ENCORE

COURTESY OF ARTIST

RODNEY JONES

BUILDING A TRUE BLUES FOUNDATION

BY RICHARD SKELLY

Like Wynton Marsalis and his late father, Ellis Marsalis, guitarist Rodney Jones agrees with the notion that a grounding in blues is what's needed to play traditional jazz. "There's a big difference between knowing how to play a blues and knowing how to play *the blues*," Jones says emphatically. "There's playing blues connected to your life experience and journey, as opposed to playing a blues which is something where you (just) know the form of it." Through the years, Jones, now 68, has accompanied Ruth Brown, Irene Reid, Jimmy McGriff, Jimmy Scott, James Brown and Maceo Parker, to name just a few. In his early 20s, he left his studies at City College of New York to go on the road with Dizzy Gillespie. About the blues, Jones says, "Blues is very therapeutic, very healing and embodies the best of storytelling in the American folk tradition." He cites the reverence people like late poet-activist Allen Ginsberg had for the idiom, and how Ginsberg even recorded a double album of blues.

Born in 1956, in New Haven, CT, he spent a few formative years in Nashville, TN, while his father, the Rev. Lawrence Jones (the first African American to receive a doctorate degree from Yale) served as dean of Fisk University, before then moving to New York where Jones senior took a post at Union Theological Seminary. Although steeped in Biblical scriptures and gospel music, his parents also appreciated and listened to blues on radio in Nashville and New York. Jones began playing guitar at six. His father had been given a guitar upon his departure from Fisk, which the youngster soon appropriated in New York, beginning his first lessons. An intersection with Pete Seeger came as a result of the folk star often requesting gospel choirs from Union Theological to back him up at concerts next door at Riverside Church—and Jones happened to be a young chorister. "Pete would often do concerts (there) with Odetta, Tom Glazer and other folk singers," he recalls. "I don't remember exactly how it came about, but Pete liked what he heard of my guitar playing and he gave me a chance to sit in with him at concerts." Jones accompanied the folk singer for at least a half dozen concerts at Riverside Church and learned from Seeger as well as Glazer.

A short time later, Jones discovered Jimi Hendrix. "My life changed," he remembers. "I discovered B.B. King, Albert Collins, Johnny Winter, Alvin Lee and all of these people." But at around 14 or 15, he had an epiphany when he heard Barney Kessel play "Summertime". "I tried to play it, but I couldn't. I had no idea how he did it, so that sent me on a journey of being intensely interested in jazz guitar," he says. Thus, Jones began studies with jazz guitarist Bruce Johnson (as a guitar duo, in 1976 they recorded *The Liberation of the Contemporary Jazz Guitar* for Strata-East). Johnson introduced him to more recordings by Kessel, as well as Wes Montgomery, Grant Green and George Benson. "All of them, particularly Green, are brilliant exponents of the blues," he states. Around 1969-70 teenager Jones was not only drawn to jazz clubs on the Upper West Side, such as the West End Café "when Phil Schaap was curating so many shows," but he got to play with legendary jazz figures such as Tiny Grimes, Papa Jo Jones, Eddie Durham, Helen Humes, and many of the luminaries from the Ellington and Basie bands. "I got to meet them and sit in, so I brought my guitar and in some cases I brought my bass, too," he recalls. On the threshold of leaving college and making his living as a professional jazz musician, he had the support of his gospel-steeped parents. "My father's only admonition was to really do it to the best of my ability," he says. "If I was going to do this for a living, he told me to be the best steward of whatever gifts I had to share."

Setting out on his vocation, Jones recalls that most of his real blues experience came on the road. "I worked for years with Jimmy McGriff and I also worked as Ruth Brown's musical director for 20 years," he says. Jones also worked with Curtis Mayfield, Carla Thomas and Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown. Today, Jones remains as enthusiastic as ever about live shows. He adores working with New Jersey bassist-bandleader, radio host, impresario and educator Christian McBride. Jones, who was a featured artist on the McBride Big Band 2017 album release *Bringin' It* (Mack Avenue), describes him as a connoisseur of all things blues, observing that McBride's heart and soul resides in classic R&B and blues. He also admires McBride as "a great human being and a genius of a musician," also acknowledging that he's learned so much with him.

With his more than 50 years in jazz and blues, Jones strongly believes that "without the blues, jazz loses its soul, for me anyway. You need to keep that in there. It makes jazz more accessible to people when you throw the blues element into it." And although it's been over 16 years since his last jazz album as a leader (*A Thousand Small Things* on 18th & Vine), he no longer needs a booking agent or manager, and books himself when people call or e-mail him through his website/Facebook page. There are four stages in a musician's career, he observes: "The first stage is 'Who's Rodney Jones?' The second is 'Get me Rodney Jones.' The third is 'Get me a young Rodney Jones' and the fourth stage is 'Who's Rodney Jones?' But now, it's recycling again and I'm getting 'Get me Rodney Jones!'"

A still enthusiastic Jones declares he's been fortunate to have the longevity and skill sets of success, having produced records, written songs, done TV shows and occupied the house guitar chair at the Apollo Theater for nine years. "I've done a really wide range of things with the guitar," he says—an understatement. And clearly, Rodney Jones isn't done yet by a longshot.

For more info visit rodneyjones.com. Jones plays Frank Vignola's "Guitar Nights" at Birdland Theater Feb. 5 and is at Smalls Feb. 25. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Rodney Jones/Bruce Johnson—*The Liberation of the Contemporary Jazz Guitar* (Strata-East, 1977)
- Rodney Jones/Tommy Flanagan Quartet—*My Funny Valentine* (Timeless, 1981)
- Kenny Burrell & The Jazz Guitar Band—*Piece Of Blue And The Blues* (Blue Note, 1986)
- Jimmy McGriff/Hank Crawford Quartet—*Right Turn On Blue* (Telarc Jazz, 1994)
- Rodney Jones—*Soul Manifesto* (Blue Note, 2001)
- Rodney Jones—*A Thousand Small Things* (18th & Vine, 2008)

LEST WE FORGET

FRANCIS WOLFF © BLUE NOTE RECORDS

FREDDIE ROACH

FROM JAZZ ORGAN'S GOLDEN ERA

BY BRIAN CHARETTE

When Freddie Roach passed from a heart attack in 1980 at age 49, he'd already established himself as a master of the Hammond B3 organ, yet, denied the chance to mature into his craft, he remains today generally mostly unsung, particularly as a master of soul jazz. Yet, among a group of modern cognoscenti, Roach has developed an appreciative following.

He was born into a musical family in 1931; his mother being a church organist surely had a huge impact on his sonic palate. However, Roach's childhood was marked by being shuffled among a variety of relatives. At age 8, while living with an aunt in White Plains, NY, he began playing pipe organ, then moved to teach himself piano, while continuing with the organ. By his late teens, he was playing professionally with Grachan Moncur's The Strollers. He spent a semester at the Newark Conservatory and then at 20, joined the Marine Corps for two years of service, playing in the Corp band. Discharged in 1953, Roach spent time in Canada, returned to New York, then soon hit the road, playing piano and organ with trumpeter Cootie Williams, alto saxophonist Lou Donaldson and drummer Chris Columbus (aka "Crazy Chris Columbo").

Roach first started getting noticed around 1961 when he appeared on tenor saxophonist Ike Quebec's Blue Note albums. The first, *Heavy Soul*, is haunting from its first note in album opener "Aquitted". He already had begun to prove that he was breaking new organ ground: different from other organists of his day, heavily influenced by older styles of Hammond organ but at the same time using modern jazz vocabulary, with a style textured and shaded. Roach could play with virtuosic technique but would use it sparingly to great effect and always surround it with volume swells, unusual tones, and an air of mystery. Caesar Frazier, a Hammond B3 player probably best known for his work with Marvin Gaye (as well as guitarists George Freeman and Melvin Sparks), notes that Roach had a manner of approaching the organ that bridged the playing of organists such as Jackie Davis and Wild Bill Davis to Jimmy Smith who himself bridged jazz and soul. "Freddie had a pronounced bass line and linear, bebop/blues approach that Jimmy Smith so ingeniously brought to the world," Frazier notes. Indeed an element of Roach's playing is that it switches quickly from boisterous organ shouts with spinning Leslie speaker pedals of yesteryear to tight quartal harmony.

His mysterious approach to the Hammond also landed him on trumpeter Donald Byrd's *I'm Trying to Get Home* (Blue Note, 1965), an unusual album with brass and vocalists. On his own debut album as leader, *Down To Earth* (Blue Note, 1962), the organist already displayed a fully-formed style. Composing by this time, his work revealed a great blues concept, church roots and impressive musical sensitivity: his "De Bug" has since become a jazz organ classic. But the artist's most seminal album is arguably *Mo' Greens Please* (Blue Note, 1963), full of improvisations, some cleverly humorous. Frazier first heard Roach in the '60s during what he refers to as "The Great Organ Era" (the golden era of jazz organ during the '50s and '60s). "As most organists during this great era, Freddie brought Freddie to his approach and it was obvious that he had a special relationship with the instrument," he observes. "You could always identify the story that he was telling." Over the decade, Roach continued to stretch out, incorporating even more

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