



# WALTER BLANDING

## NICE GUYS DO FINISH FIRST

BY MARILYN LESTER

In Greek mythology, Athena, goddess of wisdom and war, the companion of heroes, sprang fully formed from the head of her father, Zeus. To study the life of Walter Blanding, master of reeds, composer, educator and self-identified family man, is to wonder if he too arrived on this planet more or less fully formed. Precocious in talent and personality, since early on he's been lauded as a genuinely "nice guy" with a maturity beyond his years.

On August 14, 1971, Walter Blanding Jr. was born into a musical family in Cleveland, where a mere six years later he began saxophone studies. In 1981, the Blanding family moved to New York, where his parents took positions in the Village Gate house band. Soon enough, young Walter was playing there as well in the Blanding Family Trio. It's an experience he's described as "rich," especially in learning how to use his creativity. He attended Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, where he first met Wynton Marsalis around 1986. Marsalis recalls at the time Blanding was a "dread-locked 15-16 year old playing a whole lot of saxophone."

High school was followed by studies at The New School, and by age 20 Blanding was a member of the Tough Young Tenors, releasing an eponymous album (his recording debut) in 1991. His second recording followed that year: *You Can Hide Inside The Music* (Verve) with The Harper Brothers. Co-producer and drummer Winard Harper recalls Javon Jackson had left the brothers' band and Blanding, whom they knew from the Gate, was right for the spot. "Walter had a lot of talent," Winard recalls. "I've long admired him. He's also a nice guy." Trumpeter Philip Harper adds "He played music with heart and soul." Flash forward to 2000 and the release of Blanding's first album as a leader, *The Olive Tree* (Criss Cross); his sophomore leader release, *Fantasy in Blue*, didn't arrive until 2018, but along with it came a statement of purpose: "to discover the profound depth and importance of cultural awareness and well-being." Trombonist Wycliffe Gordon has long observed a soulful quality in Blanding, whom he calls, "my brother, my friend" and whom he says to call a great musician—even the epitome of greatness—is an understatement. "Walter embodies what makes all things great for humanity," he asserts. "The music is simply a manifestation of just a small part of what is in his large heart!"

Another longtime friend and colleague, Sherman Irby, who occupies the alto chair in the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra (JLCO), regards Blanding as "One of the most complete musicians I have ever met. He has total control over his instrument, can play in any style, is an excellent composer and arranger, great educator, and most importantly, knows how to *move* people." As to who shaped him, Blanding cites those who had the most significant impact on his development as a person and an artist as his parents and musician grandmother, as well as Barry Harris, Wynton Marsalis, Michael Carvin and Cab Calloway among others. "They didn't necessarily tell me many things but showed me by example, which I followed," he notes. His time as a Jazz Ambassador

also shaped him. He lived in Israel for four years in the mid '90s where he performed with his ensemble and taught in schools. From 2018-20 he was at Jazz at Lincoln Center Shanghai, an experience from which he says, "In recognizing the beauty of our differences, as well as the things we have in common speaks volumes. These experiences have shaped my perspective on everything."

Membership in the JLCO started with a "no" when Marsalis was appointed artistic director in 1991. He was then invited to join the orchestra several times, but refused, feeling a commitment to the group he was playing with. But he realized that "it would be wise not to turn down such a great opportunity" so, eventually, he said 'yes.' Reed virtuoso Ted Nash, who, like Blanding, has recently moved on from the orchestra recalls, "Walter and I came into the JLCO (né Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra) at the same time, in 1998. We spent 25 years together playing concerts, touring the world and teaching our young people. We are family. I love him like a brother. I have so much respect for his unique voice as a soloist, on both the tenor and soprano saxes."

Blanding assesses the years with the band and the expectation that members maintain a high level of activity to compose, arrange, educate and lead, as well as play, as fairly unique. Yet, he says "Wynton's vision is something not to be overlooked or underestimated," conceding these expectations as an honor and a challenge, "not only because of the strenuous, constant touring schedule but also because of the need to maintain a certain level of excellence on my instrument. I loved it." Of Blanding, Marsalis observes, "Down through the years, his development as a player and composer-arranger has been a source of great pride and happiness. Walter speaks four languages, stays in tremendous shape and plays his horns with deep blues feeling, harmonic sophistication and directness."

Recently (2023), Blanding accepted the position of Assistant Professor of Jazz Saxophone at Michigan State University. He plans to share his very personal experience of learning with his students there and believes the jazz education experience is eminently applicable to life skills in problem solving, creative ability and how to make ideas become reality. "These are the things that lead to success, interdependence, understanding and much more," he declares. And what has given joy to Blanding is "spontaneous discovery and synchronization with others." His approach to life is what underpins Nash's feelings about Blanding: "He continues to inspire me. As a human being he brings so much integrity to everything he does: how he communicates, how he shares what is meaningful in music and in life, how he is as a father."

Is there unconquered territory for Blanding? "One of my dreams is to have a full orchestra perform some of the compositions I've written," he muses. No doubt that dream will come true.

For more info visit [walterblanding.com](http://walterblanding.com). Blanding is at Dizzy's Club Feb. 27 - Mar. 2. See Calendar.

### Recommended Listening:

- The Harper Brothers – *You Can Hide Inside The Music* (Verve, 1991)
- Walter Blanding Quintet – *The Olive Tree* (Criss Cross Jazz, 1999)
- Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra – *Plays The Music of Duke Ellington* (Brooks Brothers/DMX Music, 1999-2003)
- Vincent Gardner – *The Good Book, Chapter One: The Book of Foster/The Book of Silver* (SteepleChase, 2006)
- Wynton Marsalis – *Plays Louis Armstrong's Hot Five & Hot Sevens* (Blue Engine, 2006)
- Walter Blanding – *Fantasy in Blue* (s/r, 2018)





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