featuring Joe Locke; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Spanish Harlem Orchestra; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Saxophone Summit with Joe Lovano, Dave Liebman, and Greg Osby; Birdland, 315 W. 44th St.
- David Sanborn; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Sunday, February 24
- Warren Wolf Quartet Featuring Joe Locke; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Jazz For Kids; Spanish Harlem Orchestra; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Dayna Stephens Quartet - Dayna Stephens, Saxophone; Aaron Parks, Piano; Ben Street, Bass; Greg Hutchinson, Drums; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- Emilio Solla Tango Jazz Orchestra; The Ktet; The Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra; Birdland, 315 W. 44th St.
- David Sanborn; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Monday, February 25
- Matthew Shipp Trio; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Mingus Big Band; Celebrating 10 Years At Jazz Standard; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Vanguard Jazz Orchestra; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- Lucas Pino Nonet; Rodney Green Group; Jon Elbaz Trio “After-hours”; Small’s, 183 W. 10th St.
- Victoria Shaw; Birdland, 315 W. 44th St.
- Wallace Roney Quintet - February Residency; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Tuesday, February 26
- Allison Miller’s Boom To Boom; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Steve Siglie’s A.M. Band; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Terell Stafford Quintet - Terell Stafford, Trumpet; Tim Warfield, Saxophone; Bruce Barth, Piano; Peter Washington, Bass; Billy Williams, Drums; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- Eric Harland’s Voyager; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Wednesday, February 27
- Black Art Jazz Collective; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Joey DeFrancesco Trio With Troy Roberts And Billy Hart; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Terell Stafford Quintet - Terell Stafford, Trumpet; Tim Warfield, Saxophone; Bruce Barth, Piano; Peter Washington, Bass; Billy Williams, Drums; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- Michael Stephans; Quartette Oblique; Amos Hoffman Trio; Davis Whifield Trio “After-hours”; Small’s, 183 W. 10th St.
- Cyrille Aimee: A Sondheim Adventure; Birdland, 315 W. 44th St.
- Eric Harland’s Voyager; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

Thursday, February 28
- Black Art Jazz Collective; Dizzy’s Club, Jazz At Lincoln Center, 60th & B’way
- Alfredo Rodriguez/Pedrito Martinez Duo; Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.
- Terell Stafford Quintet - Terell Stafford, Trumpet; Tim Warfield, Saxophone; Bruce Barth, Piano; Peter Washington, Bass; Billy Williams, Drums; Village Vanguard 178 7th Ave S.
- Cyrille Aimee: A Sondheim Adventure; Birdland, 315 W. 44th St.
- Cory Henry Birthday Residency: The Revival; Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St.

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Interview & Photos by Ken Weiss

Idris Ackamoor (born Bruce Baker, January 9, 1951, Chicago, Illinois) founded his group The Pyramids in the early ‘70s in Europe while still a student at Antioch College. Utilizing the school’s study abroad program, he was one of the first jazz musicians to live in Africa, internalizing the nine months he spent there into a lifetime of creative inspiration. He also, very significantly, studied under Cecil Taylor at Antioch as part of Taylor’s Black Music Ensemble. The life and musical lessons learned under the iconoclastic pianist still enrich him today. The Pyramids self-released three well-received albums in the early ‘70s and then disbanded. Ackamoor resettled in San Francisco, where he still resides, and became the founder and co-artistic director of Cultural Odyssey, a performance company, along with his partner, Rhodessa Jones. The Pyramids reunited in 2007, more than thirty years after dissolving, and remain committed to incorporating the broad elements of the African diaspora along with a social consciousness. Ackamoor is a charismatic artist who utilizes costumes, tap dance, and audience participation, along with searing saxophone playing. He’s done a lot and has much to say. This interview took place on October 5, 2018 while he was in Philadelphia with The Pyramids to play Ars Nova Workshop’s October Revolution of Jazz & Contemporary Music Festival.

Jazz inside Magazine: Viewing your list of accomplishments is more than a bit overwhelming. You’re a creative musician who’s work spans multiple genres, a multi-instrumentalist, a composer, actor, tap dancer, athlete, a co-director of a performance company, a community activist, and on top of all that, you’ve got a real flair for style and theatrics. Being good at so many things, it must have been a challenge to decide the focus of your life’s work.

Idris Ackamoor: It seems like I became as versatile as I am through a natural process. It was never really rushed or designed. I started early, I started music when I was seven-years-old, and then I left music for a period in high school for sports but I eventually came back after I found my teacher and mentor in Chicago. Since that time I’ve been consistent at becoming an artistic being, surrounding myself with music. My African odyssey was very important. In Africa, you find the griots and it’s rare that anyone just does one discipline. The griot will tell stories, play music, he’ll do movement, so that was one of my formative times and I realized that that’s what I was about. I was about interdisciplinary performance – combining music with theater and dance – so that over the years I was able to become adept at these different disciplines. I’ve been a tap dancer for thirty years. I studied with some of the masters in the ‘80s. The thing that gave me the ability in order to do that was my company Cultural Odyssey. I never had a day job and with the company, being an artist-centered company, I made up my own time and it gave me a salary so I didn’t have the pressure of getting a job or a boss telling me what to do. It wasn’t easy because there were projects to do but it was exactly what I wanted to do.

J1: Your music with The Pyramids is generally described in the press as something along the lines of Afrocentric/world music and spiritual jazz or cosmic jazz. How do you define what you do?

IA: It has to be traced to Africa and my nine months living there. I became a percussionist as well when I was in Africa after starting out as an alto saxophonist. When I came back from Africa I was playing many instruments including talking drums and balaphone. In defining my music, I think I play the music of my own soul through the varied influences in my life. As far as The Pyramids, we’ve always been rhythmically based but very avant-garde, coming from the Cecil Taylor school. We came from the “energy” school, the spiritual jazz school, but what we were even doing in the early ‘70s was still rooted in the rhythm.

J1: Taking into account that you live in San Francisco and play the music that you play, how has the abrupt emergence of Kamasi Washington and the West Coast’s growing Afro-futuristic spiritual revival affected you and your band? Also do you have a relationship with Kamasi Washington?

IA: I like and enjoy his music but I have no relationship with him. I feel we are compatriots in a sense that his emergence seems to mirror my re-emergence. How people have embraced Kamasi’s music is similar to how they’ve embraced my music. The Pyramids are really forerunners and the emergence of the DJ culture has coincided with these heavy DJs, such as Gilles Peterson and Flying Lotus, rediscovering The Pyramids’ music. I am the elder, the progenitor, my band came out of the breath of Cecil Taylor and the Sun Ra Arkestra in the early ‘70s.

J1: It’s remarkable that your band was active in the early ‘70s, disbanded in ‘77, and then successfully reformed more than 30 years later. Why did the band fail in the ‘70s? Do you feel the concept was too far ahead of its time?

IA: I believe we were ahead of our time and we eventually let time catch up. [Laughs] In the early ‘70s we were young. We were touring in Africa when I was like 22. Once The Pyramids came back from Africa, we were isolated in Yellow Springs, Ohio. We weren’t influenced by the Chicago scene, the AACM, or the New York loft scene. We were in this village in Ohio and so all of it came from within, which I think is the best thing that could have happened to me. I was in a cocoon and I was able to develop naturally without outside influence.

(Continued on page 22)
Idris Ackamoor

(Continued from page 20)

ences. Of course, when Cecil came, he was one of my major influences, and a mentor and a friend. When we came out to the West Coast, we learned we had to make a living and we couldn’t make a living with our music. We couldn’t start families and all those pressures led to the dissolution of the band which was probably the best thing for me because it allowed me to go on my journey that I’m still on now. That was in ’77, and in ’79 I formed my company, Cultural Odyssey.

JL: In speaking with a couple other musicians, they feel it’s encouraging to see you have success finally after so many years. They feel there’s also hope for them.

IA: [Laughs] Other people have told me that. I’ve stayed healthy and I’ve always stayed with my music, and I’ve always been hell on my instrument. I’ve listened to John Gilmore, and listened and played with Charles Tyler, and of course, Clifford King, who was one of my teachers when I first got back on my instrument in Chicago. I studied with him for over two years and he really got me going. I’m learning stuff from him still! I learned everything I needed to know from several amazing instructors close to fifty years ago that I’m still discovering. I really didn’t grasp it then and now I’m starting to grasp it.

IA: Because I am a multi-instrumentalist, I find instruments that help to help me with my composition and make that connection between spiritual jazz, between avant-garde jazz, and a rhythmical foundation. I’m using many instruments, including many African instruments, in a non-traditional way that comes out very other worldly.

JL: Another immediate attention-grabbing aspect of Idris Ackamoor and The Pyramids is the use of theatrics. There’s numerous photos of you online wearing outlandish costumes. Would you talk about your use and choice of costumes and costume design?

IA: Once again, Africa is the source. Being in Africa, you just go nuts because all of the costume possibilities there. When The Pyramids came back from Africa, we were all dressed in African costumes. That’s where we got our initial inspiration for theatricality, and particularly for costumes. Later on, I became aware of Sun Ra’s work but Sun Ra was not an influence on me in terms of my theatricality. I was already moving in that direction before I was really into Ra. I was in Africa, that’s even Ra’s source, along with outer space. In Africa you see all these incredible costume dramas, the masquerades they do where they become another entity, another spirit. Once I got into Cul-

“...It was all about cooperation, it was all about personality, about uniqueness, finding your own voice. That was some of the biggest takeaways that I received from Cecil. When we worked with him, we didn’t do notes, we didn’t do lines on music paper. He had a completely different way of composing and way of trying to give his music to us as acolytes in his orchestra. It was all basically based on his own concept of letters.”

JL: What do you do with your band is unique, the way you plunge a stormy African percussive and rhythmic base into a cosmic, avant-garde mash. Would you talk about your commitment to your music?

IA: What practical things have you learned over the years?

IA: I have learned the concept of a business sense from all the years that I’ve been involved with my company. I realize all the stumbling blocks and the challenges of trying to survive as a musician. I knew I had to go back to the “street” school of how do you survive as a musician, and through my ability to take classes and learn grant writing, I was able to have health insurance decades ago. I think about Aretha Franklin dying with no will and that Prince’s estate is all messed up. That is my feeling and if someone thinks that I don’t, that’s up to them. I’m not wearing costumes to masquerade anything, I’m playing out of the African tradition. That’s what I learned.

JL: Have you had concerns that you might not be taken seriously when dressed as an Egyptian pharaoh or a zebra at performances?

IA: I’ve never had any concerns. We don’t want to look better than we play, we want to play better than we look. That has always been my feeling and if someone thinks that I don’t, that’s up to them. I’m not wearing costumes to masquerade anything, I’m playing out of the African tradition. That’s what I learned.

JL: It’s challenging to view your use of theatrics, costumes, audience interaction, including walking the aisles, and the use of Egyptian themes, without drawing a comparison to the Sun Ra Arkestra. You said earlier that your work emerged separately from what the Arkestra was doing. Would you talk more about that?

IA: I’ve always loved Sun Ra but I was never immersed in Sun Ra. The first time I saw Sun Ra was in the early ’70s when he did the Berkeley Jazz Festival. In reality, I think I was in Africa before Ra was in Africa, before he went to Egypt. I was living in Africa in ’72 and that gave me a grounding sense. I’ve never put Ra’s cosmic idea of being from outer space down in any manner, but that’s his philosophy, not my philosophy. I’m more grounded, I’m more in the earth. When I was with Cecil, he was talking about Africa, about the churches in Lalibela, Ethiopia. I’ve constantly been on my own path, taking in various inspirations but mostly influenced by my teachers, my life, and my parents.

JL: What kind of feedback have you gotten from the Arkestra?

IA: Oh, Marshall [Allen] loves what we do, but they’re doing their thing and we’re doing our thing. I’ve come about it in a very different way.

JL: What practical things have you learned over the years?

IA: I have learned the concept of a business sense from all the years that I’ve been involved with my company. I realize all the stumbling blocks and the challenges of trying to survive as a musician. I knew I had to go back to the “street” school of how do you survive as a musician, and through my ability to take classes and learn grant writing, I was able to have health insurance decades ago. I think about Aretha Franklin dying with no will and that Prince’s estate is all messed up. That is my mission in this life. No, I ain’t going out that way and you don’t have to go out that way.
Idris Ackamoor

Musicians shouldn’t go out that way. Fortunately I’ve learned all that without handicapping my music. I have an estate plan, I’ve got a retirement plan, I’ve had health insurance and a salary for decades. That’s my one little peeve with Ra and his Arkestra. He’s kept his orchestra together for a long time but from what I can see the business connection is very sparse. It would have been better to have a situation where the members of the Arkestra were taken care of. That, to me, would have been a great accomplishment. His music speaks for itself but what about the human element? We can’t ignore that and I’m not about ignoring that.

JI: What instruments do you play?

IA: [Laughs] The question is what instruments don’t I play! My babies are alto and tenor saxophone, and lately I’ve been playing a lot more tenor, but alto always gives me a little edge because alto is really what I became known for. I’ve been playing keyboards for many years. I’m a percussionist that can stand my own with master percussionists, but I’m not a master percussionist. I’m a mover, I’m a tap dancer. That’s one of my secrets for my longevity because tap dancing is one of the best health exercises that you can engage in. I play gongs and anything I can get my hands on except the trumpet or any of the brass. I play all that stuff but my calling is the alto and tenor sax.

JI: Your given name is Bruce Baker. When and why did you change your name?

IA: Bruce Baker was up until high school and until I went on my path. 1968 was one of the most important years of the 20th Century. That’s when I graduated and that’s when we had the assassination of Martin Luther King, the Democratic riots in Chicago, Bobby Kennedy’s assassination, and Black Power was in full blossom. I had a big afro. Everybody was changing their names and I took Idris at that time. Later, I did research and found out Ackamoor is my true family’s name on my father’s side.

JI: Music almost didn’t happen for you. You originally went to college on a basketball scholarship but during your freshman year you changed plans. What was your jazz epiphany?

IA: It wasn’t a jazz epiphany, it was a drug epiphany. It was around that time that we were experimenting with LSD. I was a basketball player but I realized that basketball wasn’t my calling. I played freshman ball at Cole College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa but I was the sixth man. The coach didn’t like that I was growing an afro and a beard. There were only 50 blacks at the college. I had a LSD trip that went bad which was an epiphany and made me realize this Iowa thing just wasn’t for me. I had a friend at the college, Albert Waters, a trumpet player, who started an R & B rock band and he asked me to join. I told him I hadn’t played in four years but he said, “Just come on and play.” So that got my horn back out. That was in ’69. I soon saw a Jet Magazine with a featured article on the Nyambi Umoja-Unity House in Antioch College, the nation’s first separate black dorm. I thought that was cool and I read the article and it said that Antioch College was the most experimental college in the nation. It was a five-year program with a work-study program. There were no athletics or grades, just pass/fail, and they had an education abroad program. It just hit me that I needed to go there. I was on the Dean’s List at Coe College but I called my dad to come and get me out of there. He took me back home to Chicago and I was thinking through the Chicago telephone book for instrument lessons and that’s where I found my mentor, my guru, Clifford King, who was an old, retired gentleman who had been a part of the whole ’30s big band movement with Jimmie Lunceford and all those other big bands. I studied with him in the spring and summer and then left for Antioch.

JI: Did Clifford King share any anecdotes from his time with Jelly Roll Morton?

IA: He didn’t tell me any stories, he just showed me all kinds of tricks he had learned. He was a master clarinetist and the first person to show me how to make any animal sound you wanted to make on a clarinet – dog, cat, bear. He could do that all because back in the day, that’s one of the things the big bands wanted for the movie scores. They could make their instruments talk and sing. I was learning my chromatics, my scales, and a lot of the stuff he showed me just went over my head but I became his star pupil because I was a fast learner.

JI: Your years at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, beginning in 1969, were pivotal years in your life. The first of two off-campus training experiences came in 1971 when you did a semester in Los Angeles and studied with alto saxophonist Charles Tyler [Albert Ayler’s cousin and band member]. How did he help you?

IA: Charles was amazing and he always supported my sound. Clifford had taught me in such a way that I was playing stuff that I didn’t even know I was playing. When I got to L.A. I wanted to find another teacher so I went to this very well-known studio saxophonist and he asked me to show him how I played. So I played through my routine and he said, “I’m not teaching you man. Go about your business, you got it.” He turned me away because he said I was on my way and he didn’t want to mess with it. I found Charles and always told me, “If you can play every note in every key on the saxophone with one finger…” More than anything, what I learned from Charles was the ability to improvise, in a trio mostly, because he wasn’t really into pianos. He was out of Albert’s school so he had that folk-like thing in his melodies that I loved playing. Most amazingly, Charles liked my early compositions so he played my compositions.

JI: During your time at Antioch, you suffered a severe hand injury that almost ended your career before it started. You refer to it as a “life-changing accident.” What happened and how did it change your life?

IA: Around that time I was really blossoming and I think God said to me, ‘You’re moving way too fast. Let me show you something.’ Because I was playing saxophones and flutes and constructing instruments, making percussion instruments even before I went to Africa. I did design this very formidable instrument that they called Idrissa’s machine. It was hallow out blocks placed on a board and I’d play them with bamboo and it sounded almost like a horse galloping. I really didn’t know anything about instrument construction and one day I was alone in the theater department’s construction shop making my second percussion instrument and there was a faulty guide on the power saw I was using to gouge out the block. Why the hell was I using that saw with huge teeth like that? Needless to say, the guard broke and my left hand went into the saw and nobody was around. I got knocked down and, of course, it was panic and complete mayhem. I just picked up and ran across a big golf course. Nobody was around, zero. One Antioch student happened to be driving by in a Volkswagen and heard my screams, saw me running and got me right to the infirmary and then to the hospital. The doctors thought I had lost my finger, I thought I was done. I had severed my index finger, it was hanging by the skin. The surgeon who fixed me knew I was an artist so he set the finger to be curved so that I could still play saxophone. It was hard but I was fierce, I was determined. That happened right when Cecil came. So I’m preparing for Cecil to come to Antioch, waiting for my hero, and bam! I’m out of the picture. Cecil got there and I helped letting students know about him but my hand was in a cast. I began to play trumpet because all I needed was my right hand to play it. I went to Cecil and told him about the accident and that all I wanted was to participate with what he was doing. He said, “Idris, if you can play one note, come, come, come join the ensemble.” And that’s what I did and then Clifford Sykes is the guy that turned the lightbulb on for me. He was a percussionist who came with Cecil’s ensemble and I saw (Continued on page 24)
I had my left and he had his right so I said, "Damn, Clifford, we like twins!" [Laughs] He said, "Hey, Idris, don’t worry about it, I know a clarinet player who has two fingers missing and he’s still playing. Think about it. Roll your palm..." So he opened my eyes and I got a Selmer alto, had it modified, and I’ve been playing it ever since.

J1: What most surprised you about Cecil Taylor once you got to know him in the fall of 1971?

IA: His non-competitive nature, his collaborative sense. He was always maligned by the critics, other musicians, and the club owners. So he was the epitome of the outlaw. He had the ability to embrace you for who you were and not put you into a competitive structure. It was all about cooperation, it was all about personality, about uniqueness, finding your own voice. That was some of the biggest takeaways that I received from Cecil. When we worked with him, we didn’t do notes, we didn’t do lines on music paper. He had a completely different way of composing and way of trying to give his music to us as acolytes in his orchestra. It was all basically based on his own social dancing. They had multiple unique dances there including the Bop, which became Stepping. I grew up with the Bop in the ’60s and that’s what you would dance with to Marvin Gaye and the Temptations. We’d also “walk” on the slow dances and then we would “grind” when we were old enough in those basement parties. That was the nasty dance. I love Tap but I didn’t become aware of it until quite a bit later, and when I had the opportunity to take Tap, that was one of the best things I ever did.

J1: You eventually left Antioch’s campus and Taylor behind in ’72, utilizing the college’s abroad program to spend a year in Europe and Africa to organize a band and to study. What was your initial concept for The Pyramids and how did it evolve during your time in Africa?

IA: I didn’t know much about African music until I got there. The Pyramids had evolved out of my 1971 band, The Collective. My music back then was full of so many different colors with French horn, flute, alto and piano. Once Cecil came, and that band ended, I was fire-breathing. The three of us that went on to form The Pyramids – myself, [future wife/ flutist] Margaux Simmons, and [bassist] Kimathi Asante, we were all in Cecil’s ensemble and we were fire breathing. We did the most avant of the avant-garde. We were playing my tunes, I didn’t know about standards at that time. We were trying to make our souls leave our bodies.

J1: Why didn’t more musicians explore Africa at that time?

IA: Financially, it was a big issue. Who had money to go to Africa? Where would you stay? It was as far away as being on another planet. There was also the stigma that African Americans had about Africa in the late ’60s. It took a long time to get over that stigma that Africa was a primitive place. There were so many African Americans that thought Africa was just a jungle and Tarzan. The Black Power Movement was formulated to dispel that and it did. People thought you’d go there and die of malaria.

J1: What did the indigenous African musicians make of your music?

IA: Nothing but positive. Margaux and I took this spiritual journey up to northern Ghana that was another one of my most life changing adventures. Just through sheer luck we fell into the Dagomba people’s musicians of the king’s court. They were prayer drummers and they allowed us to pray in their prayer circles. They

"I think dance and music is integral. Jazz used to be a dancing art form. In the ’20s and ’30s you didn’t play jazz for listening, you played jazz for dancing. Jazz was the social dance music of America. Something got lost when jazz transitioned to music that people listened to. I mean how did we get from jazz being the predominant musical voice of America to it becoming 1.2% of record sales?"
Idris Ackamoor

met in the village square of a small town with dirt streets called Tamale. There’d be like 10-16 Dagomba master drummers from the king’s court. It was like going back to Africa 500 years in the past. I also saw the parade with the King of Kings on his horse with a big umbrella and the talking drummers behind him playing while the horses were prancing. We then went further north, almost to the border of Upper Volta, to Bolgatanga, which was the home of the Frafra people, and we experienced two ceremonies there. One of the ceremonies was the second burial ritual of a Frafra king. In ancient days, when a Frafra king died, they wouldn’t let it out that the king had died because they were worried that the surrounding tribes might try to take advantage of the disarray. So the second burial would be celebrated a year later, after the governmental transition had taken place. We played along with the other musicians during the ceremony.

Ji: You made field recordings of the African musicians you encountered. How have you used those documentations?

IA: The only thing I’ve actually issued is on my double album The Music of Idris Ackamoor [EM, 2006]. On one of the sides is a track called “Africa” and that field recording is of the Dagomba prayer drummers along with me and Margaux. It’s an amazing track. I’ve got hours of field recordings that I haven’t released yet because I’m deciding in what manner I’m gonna release them and how I can donate the proceeds to an African charity because these recordings are like fifty years old and most of those musicians are no longer with us. Antioch gave me a very nice Sony field recorder and I digitized those recordings which are from Ghana, Kenya and Ethiopia.

Ji: In the early to mid-’70s, you self-released three albums of your band. How unusual was it to self-release at the time and why did you go that route?

IA: Right, it was absolutely unusual to do that at that time. I did it through sheer determination in getting the music out. Around that time, Cecil was also self-releasing. He did Indent on his own label and he was at Antioch at that time. Cincinnati had a pressing plant and it was about an hour and twenty minutes from Yellow Springs. We wanted to get The Pyramids sound on wax and there was no record company beating a path to our door, [laughs] and at that time I had settlement money from the accident. It was a really powerful statement that Antioch fully supported me during this transitional period. They waved any loans that I had and they made all of my education free and I had a significant settlement so I became the financier for the albums. We started with 500 to 1000 of each of the records and we might have to reorder for another 500.

Ji: Since 1979, you’ve led Cultural Odyssey, the San Francisco-based non-profit performing arts organization, along with actress/vocalist Rhodessa Jones. One of the programs the organization heads is the Meade Project which entails going into jails to make theater with incarcerated women out of their own experiences. Why do so and why only target women?

IA: Because this was Rhodessa’s pet project and she’s always told me there’s so many social programs in prison for men. Men go out to the yard and lift weights and various workshops are available for them. Women have never had that. They’re left alone to sit in their cells and just go crazy. Rhodessa went into the San Francisco city jail around 1989 to make theater out of these women’s real life experiences. San Francisco had a very radical sheriff at that time [Michael Hennessey], he loved the idea and got behind it completely. He even allowed the women to be escorted outside the prison to a major city theater for a two week run. Every night they go there in their orange clothes and in handcuffs, deputies at every exit, they do the show, and are then transported back to jail. First I’d ever heard of that. Since that time, Rhodessa has done it all over the world. Over the past twenty-five years the Meda Project has become the model for working with incarcerated women and ex-inmates, and now with HIV + women. I produce the project, I do all the fundraising.

Ji: You’ve also worked with Rhodessa Jones’ brother, famed choreographer/dancer Bill T. Jones [best known as the Broadway choreographer for the musical Fela!] How do you view the connection between dance and music?

IA: I think dance and music is integral. Jazz used to be a dancing art form. In the ‘20s and ‘30s you didn’t play jazz for listening, you played jazz for dancing. Jazz was the social dance music of America. Something got lost when jazz transitioned to music that people listened to. I mean how did we get from jazz being the predominant musical voice of America to it becoming 1.2% of record sales?

Ji: How did you come to simultaneously combine tap dancing and saxophone playing? Had you seen others do it?

IA: The only person I’ve seen do that, and I

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didn’t know that at the time, is a white saxophone player named Shoehorn. He doesn’t play saxophone the way that I do. My combining Tap and sax happened naturally, I took an intensive study program in Tap, the first thing I thought about was how I could maybe apply it to my saxophone playing. It took me a long time, I should have just been concentrating on my steps. I didn’t want to make it just a novelty. I wanted to present the substance of a hoofer. I didn’t know what I was doing at first but once I had more facility with Tap I began to use it while playing standards such as “Misty” and “Sophisticated Ladies.” My whole idea was playing these beautiful tunes and I could really float across the floor.

JI: Your current release is called An Angel Fell [Strut]. Do you believe in fallen angels?

IA: Yes, I’ve seen them. That’s what An Angel Fell is all about. Between 2005 to 2012, Rhodessa and I worked in a South African prison through the Medea Project. We originally were brought over there to do our duet shows but while we were there, the promoter got us into the prisons and we set the wheels moving for a seven-year residency, six weeks out of the year, to go into the women’s prisons. The women that we met there, we saw the whole gamut – murderers, mules, a lot of drug crime. You’d never know by looking at them. They were the most beautiful creatures you’d ever see. In fact, I met and fell in love with this gorgeous South African woman who was in there for murder. The lyrics for the title song of the album are inspired by the meeting I had with her. A lot of the women were in there for crimes of economics, not having money and hooking up with the Nigerian drug cartel, or for killing their abusive partner in self-defense. So yes, I’ve seen fallen angels.

JI: The last questions have been given to me by other artists to ask you:

Rhodessa Jones (actress/vocalist) asked: “What was your first reaction to our initial performance together? I always say we fell in love on stage—I was singing Nina Simone’s version of “West Wind” and you played the balaphone.”

IA: Yes, those initial performances liberated me. I met her around 1979 but we didn’t really start collaborating until 1983, and once we did hook up, it was as a duet. It was a revolutionary duet that we had. I had been going to Europe with my quartet since 1980 but every time I’d go, I’d lose money. I had an agent in Austria call me to come play and I told him I would only come over as a duet with this very beautiful woman who is a dancer, singer and a mover. He said, “Well, what am I going to do with that? I’ve got jazz clubs and festivals?” I told him to trust me and we went out there as one of the early originators of this new form of interdisciplinary spoken word and theater. We went over there with about five gigs that the quartet had that was replaced with the duet, and we ended up staying three months because we were able to play theater festivals, jazz clubs, and most important, we did dance intensives. She was the main dancer, teaching them all the crazy four-legged dancing, and I would play the music to accompany them. At the end of the intensive, we’d do a big show at a major venue. That began the basis of Cultural Odyssey.

Bill T. Jones (choreographer/dancer) asked: “Recently, Wynton Marsalis and I were challenged with a question directed to both of us and our specific disciplines during a public conversation. The question was why more black people were not in jazz audiences. Wynton said he had tried everything he could think of to attract a wider audience but it seemed that black people really didn’t care about jazz. How would you answer that question?”

IA: I would say it’s not black people that don’t care about jazz, I’d say it’s that same divide that separated jazz as a danceable art form to where it’s evolved, including Wynton Marsalis’ music, that there’s a disconnect. The main apparatus for spreading the word are the radio shows and because radio has become so bad, in terms of playing jazz, it doesn’t get heard by the black population. San Francisco has one jazz station and most stations don’t have any. I think the reason that blacks aren’t in the audiences is that you’ve got to look at what is the social atmosphere of, not only black audience members, but also young, white listeners. There’s a disconnect between the marketing apparatus of jazz and getting it to black people. So it’s mostly a question of exposure, and then the other issue is jazz education in America.

Bobby Zankel (alto sax) asked: “You may remember that we first met when I traveled from Madison Wisconsin, where I worked and studied with Cecil Taylor, to Yellow Springs, Ohio to find a place to live. Cecil was hired to create sort of a Black Aesthetics program that included literature, dance and, of course, create an ensemble, as he had done in Madison, which I was going to continue being a part of. You and I are about the same age, and in a lot of ways we seemed to be interested in many of the same things. You shared your experience of working with Charles Tyler in L.A., who I admired. (In 1974 I got to play with Charles with Cecil at Carnegie Hall) You invited me to stay at your house and I remember having a late night jam session. I was really impressed with your saxophone playing and I was amazed at your courageous and creative response to your accident. Of course the time we spent working on Cecil’s music was wonderful and life changing. The question I would like to ask you centers around my interest in how musicians evolve and develop themselves over time - I hate to use the word mature, because that means you’re getting old. I’d be curious to know how you connect what we did with Cecil in Ohio, to the work you’re doing now. I know for myself, there’s stuff that I do that comes directly through Cecil but it doesn’t sound too much like him, but in my mind I know how it connects. It’s not like I’m doing a Cecil thing, but it came from that. Knowing how brilliant you are, I’m sure your personal connection with Cecil comes up in many interesting and personal ways.”

IA: I definitely can say that what I got from Cecil was the idea of possession in music. When Cecil plays, it’s almost as if he’s possessed. I mean Cecil would play like he’s a beautiful demon or a beautiful angel. He always connected the possession Haitian Voodoo or possession in African and he played piano like it was 88-tuned drums. He would be playing as if his soul was being possessed. If you listen to some of my early recordings, there’s some things that scare you. We’re doing something else, we’re possessed, and the soul is taking you somewhere else. In those early years, when I was right out of Cecil’s ensemble, those early Pyramid’s recordings, especially on the 2 CD set out on EM Records, there’s a solo I take on “Land of Eternal Song,” it’s a LONG solo. When I listen to it, I don’t even believe it, it just keeps getting further and further out. It’s out of what Clifford taught me about animal noises. It’s really intense, I think probably one of the most intense alto solos on record. Talk about maturity, although I’ve gotten older and my sound has changed, but I still play with my whole body, I still have that sense of possession when I play. I try to reach, I become transformed in my body on certain songs. I’m still a very physical player, like Cecil was always a very physical player. Jimmy Lyons could play these beautiful, sweet, long segments. He was the perfect counterpart to Cecil. And then there’s Bobby, he’s the same way as me. He would play such intense

“Have the courage to say no. Have the courage to face the truth. Do the right thing because it is right. These are the magic keys to living your life with integrity.”

- W. Clement Stone
Idris Ackamoor

alto solos.

Bobby Zankel also asked: “Talk about maintaining a concept and also apparently not feeling any need to live in New York. I like that.”

IA: [Laughs] I’ve maintained a concept while being very isolated, at first in Yellow Springs, and secondly in San Francisco. Neither of them were supposed to be the hotbed of avant-garde music. I’m the last man standing in San Francisco. A lot of my contemporaries left San Francisco a long time ago. I stayed in San Francisco and made a life, made a foundation.

Karen Borca (bassoon) asked: “Cecil [Taylor] didn’t give lessons, he directed rehearsals. What was your take on Cecil’s methodology?”

IA: When Cecil did auditions for the Black Music Ensemble, we all came thinking it was involving music but there wasn’t one note played in the auditions. Cecil was basically doing theatrical exercises. He had the musicians lay on the floor and with his directions he would direct people to crawl over one group of people to get to another place. You had to figure out how you were to get over there and how people could help you get over there. These were theatrical sensitivity exercises. He was not looking for the most technically proficient musicians. I think he was looking for the ones that best took his directions and that’s been with me all this time. I’m in the same situation in my bands. I’ve been through lots of personnel changes. I’m not looking for the most technically proficient musicians, I’m looking for the ones that can best take my direction because I know what I’m doing, I know what I want, and when I give a direction I want that direction to be followed. Not as a dictator, but my band is not a democracy. The Pyramids began as a family band, I had to subvert my leadership responsibilities, but in reality I was always the leader.

Andrew Cyrille (drums) asked: “Hi Idris, what was the best thing you got out of being at Antioch College in the early 1970’s?”

IA: Wow, you’re getting all the greatest hits! My god! [Laughs] The best thing I think I got was Antioch College Abroad Program and of course the Cecil experience, but more than anything, developing an independent study concept. No one told you you had to go to classes. No one told you to do homework. No one told you any of those things. You had to make your own plans. I told them I wanted to go and form a band and then I wanted to travel to Africa. The abroad program was really set up for people to go to universities in Europe but I didn’t want to do that. The best thing that ever happened to me was that they cast me out into an abroad program and all they said was that I had to go to a university in France and take six weeks of French. Other than that, they gave us an around the world ticket where we could stop anywhere in a circle by airplane and they gave us a 300 dollars-per-month stipend. Other than that, we were on our own. So I had to get to Amsterdam and figure out where we were gonna stay, how we were gonna get gigs. We didn’t even know anybody in Africa. What were we supposed to do in Africa? It all came about me as a leader in collaboration with Margaux and Kimathi. I was always the fearless one. I was always let’s go, we’ll do this.

Famoudou Don Moye (percussion) asked: “How did you get interested in learning to play and dance with the chekere [a percussive instrument of West African origin consisting of a dried gourd with seeds woven into a net covering the gourd] and how has your command of the instrument and dance movements progressed over the years?”

IA: I did a big collaboration with Moye and other master percussionists once and we did a chekere dance. I’ve always been very physical so I would play the chekere, bounce it on my knees, throw it under my legs, and then throw it over to the other chekere master percussionist, and he’d have a chekere and he’d throw his to me. It was almost like a basketball game but it was all in rhythm. When I get with a master percussionist, there’s nothing we can’t do because the master’s got it under control and I’m able to hang. As far as progression of dance movements, I’ve continued to advance my ability to tap dance and play saxophone at the same time. The physicality has helped to keep me in shape. I’m also an active swimmer, which has helped me with my lung capacity. It’s all about the wind.

Jemeel Moondoc (saxophone) asked: “How did your travels to Africa enhance or support your concept of American Black Music?”

IA: No, you didn’t talk to Jemeel! No! Well, what Cecil taught us was timeline patterns. Basically, it is a continuation from Africa to the slave trade to the middle passage to the field shouts to the blues to New Orleans, so that the connection with Africa is a part of our common experience as African Americans. They’re getting ready to celebrate 400 years since 1619, the year the first black slaves arrived in America. They’re gonna celebrate that in August, 2019. The whole concept is dependent on how you relate and associate yourself with Africa, and I think that Africa is only now becoming even more important through climate change. Western society is damaging our environments with climate change. Africa is such a large continent, and there’s been several books written that Africa may be the last bastion of nature and the pureness of the Earth. It’s so vast, some parts of the interior have not even been explored. I’m still very inspired by the developments in Africa and Fela’s music. It’s a diaspora. I’ve always been inspired by Bob Marley’s music, Sun Ra, Art Ensemble, the griots, the chroniclers of the African society and history. I can connect myself to that and I’m finally in that position with An Angel Fell, which is, in my opinion, the most socially conscious album I’ve ever done, and that’s where I’ve always wanted to be. I’ve always wanted to be like a New Age griot. I see things that inspire my compositions.

Jemeel Moondoc also asked: “How was We Be All Africans [Strut] conceived?”

IA: It was conceived because of all the police shootings of young black men. The oldest bones have been found in Africa and a lot of scholars, including Leakey, believe we are all descended from a common ancestor, and many people think that ancestor happened in Africa and then migrated to different places. There’s a lot of scientific information that we came out of the Garden of Eden, and that’s in Africa. So I’m asking why are we killing each other? Why are white policemen killing black youth? Why is there all this racism when we be all Africans? We’re all a part of a common ancestor.

Jemeel Moondoc also wanted to know if you would be interested in performing in a project that he’s calling ‘Alto Gladness’. He wants to reform Cecil Taylor’s alto section at Antioch College and I’m with you and Bobby Zankel. The three of you and a rhythm section.

IA: He really said that? This is what I’ve been thinking about for the last couple of years! Yes! Wow, I’m ready!

On playing with Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins and more...

By Eric Nemeyer

JI: What were the circumstances that led to your association with Miles Davis?

BB: Around 1983, before I moved to Chicago, there was talk about the possibility that I would play with Miles. There was a musicians’ club in the village at that time called 55 Grand Street, where a who’s who of the modern jazz, fusion and funk scenes would be playing and/or hanging out every night. Miles’ road manager was there a lot and would tell me that I was going to be getting that gig eventually. I didn’t believe him. In 1987 a few of the members of Miles’ band were native Chicagoans – Robert (Babe) Irving, III, Darryl Jones and Vince Wilburn. Miles was going through guitarists in search of play with him. I think it became clear to him pretty quickly where my heart was musically. He’d come over to me on stage and play lines that he would have played in 1958; then he’d wink at me and stroll off.

JI: What kinds of discussions did you have with Miles Davis?

BB: Just regular ones I guess. Sometimes they were about music of course and then other times just regular things; you know, like when you’re traveling with people and sitting around airports for hours passing time. The conversation that really stands out in my memory though, is when I had to call him up to tell him I couldn’t play a concert with him because I had a previous commitment. Miles was scheduled to play at Chicago’s Auditorium Theater, but Kenny Burrell had a job in Jersey somewhere for the Jazz Guitar Band. Kenny wouldn’t let me out of the job, so I was trapped! I called Sonny Rollins for some words of wisdom. When I told him “Part of me really wants to do the gig with Miles…” he asked me, “Which part is that?” So I hung up, called Miles and explained everything to him. Miles’ response was: “Kenny Burrell!!” And then, “Who you gonna get to sub for you?”

JI: What impact did Miles Davis have upon your approach to creating music?

BB: The way I see it, Miles was great at getting the right one, and they (and possibly others) must have told him about me. I was told to put a tape together, so I did my best rocked-out guitar impersonation, which was pretty phony, but got me to the next stage of being summoned to New York. I still had my apartment there. We rehearsed, and I started working. I recall breaking a string seconds before I was to take my first solo…a portent. I never, ever, was inclined toward rock guitar. Never felt comfortable with distortion as a part of my voice. So really, I wasn’t the man for the job because that’s what Miles was looking for. That sound had been a part of Miles’ bands for ten to fifteen years up to that point. At the same time though, I wasn’t going to pass on the chance to please to play at Chicago’s Auditorium Theater, but Kenny Burrell had a job in Jersey somewhere for the Jazz Guitar Band. Kenny wouldn't let me out of the job, so I was trapped! I called Sonny Rollins for some words of wisdom. When I told him “Part of me really wants to do the gig with Miles…” he asked me, “Which part is that?” So I hung up, called Miles and explained everything to him. Miles’ response was: “Kenny Burrell!!” And then, “Who you gonna get to sub for you?”

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JI: What kinds of discussions did you have with Miles Davis?

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Bobby Broom

Appearing at Dizzy’s Club at Jazz At Lincoln Center
February 20, 2019

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BB: The music making process is much the same for me now as it always has been: I listen, respond creatively and try to give what I can to the overall sound of the music – not just the guitar solos. However now, because I am more skilled at what I’m trying to do, I can interact in a more sophisticated way, bringing a more refined sound to the group. I can also present more thoughtful and interesting solos, and hopefully all of this lends to the listening experience while being inspiring within the group as well. In the early days, sometimes I’d think, “Why am I even here?” because I felt I was playing so poorly. And we all know that since the ’70s Sonny has gotten much flack about his band members. But maybe there was a bigger picture happening that’s not so apparent. It’s fulfilling to have more to say as an improviser now. Of course, in this situation “more” is always relative to the wellspring of ideas coming from Sonny. And that’s inspirational to me, to see that by continued practice and involvement, access to more of what you want to play is possible. Anyway, I feel that it’s possible that there can be more of a collective musical presentation by Sonny’s group now. Obviously, he is the leader and master, but we want to contribute something more substantive than ornamentation. I think that slowly, this is beginning to happen.

JI: Could you talk about your move to New York in the 1980s and how doors began to open for you?

BB: Growing up in New York allowed me access, at a young age, to jazz, its musicians and more. When I returned to New York from Boston I guess I had a reputation of a young guy who could play a little bit and, because I had been actively pursuing involvement in the field, I knew a few people. I found myself involved in two scenes that were happening there at that time. One involved the talented young musicians who were New York natives, guys that I came up with. We all got involved with GRP Records by playing in trumpeter Tom Browne’s band. There was also a buzz around Art Blakey’s band as he searched for new young musicians. I was there for that and was deemed by Blakey a “Messenger”, but I chose the closeness and familiarity of my friends over the historic significance of playing with The Jazz Messengers. In fact, I don’t think I was even considering that historic significance.

BB: When it was time for me to attend college I didn’t view the opportunities that I had had up to that point in quite that way. I was most concerned with developing as a musician and in my family it was understood that I would attend college. Music was an obvious choice as a major for me, and Berklee was the popular choice of colleges for jazz development at the time. When I was well into my freshman year I began to see fellow childhood musician friends appearing on records and also to hear talk from all my friends at Berklee about their plans to move to New York after they graduated. It was then that I decided to continue college at home in New York the following year.

JI: What was your approach to music and the rest of your life as well, I guess. It wasn’t until I was of age that I realized that this was my approach to music and the rest of my life as well, I guess. It wasn’t until I was of age that I realized that

BB: All of the listening, practicing, studying and playing that I had done up to that point was the preparation for the moment I was asked to sit in with Art Blakey’s band. I didn’t know beforehand that this would happen. I went to see the band play and was happy to see that James Williams was playing piano. Just a few months prior to this he and I had met and played a performance with saxophonist Billy Pierce and other Berklee faculty. So in between Blakey’s sets, James told me to go get my guitar (I lived a few blocks from the club). So that’s how it happened. The tune I most clearly recall playing with the Messengers is “One by One.” We played standards and some other things. We were encouraged to play what we could, the rest we’d learn later. We were just eighteen or nineteen years old. However, when we got up on the bandstand we stayed. Pretty immediately there was an implication of acceptance from Blakey, as though we were already on the gig.

BB: When first of all, there were a million guitarists there (much like in Chicago now) so it forced me to stay focused on practicing and to not concern myself with too much outside of that. In order to learn, grow and have fun I would connect with fellow guitarists that I admired, such as Kevin Eubanks and Joe Cohn. Otherwise, Berklee was a fertile environment for fellowship and development among young, like-minded musicians. Most of the currently well-known jazz musicians that are around my age were there at the time and we would get together every night, without fail, for the then modern-day version of Minton’s jam sessions, which happened in Berklee’s band rooms.

BB: Exactly. I didn’t know it at the time, but I was practicing visualization as a kid. After I became enamored with jazz music as a form of expression, I felt that I wanted nothing more than to do this just as those that I was listening to were doing it. I wanted to be like these guys. This was the direction that I moved toward in my life from that point on and situations and opportunities followed along with me in that direction.

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BB: Well, there were personal obstacles. I believe that I gave myself the most difficulty as far as that’s concerned. I mean I was just so young and hadn’t experienced that much, other than trying to make music. I didn’t have healthy outlets and alternatives. I had the great-est mentors I could have in music – Sonny, Weldon Irvine, Jackie McLean who gave me my first college-level teaching job – but I had to live and go through some things and search for answers and meaning that would sustain me above and beyond music. I’d say I actively began this search in my early twenties. It’s interesting for me to think back on that time. Those were some serious musical experiences that I had. I realized that then, but not in the same way that I do now. Then, it was all about learning. My first guitar teacher taught me that it was very possible to learn by doing. So that was my approach to music and the rest of my life as well, I guess. It wasn’t until I was offered my first recording contract that I questioned whether or not I was ready for an opportunity. I remember talking it over with my friend Omar Hakim. He encouraged me that I was good enough to record and suggested that I could develop as a musician while I was making records. So as I think about it, my musician comrades were also very important in terms of providing me positive energy and an environment in which I could grow. I remember well the beautiful spirit, prompted by a shared interest, that I felt from all of the other young musicians in New York at that time – those who I had known for a while and those who were just getting to New York from their home towns.

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Jl: What kinds of challenges and or benefits did you gain from your experiences at Berklee College of Music?

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Bobby Broom

BB: I’ve talked before about the misconception that there’s an inherent problem with guitar and piano playing together. The only adjustment that I may have made then, and would still make today when playing with another harmonic instrument, is maybe to play less. In other words, I’d leave more space for the other person to comp. And I’m not suggesting that it doesn’t work for two or more chord instruments to comp together. When playing together, listening is most important for any combination of instruments to get along. If there’s mutual respect, courtesy, awareness, sensitivity, then beautiful music can be made regardless of the instrumentation. That’s assuming the musicians can play of course.

JI: Can you discuss the development of your association with GRP Records?

BB: GRP was signing young, aspiring, jazz-aware musicians who lived in New York in the late seventies/early eighties. We were jazz-aware in that we were getting ourselves together as jazz musicians, and most of us had an inclination toward straight-ahead jazz along, with the requisite passion and talent, but we also considered the other styles of music that were apparent and available to us. Anyway, as I said, I was playing in Tom Browne’s band, and I got called to do a tour of Japan with the GRP All-Stars. I did a few records for GRP as a sideman and was then offered a recording contract. All this was happening just before it was fashionable or feasible for a youngster to play straight-ahead music exclusively – before the Marsalis started recording. So we were perfect for GRP as a developing record label in that we were marketable as young prodigies in a sense, and we had the probability of making money because we were playing cross-over music which could potentially have greater appeal via black radio.

JI: What kinds of direction or suggestions did you receive in the creation of your two albums for GRP—Clean Sweep and Living for the Beat?

BB: For Clean Sweep I had quite a bit of freedom to do what I wanted. I wrote and arranged most of the tunes, and some things were worked out in the studio among the musicians. That record is a good musical representation of me at the time. Living for the Beat was a representation as well...of the confusion in my personal life. By then the advent of the drum machine had been fully realized, and self-production and the emphasis on electronics were taking hold. These trends pointed toward a future of less collective music making, as well as to the popularity of the individual musician as star artist/producer. As youngsters we all had four track recorders and were making our music at home. Add to that mix the influence of Michael Jackson, Stevie, etc. We were all trying to write, sing, play...So for me, all this made for a lot of confusion as far as what direction to take in making a record was concerned. Then my contract got assigned to Arista Records. For an indication of what was happening over there: that was the label that made Kenny G a star. I would meet with the executive at Arista, and he’d be asking me what I wanted to do: “How do you see yourself as an artist Bobby?” Hell, I don’t know, I’m twenty-two years old! However, I was self-aware enough to suggest jazz-savvy musician/producers such as Marcus Miller and George Duke, but my man wasn’t feeling or hearing me at all. Arista wound up assigning a couple of nouveau producers to make some hit singles for my record and thus my state of confusion was nearly complete. All that was left was for me to pose holding the girl’s red shoe for the back cover photo. Sure what the hell, I’ll do that too. After agreeing to play the nastiest sounding guitar-synth over a track that sounded like an acid trip induced version of Paula Abdul’s Straight Up, all hope was lost for me. I’ve never done acid, but have heard about bad trips. To add insult to injury, a few years later I’m playing in London (I think I was with Sonny), and I find out that “Living for the Beat” (the acid trip song) is some kind of dance hit in the UK. At that point I had to laugh.

JI: How did Kenny Burrell impact your artistry and approach to phrasing melodies, and lines, and your improvisations during or as a result of your work with his Jazz Guitar Band?

BB: At the time I began working with Kenny Burrell I had moved to Chicago and had begun working on realizing and accepting my own sound and tendencies on the guitar. By that time I had a pretty good working knowledge of the jazz language, but what was important was what a positive impact it had on me to receive an endorsement and validation from a jazz guitar master and legend. It couldn’t have come at a better time. I would soon be asked to play with Miles Davis and to again be posed with the question about my true sound and direction with Miles. I would meet with the executive at Arista, and he’d be asking me what I wanted to do: “How do you see yourself as an artist Bobby?” Hell, I don’t know, I’m twenty-two years old! However, I was self-aware enough to suggest jazz-savvy musician/producers such as Marcus Miller and George Duke, but my man wasn’t feeling or hearing me at all. Arista wound up assigning a couple of nouveau producers to make some hit singles for my record and thus my state of confusion was nearly complete. All that was left was for me to pose holding the girl’s red shoe for the back cover photo. Sure what the hell, I’ll do that too. After agreeing to play the nastiest sounding guitar-synth over a track that sounded like an acid trip induced version of Paula Abdul’s Straight Up, all hope was lost for me. I’ve never done acid, but have heard about bad trips. To add insult to injury, a few years later I’m playing in London (I think I was with Sonny), and I find out that “Living for the Beat” (the acid trip song) is some kind of dance hit in the UK. At that point I had to laugh.

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Bobby Broom

(Continued from page 31)

Burrell clones. Kenny also inspired and encouraged me to play solo guitar – one of the things that he did so beautifully, and something that I really shied away from then and still kind of do… but today I’ll do it when no one’s looking.

**JI:** Could you talk about working with two of the archetypal bebop pianists, who themselves worked with Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker? What were some of the lessons you learned in those situations?

**BB:** I’m glad that you mentioned those little details. I sometimes think about those wonderful connections to jazz music’s glorious past that I’ve been blessed to have. Playing with Al Haig was the sweetest thing. He heard me play and invited me to sit in with him at a piano bar called Gregory’s, which used to exist on the upper-east side. He played there a few nights a week with a bassist (Morris Edwards). Of course, I took him up on his invitation and was there regularly. He’d call tunes. He’d say, “Do you know this tune?” If I said no, which at that point I probably said a lot, he’d say something like, “It’s not hard, just come in after the first chorus.” I learned quite a few tunes that way. It’s cool to think that I was so welcomed by him and that I must have been able to hang and get along, otherwise I’m sure I wouldn’t have been there. Some nights Al would be absent, so he’d call Walter Bishop, Jr. to sub for him. I’d be thinking to myself, “Wow, he played with Charlie Parker too!” Bishop was just as encouraging to me, and I’d just be reveling in these experiences, trying to soak up the moments and all that music I was hearing these guys play. I got a chance to play with Walter Bishop again in the Late ‘80s when saxophonist Paul Jeffrey got a chance to play with Walter Bishop again all that music I was hearing these guys play. I like drummers who have an understanding of the beatback – those that can make their swing funky and their funk swing. I want musicians that value the feeling of the music first and foremost and who demonstrate that every second that they play. I also want a drummer that can coax me to higher levels without being overpowering; one who I can interact with and engage in the balancing act with, who will be aware and selfless enough to forego their super-hi bar fill that they were just about to play because something else more compelling just happened in the music asking them, in that instant, to take another direction.

**JI:** Could you talk about what it is that you want in a drummer that will enable your music to soar creatively?

**BB:** You’re right if you sense that the drums are a very important instrument for me. I like drummers who have an understanding of the beatback – those that can make their swing funky and their funk swing. I want musicians that value the feeling of the music first and foremost and who demonstrate that every second that they play. I also want a drummer that can coax me to higher levels without being overpowering; one who I can interact with and engage in the balancing act with, who will be aware and selfless enough to forego their super-hi bar fill that they were just about to play because something else more compelling just happened in the music asking them, in that instant, to take another direction.

**JI:** Are there certain drummers who have made a mark on your music and spirit?

**BB:** I love the drums, so I’m fortunate to have experienced playing with quite a few of the greats. I did miss playing with Philly Joe Jones and Elvin Jones though, two of my favorites. I had Idris Muhammad on the *Modern Man* record. That was joyful! He brought a positive, supportive spirit to that date that can be felt in the music. Every beat danced. We had never played together before that time, but it never mattered. He was a supreme music maker.

**JI:** What kinds of challenges and or growth did you experience as a result of your role performing as an accompanist?

**BB:** The biggest challenge for me in that role is the usual one of wanting to do my best in support of what’s happening musically. Playing the supportive role of the sideman has never been a problem to me because I love music and want to make it sound the best I can when I play. This is always the most important thing to me regardless of my role in a musical situation.

**JI:** What was some of the highlights and challenges that you experience as a leader?

**BB:** Playing with just bass and drums was very difficult for me to get used to. The space that’s made available by the sound of that instrumentation can be confusing. I had to become able and comfortable to carry the total responsibility for the chords. I also had to learn not to overplay as a soloist – to use the space to my advantage. I make sure I have musicians that understand how to listen to and influence the total musical picture – a drummer that can comp and a bass player that can create a variety of colors and make harmonic diversity. As all of these elements developed and evolved over the years, my sound, that of the other musicians involved and the distinctive sound of the Bobby Broom Trio emerged and has become more and more apparent to me. The 2001 release of our first trio record, *Stand!* (Premontion Records) and that it was so well received, was a definite highlight for me. Now our new recording *Song and Dance*, which will emerge in September, is the latest milestone for me. I am grateful for my musicians (bassist, Dennis Carroll and drummer, Kobie Watkins), how well we interact and the beautiful and powerful result.

**JI:** The sum total of an artist’s life experiences and the kinds of thought, philosophy, ideas, spirituality, culture, people that we allow ourselves to open up to are what shape the ideas and energy that is expressed in our music. Inexperienced players want to copy the sound and the notes to sound like someone like Coltrane—but it is so much more than that. So when an inexperienced guitar player recently said to us, “I don’t care what these artists did 10 or 15 or 30 years ago or their experiences or what philosophies and culture they’ve experienced” (essentially what got them to play the way they do), he wanted to know what someone is playing over a C7sus chord. (Listen to the record!) What would be your response to that kind of thinking?
**Bobby Broom**

**BB:** This type of thinking is how some musicians deal with music or how some people see life: on the surface. This is our current level of awareness and basically how we operate as a species. It is too difficult, unclear and unpredictable for most of us to see things any other way. We don’t understand or believe in our awareness potential. If all I’m getting from music are quantifiable thoughts, then I’m missing the point. If the purpose of music is expression, then I need to go beyond the surface to find the meaning, which isn’t something we can really talk about. Understanding the tools, language, or whatever you want to call what someone is playing over a C7sus is necessary in the process of development of the young musician, but for me that info is just scratching the surface of what experiencing music is really about. I did a gig recently with The Deep Blue Organ Trio. Fifty or so Canadian high school kids were brought to the club on a field trip. Of course these kids knew absolutely nothing about C7sus, but they were able to have a transcendent experience because of the music. These were teenagers – supposedly too afloat to like anything outside of their familiar realm – but they couldn’t help themselves from moving to the beat, and their wide eyes, open jaws, applause and request for CDs let us know they couldn’t help themselves from moving to the beat, and their wide eyes, open jaws, applause and request for CDs let us know they understood and liked what we played over C7sus chords.

**JI:** What were some of the experiences that shaped your early development as an improviser?

**BB:** Well, at first I had to play very slowly and deliberately because I didn’t play with a pick. My first jazz guitar teacher played with his thumb, but only used down-strokes. I wanted to sound like him so I copied his method. I think playing this way forced me to be honest about finding which notes I really wanted to play; meaning which created the colors I wanted against a given chord or progression of chords. Either because I couldn’t manage or didn’t aspire to play fast flurries through scales, I was determined to use rhythm and a good time feel to give my fewer notes added quality. This emphasis on certain qualities over quantity stayed with me even though I eventually started using a pick and developing my technique. By the time I began to focus on the type of playing and players I wanted to emulate in jazz, my aesthetic, in large part, had already been formed. Another significant memory is about how I realized early on that I couldn’t and shouldn’t fixate on my favorite player as far as trying to duplicate what he was doing. I felt that this was pointless because (a) It would be virtually impossible to sound exactly like him, and (b) If I did, that would be self-defeating. So, although I listened constantly to certain players because I was obsessed with their playing, I made sure to be democratic about transcribing. Which brings up another good topic: When I began taking things off recordings I was attracted to certain phrases that made impacting statements. These phrases had the feeling of a verbal statement and also an arc, with a clear point of departure and arrival. These were the phrases that seemed to be common among all jazz players – the ones that comprised the language that I wanted so desperately to learn. So, rather than transcribing a player’s entire solo (which I realized I’d never have use for anyway), I’d go for these isolated phrases. Also, that way, I could pick from a variety of players, on various instruments, as sources of information.

**BB:** Most often some part of the music will seem to just pour out. Usually I get an idea for a melody, and then I’ll have to work a little to find the harmony that I want, or that which fits best. I would like to write more often, but I don’t like to feel like I’m forcing creativity. I can write when I need to however, like when there’s some kind of deadline. I guess composition is about following your ideas through to completion.

**JI:** How do media critics influence your perspectives or your music?

**BB:** They don’t, really. I have to be the final judge of what I’m offering, otherwise, my feelings may have been hurt a long time ago and I might have stopped playing music. How can I pay serious attention to what critics have to say, when musicians and fans are telling me one thing and critics are sometimes saying something entirely different and for different reasons? I have never read a negative review of myself that has been an insightful commentary or critique, or that doesn’t seem in some way inherently negative. A lot of the time these people are self-appointed experts, who are not very well informed and are just reacting to what they like or think. They have a right to their opinions, but what gives them the authority to professionally document commentary regarding someone else’s art? Rilke says it best in Letters to a Young Poet: “aesthetic critiques are either prejudiced views that have become petrified and senseless in their hardened lifeless state, or they are clever word games. Their views gain approval today but not tomorrow. Works of art can be described as having an essence of eternal solitude and understanding is attainable least of all by critique. Only love can grasp and hold them and can judge them fairly.”

**JI:** Dan Boorstin, former Librarian of Congress stated that “The greatest obstacle to discovery is not ignorance; it is the illusion of knowledge.” How have you experienced and dealt with this in your life? In dealing with others?

**BB:** We all deal with this, always. Especially because western society has been built upon the illusion that knowledge is power. I think the important questions then are: what knowledge and whose power?

**JI:** What suggestions do you have about avoiding an inflated ego, as opposed to developing quiet confidence, as an artist?

**BB:** I believe that an inflated ego is a result of insecurity. If I’m secure in my place and I don’t feel threatened or inadequate, then I can just move about without needing to create fanfare around my existence. I can do what I do to the best of my ability and have that speak for itself. As human beings, this is something that we have to try to be aware of. Because, by playing music, we’re sharing such a personal thing; it takes a delicate balance of confidence and humility to be in the right place. How can I think I’m so special when before me there exists the work of generations of great artists from whom I received inspiration and knowledge, directly and indirectly? I can feel pride in knowing that I’m getting something right or doing something well, but there will always be some things that I can’t do or that someone else will do better than me.

**JI:** Could you discuss what ideas or activities outside of music you engage in and how they provide fulfillment for you?

**BB:** My home/family life, exercise, creative writing, my dogs (a German Shepherd and a Chocolate Lab/Rottweiler or Doberman mix?), reading (sometimes)… These are all things that give my life meaning and balance. My relationship with music has been a constant for me, but it can’t be everything. Life has so much to offer.

**JI:** What foundational understandings are the guideposts by which you live your life?

**BB:** Some of it has to do with acceptance, which is something that is never a finished state of being for me because things keep changing all the time. But this is one of the important things that I’m striving toward.

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**“The greatest day in your life and mine is when we take total responsibility for our attitudes. That’s the day we truly grow up.”**

- John Maxwell
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By Eric Nemeyer

JI: Like you’re saying, when you're playing with really great players, and you’re surrounding yourself with people who are sensitive and in the moment and have those tools, in much the same way you or I create a conversation using the English language, the English language is just the language. You want to forget about the words and the meanings, and you want to convey an energy.

DR: Exactly! I loved Betty Carter for that. The very first time I saw her, I had a totally religious experience—it just wrecked me for a month. I walked around kind of weeping. I had never seen anything like that. Because it was something that I aspired to do and it existed and I couldn’t believe it. Basically, the musicians were an extension of her sound and they were co-creators on stage, and I thought, “Oh my god, how do you create that?”

JI: As you had mentioned, Clark Terry became a mentor early on in your career. Can you talk about the kind of discussions or advise that you received, or opportunities that he may have helped develop for you?

DR: It wasn’t so much what he said, as much as all the things that he did and all the places that he would present me. One of the biggest things was I was so eager to improvise and he would always say to me, “You know, you have to learn the melodies first and you have to sing the lyrics.” What I got from him was, the building block of improvisation was phrasing. That was the very, very beginning for me, you know? How I could really tell a story—

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Drummer Clark was always interested in the music he played and how it was presented. He taught me the importance of respect and how to be respectful of the song that I was presenting on record. It might sound different, but it’s not because I would think, “This song needs this kind of texture in my voice, and this kind of arrangement and this kind of way of singing.” Fortunately, people always talk about the age of fusion music and all that kind of stuff, but for me, it was an entrée into World Music. I would never have known about artists like Milton Nascimento and any of the Brazilian musicians or musicians from India. I would never have known about Cuban musicians or anything had it not been for Jazz musicians. So, here was even more color and more approach and a different way of seeing it, so I was steeped in all of that stuff and I loved it. One of the things that I found with the voice—which is why I loved Sarah Vaughan so much—is that with the voice, you can really refine your sound. And there’s so many things that the voice has possibilities of doing and it doesn’t have to just be one sound. When certain harmonies are put by me, I respond to them. Or if I work with a different pianist, I respond to that. And Clark always liked that I was different with everybody that I sang with.

JI: Just to show off what you have as opposed to developing the song for what it is, or to be with where the other musicians are going.

DR: Exactly! And so, he also taught me—I don’t view myself as an entertainer, but I think that my music is entertaining. I think it is because all of those things are there and Clark really showed me how to do that. So, as I continue to develop, people would say, “Oh, she’s just too broad—she does all these different things.” But it was never that. It was respecting each song that I was presenting on record. It might sound different, but it’s not because I would think, “This song needs this kind of texture in my voice, and this kind of arrangement and this kind of way of singing.” Fortunately, people always talk about the age of fusion music and all that kind of stuff, but for me, it was an entrée into World Music. I would never have known about artists like Milton Nascimento and any of the Brazilian musicians or musicians from India. I would never have known about Cuban musicians or anything had it not been for Jazz musicians. So, here was even more color and more approach and a different way of seeing it, so I was steeped in all of that stuff and I loved it. One of the things that I found with the voice—which is why I loved Sarah Vaughan so much—is that with the voice, you can really refine your sound. And there’s so many things that the voice has possibilities of doing and it doesn’t have to just be one sound. When certain harmonies are put by me, I respond to them. Or if I work with a different pianist, I respond to that. And Clark always liked that I was different with everybody that I sang with.

JI: When Miles Davis was going through some changes between Hank Mobley and John Coltrane, he had Sonny Stitt. And as great a player as Stitt was, he was playing his stuff. It was unlike the rest of Mile’s concept—it was a constantly changing amoeba-like organism—like, if Wynton Kelly was going one way, Hank Mobley would go with him…

DR: Exactly! And I think that’s the essence. When I first started out working, Billy and I used to have this group together out in the beach area. It was a place where the owner didn’t care what you played and how many people came in because he didn’t pay you (laughs). But it was a cool thing because you could pass a hat and after a while, we started making big money…which would pay for the gas! At the time, Larry Klein was in the band, and Billy, myself and drummer that came from the Latin tradition and we would create this music. The whole concept was to write, arrange and then we would take this music as far as we could. Sometimes, we couldn’t even get back, we’d be gone so far. It was a great experience because it gave us an opportunity to keep having that thing that keeps inspiring one another and try different things. I think from that, it was the thing that allowed me to sing any kind of music or even perform with anybody.

DR: When I worked with Sweets and Joe Williams, Clark on the Grand Encounter record, the thing that taught me volumes more than anything, was the life and the music were the same. Back then, I looked at all those guys—they were old, but they were young. You’d ask them how old they were and they’d say, “Eight!” and I believed it! I had the opportunity to work with Dizzy and it was the same thing. The stage is a sacred place—like a holy place where you can experience such a euphoria that you can’t have anywhere else. I can be wearing shoes that are just killing my feet and I walk on stage and they just don’t hurt. I look at Clark and Oscar Peterson—there was such a joy about what they did, to me, beyond the music. It has to be a great love. One of the things that I wish that I had in that session was just a tape recorder just to have captured all the stories because they were just unbelievable. Some of them were just the rudest and nastiest stories (laughs), but they were great because they were life stories, and I loved it. I loved the whole experience. The culture of the music has inspired me more than anything and respect they have for one another.

JI: One you’ve been playing for a while and you don’t let the tyranny of the ego get in the way, you can develop that direct connection with the music. And whenever you’re creating, it supersedes the need for the ego to take precedence and the curiosity about the other players and how they do what they do and the love of just being there is what’s showing up.

DR: I love watching musicians. I love looking at a horn player and then looking at another horn player and loving what they’re playing. Those are things I love. The musicianship went way beyond knowing how to play the music. The musicianship was an attitude and a culture, and a way. And I love that I got to be a part of that because it doesn’t really—it’s there, but it’s not like it was.

JI: What pitfalls do you think we should be aware of as we pursue a life in this creative music.

DR: I think you always must pray for clarity and awareness. Because there are so many things that go on and tell you that this thing is okay and that thing is okay, and you just have to be in touch with your inner-self—your spirit, or however you define it. You have to respect that. Define it and refine it always, and know what it is. Even if you have to compromise a bit to be able to do other things, just know how to come back to center.
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