

# JOHN CLAYTON

## Moving Forward

BY JEFF CEBULSKI



SHANE O'DONNELL PHOTOGRAPHY

To begin to understand the presence and significance of John Clayton, the celebrated bassist and arranger, one should ponder his matter-of-fact view of life after the tragic, paradoxical experience the night of January 8, 2025. While he was in NYC to receive the prestigious 2025 Bruce Lundvall Visionary Award at a ceremony at Jazz at Lincoln Center, Clayton received word from his daughter that the horrendous wildfire in Altadena, CA, had consumed her home, not far from his own. Though mortified by the news, he and his wife still carried on, as his son, the also celebrated pianist Gerald Clayton, presented him the award. After the ceremony, Clayton called his neighbor to check on things. Then, he learned that his own home also was among the conflagration's victims. Once again, Clayton steeled up the nerve to rise to the occasion, participating in a post-ceremony concert.

It's not that John Clayton didn't care—it's more his recognition that one can only control what one actually has. In this case, it was his life, his family and his essential bass, which he had along with him. The emotional impact of the devastation was still to come, including the realization that a prized possession, a bass from mentor Ray Brown, was now gone. In the midst of all that, Clayton chose to appreciate what he had. "I mean...we got to go forward," he posited in a recent interview. "So now what? Sometimes, I'll be putting on my pants and think, where's my other belt? You know, it gets a little odd and funny. Excuse me in that regard, but I'm pretty positive about where we're going because the family's holding each other up. There's been an amazing amount of support from friends and the jazz community and the community at large. So I'm feeling, still, like the luckiest guy on the planet."

The emotional equanimity Clayton possesses affirms the testimony of his longtime jazz colleagues. His good friend and musical partner of 50 years, the esteemed drummer Jeff Hamilton, observes, "I don't know one other person that could go through what he's gone through and still be so positive and have that resilience to just continue forward. It's like being a bass player and there's a storm all around you, but you just keep thrusting quarter notes through the entire band...you right the ship, and that is part of his personality." Trumpeter and educator Terell Stafford, for whom Clayton produced three albums, shares that, "He's very relaxed and chill in the studio...a 'gentle giant'...always smiling. He finds a positive twist to any negative moment." Clayton has visited Stafford at his university (Temple) several times, always packing the room because students feel safe around him—they can ask him anything, and he's not going to insult them. "He may challenge them," Stafford adds "which is beautiful, but he encourages them. We're all trying to be like John Clayton."

Becoming John Clayton began in 1952 in Venice, California, a state the bassist will not leave, even after the devastation. Clayton was introduced to music performance at age 13, while in junior high school: "I said to the band director, can I play an instrument? I saw this really big thing hanging on a wall. I said, can I play that? And he said sure and wrote down my name and 'tuba' after it. When I was walking out the room, I saw these

four gorgeous brown things. And I said, oh, can I play that instead? And I like to say that he crossed off 'tuba' and wrote down my destiny." Thus began a remarkable music education that included a class taught by the legendary bassist Ray Brown, which led to Clayton's experiences with other remarkable artists as well as a university education. "After a handful of classical lessons," he recounts, "I heard my first Oscar Peterson record with Brown. I never heard music played like that. I went to my classical teacher and asked, 'have you ever heard of this guy named Ray Brown?' He said, 'sure, he's a friend of mine.'" At that, he took out a letter from Brown that said, please tell your students about a class called Workshop and Jazz Bass at UCLA—an evening course twice a month. Signing up for that class, via Brown, Clayton was introduced to the names of great bassists such as Richard Davis, Milt Hinton, George Duvivier, Ron Carter, Charles Mingus, Jimmie Blanton and Oscar Pettiford. After the course ended, Brown allowed Clayton to accompany him to various sessions and gigs, hooking him up with another classical teacher and arranging lessons with electric bassist Carol Kaye (recently inducted into the Rock 'n Roll Hall of Fame). But that classical teacher and Brown told Clayton he was gigging too much. "Essentially," he says, "they shipped me off to Indiana University and that's where I finished school. That's where I met Jeff Hamilton. He and I became best friends." According to Hamilton, the news went around that this hot shot from L.A. under Brown's wing was coming to Indiana, and so he went in to hear him in rehearsal with the first band he was in: David Baker's (Baker founded the jazz program at Indiana University). Everybody was stunned that somebody was that good at that age. "I was 18, he was 19," Hamilton reports. "I went up to him afterwards and said 'I'd love to play with you'...and we just connected very quickly. Ray Brown had this attack to the string that was really unique, and John knew how to get that; his pulse was incredible. I just wanted to crawl into that big bass sound and be a part of it."

Prior to attending Indiana University though, Clayton was introduced to pianist Monty Alexander, who offered him a job. The appreciative but honorable young musician declined but, after five years of college, recontacted Alexander, who again invited him to join his trio but still needed a drummer. Clayton suggested Hamilton. The friends spent two years with Alexander before Clayton decided he wanted another experience with a big band, notably with the Basie contingent. A call to Brown connected the young man to Basie's manager, who hired him: "I told Monty my plan and got his blessing." Years later, Alexander stated, "My good friend John Clayton is one of the noblest and most decent human beings I have ever known as well as one of the most gifted bass players." While with Alexander, Clayton and Hamilton listened to hours of big band on vinyl. The trio's breakup led to the bassist and drummer having separate but parallel learning experiences: Clayton went to the Basie band and Hamilton to Woody Herman's. Eventually Clayton ended up expanding his classical knowledge by moving to Amsterdam, where he became the principal bassist with the Amsterdam Philharmonic

Orchestra. But he was never far from his American roots. Hamilton remembers his friend's continuing contact with people such as Johnny Mandel and Quincy Jones. After five years in Europe, Clayton—whose family expanded with the birth of son Gerald and daughter Gina—decided to move back to California and begin his next exploit. After an unfruitful attempt at film music, the bassist played for the likes of Joe Williams, Carmen McRae and Nancy Wilson, and then reconnected with Brown, which led to SuperBass (a group with a frontline of bassists Brown and Clayton and, soon, Christian McBride).

Eventually, Clayton and Hamilton reconnected. In 1985 they and the bassist's younger brother, saxophonist Jeff, joined forces and formed the Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra. Its uniqueness was centered on having three leaders, though the arrangement responsibilities fell squarely on John, whose reputation was growing. The Orchestra would record eight albums from 1990-2011. From that reputation, he was asked to create the arrangement for Whitney Houston's famous rendition of the national anthem at the 1991 Super Bowl. "The process was really minor," he says. "Her musical director at the time said 'instead of putting it in 3/4 time, we'd like it in 4/4. And since there won't be a drummer, if you can, give it some kind of a rhythmic feel from the orchestra.' So they let me go and do whatever I wanted." Since then, Clayton has remained busy. He and his saxophonist brother Jeff created the Clayton Brothers band, which debuted in 1979 (*Jeff & John*, Concord) and released eight albums between 1991-2015, before Jeff passed away in 2020 at age 66. John Clayton was also the bassist for singer Diana Krall for nearly 30 years and recorded five albums with the late vibraphone master Milt Jackson (one of which was with the Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra).

Recovering and planning after the fire has taken up a significant amount of time. "We're still in the stages of figuring out whether that's going to be a new house purchase or rebuilding," he relates. "There's a lot of challenges either way. One thing I've been saying about such a devastating event like this is it has helped clarify what I need to go forward." That philosophy and approach to the realities of life are what we now know about John Clayton: he'll always be moving forward, while providing a steady presence for those around him.

For more info visit [johnclaytonjazz.com](http://johnclaytonjazz.com). The Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra is at 92NY's "Jazz in July" Jul. 15. See Calendar.

#### Recommended Listening:

- The Clayton Brothers—*Jeff & John* (Concord Jazz, 1978)
- Monty Alexander—*The Duke Ellington Songbook* (MPS, 1983)
- Diana Krall—*Stepping Out* (Justin Time/GRP, 1993)
- The Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra—*Live at MCG* (MCG Jazz, 2004)
- John Clayton (with Gerald Clayton)—*Parlor Series* (ArtistShare, 2007)
- The Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra—*And So It Goes* (R.M.I., 2023)

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