



RON BLAKE

MADE FROM SCRATCH

BY RUSS MUSTO

Though born in Santurce, Puerto Rico, Ron Blake has long been associated with the Virgin Islands where he grew up. From the Virgin Islands to Chicago and eventually to NYC, the saxophonist has been a valued sideman (with Art Farmer, Christian McBride, Roys Hargrove and Haynes), respected educator and longtime celebrated Saturday Night Live (SNL) bandmember. He is also an esteemed bandleader, recently releasing his sixth album, SCRATCH Band.

THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD: How did you develop your attraction to jazz living in the Virgin Islands?

RON BLAKE: I was curious about music as far back as I could remember. I was banging on pots and pans like every other kid, and I picked up the guitar early on. My father had a lot of jazz in his record collection, and he used to listen to Miles Davis with Cannonball Adderley and John Coltrane, among other things, which I liked right away. As a kid in music class, I originally wanted to play trumpet, but they were all taken by the time my number was drawn from the hat. My second choice was saxophone. When I told my dad I was going to start playing the sax, he brought home (from a trip) Cannonball's latest release at that time, which was the double album *Phenix* (Fantasy, 1975). Eventually I started listening back to Cannonball's earlier recordings.

TNYCJR: Do you remember your first gigs?

BLAKE: I played at student shows in school early on. Some of my first gigs were with the school, playing events and the annual Children's Carnival parade. Music programs in the schools were a pretty big thing in the late '70s. Several young local musicians who had studied abroad at HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) returned home to teach music in the schools. I had a lot of great teachers.

TNYCJR: Were you learning jazz as well as Caribbean music?

BLAKE: Mostly it was standard concert band repertoire. This is still elementary school, and middle school, playing in the band. When I got to high school I started to branch out some more. We had a great teacher named Charles Cox. He was from the South, a great arranger in addition to being an amazing clarinetist and saxophonist. He wrote arrangements of hip soul and R&B tunes, as well as calypso songs for the 80-piece high school concert band. You wanted to be in that band. I took a few lessons with him and he would bring me LPs to check out. I also played in the community band, then transitioned out of Charlotte Amalie High School in St. Thomas in 1980 and graduated from the Interlochen Arts Academy up in Interlochen, Michigan, after attending the National Music Camp (NMC) there in the summers (1979-81).

TNYCJR: Was there anybody who made a particularly big impression on you there?

BLAKE: My first teacher at NMC was Lynn Klock (Klock would become Professor of Saxophone at University of Massachusetts Amherst from 1980-2014).

TNYCJR: You were still playing alto saxophone at that point. What did Klock in particular implant in you?

BLAKE: Just learning the fundamentals of how to practice, given with a bit more detail. Before him, Chubby Lockhart, who went to Berklee College of Music and had studied composition and played alto, was one of my early saxophone teachers in St. Thomas. I believe one of my band directors introduced me to him and he introduced me to practicing the full range of the horn, scales and intervals. When I went to NMC for the first time I was familiar with that stuff but didn't really have a grasp on how to practice it and develop a routine, like working with a metronome, working on my sound and sight reading. I guess that was the summer after ninth grade, so 1979.

TNYCJR: When did you start on tenor?

BLAKE: When I got out of college, about 1987. I played alto and baritone in the NMC jazz bands. When I went to the Interlochen Arts Academy to complete my last two years of high school, my good friend, may he rest in peace, James Farnsworth (one of the five Farnsworth brothers, which includes drummer Joe and saxophonist John) let me borrow his brand new Yamaha baritone saxophone. He played lead tenor in the band, so that's when I really started playing baritone. I played bari all through college in a classical saxophone quartet and did not get to the tenor until a year after I finished school, as I couldn't really afford one. But once I got my hands on one, I kind of went crazy and just kept going!

TNYCJR: So, you found your voice on the horn?

BLAKE: I would say, yeah. I practiced seriously and tried to find my own voice, but I switched back to the alto for a while. It took me a minute to get the concept of airflow on tenor after so many years of classical alto saxophone. Early influences included Gary Bartz and I really liked Steve Coleman at that time. And I used to follow Bunky Green around Chicago.

TNYCJR: Talk about Bunky Green, who passed away in March, because he was a genius and largely an unheralded one.

BLAKE: Bunky. Well, I was introduced to him by my saxophone teacher at Northwestern University, the late Frederick L. Hemke. Bunky had received his master's at Northwestern. Dr. Hemke knew that I was

interested in learning jazz, so while I was studying classical saxophone he had put me in touch with Bunky, who was teaching at the University of Chicago at the time. He didn't play around town a whole lot, but whenever he did I would go listen to him perform. We also spoke on the phone every once in a while. He gave me tips on how to practice, not just reading music but developing my ears and organizing my practice time. He also encouraged me to get into piano. He was a mentor and someone that I was able to stay in touch with over the years. A really cool, beautiful human being.

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TNYCJR: What about people like pianists Willie Pickens and Jodie Christian, some of the Chicago masters?

BLAKE: Willie I knew and played with in an all-star band, when I subbed for Clifford Jordan. Pickens started working with Elvin Jones shortly after some performances with the Chicago Jazz All-Stars. He was always a part of local rhythm sections when people like Joe Henderson came through to play at the Jazz Showcase. Jodie Christian I knew because when I first started to play in Chicago I used to go to the jam sessions led by trumpeter Brad Goode at the Green Mill and Jodie worked in that band, so I used to play with him almost every weekend and then we eventually did some gigs together. Now, Von Freeman was probably the biggest influence on me once I started to play the tenor. Von was the one who was really supportive of all the young players. Another great tenor player was Ed Peterson. I used to go check him out a lot at the Green Mill. Lin Halliday was another cat I used to check out and play with quite a bit, as well as pianist Kenny Prince. And there was Ira Sullivan and Johnny Griffin regularly at the Showcase. Those were some of the people that I was around in Chicago. Eric Schneider had a two-tenor gig at Andy's and would have me work alongside Von when Eric was on the road, a weekly happy hour gig playing tunes, with pianist John Young.

TNYCJR: So you were around a lot of the older cats, in addition to playing with your contemporaries.

BLAKE: Yes. There were so many musicians who were influential in my development. Too many to mention, but Earma Thompson, Willie Pickens, Larry Gray, Joan Hickey, Brad Wheeler...In addition to the older cats, there were the U of I Champaign musicians on the scene. I used to play alto with guitarist Bobby Broom shortly after he moved to Chicago. I had my own groups, too. My first trio on tenor was with Dennis Carroll (bass) and George Fludas (drums), and I had a quintet with trumpeter Stephen Schmidt that played around the city. I also worked with Charles Earland when Bobby Broom was with his band for a stint. Chicago in some ways was more open in terms of the kinds of music you could get into. You didn't really get pigeonholed or locked into a certain box if you were seen playing with certain musicians. There was of course the blues scene, for which I did some gigs.

When the Chicago Jazz Orchestra (CJO) first started up, I played in that band and got to sit next to Sun Ra saxophonist Pat Patrick who was subbing on alto a few times. I didn't even know who Pat Patrick was then! Also, trombonist Vincent Gardner and his brother, trumpeter Derrick's father, Burgess, played trumpet in the CJO. Art Hoyle, also in the trumpet section, was well known as the voiceover actor on all those Budweiser commercials back then. He was a great trumpet and flugelhorn player. So I got to hang with a lot of the older cats for sure. There were also reggae bands I played with from time to time. And I played with some of the disciples of the AACM. There were a lot of opportunities if musicians saw that you wanted to learn and knew you had a good attitude.

TNYCJR: What brought you to New York?

BLAKE: Sitting in with cats at the Jazz Showcase, I knew that NYC was where I had to get to if I was going to play and tour. I used to see Art Blakey come through with the Jazz Messengers and heard Donald Harrison, one of my big influences on alto before I switched to tenor. He's just amazing. In addition to my homeboy saxophonist Jean Toussaint,

trumpeters Terence Blanchard and Wallace Roney and saxophonist Bill Pierce were all playing with Blakey during that time. I went to listen to everyone coming through Chicago whenever I could: Oliver Lake, Lester Bowie, John Hicks, Billy Hart, Walter Davis Jr., Louis Hayes, Bill Saxton, Charles Tolliver, Bobby Hutcherson, Stanley Turrentine, Mulgrew Miller, Donald Brown, the Marsalis Brothers...everyone!

In 1990, I got an assistant professorship in Jazz Studies at the University of South Florida in Tampa. I lived there for two years and it gave me the opportunity to connect with some of the people that I had met at the Showcase. I led the faculty jazz ensemble, taught improv, jazz theory and coached the small ensembles. I invited musicians down for master classes and guest performances, including Bill Pierce, Mulgrew Miller and Ira Sullivan. It was a way for me to network without being on the NYC scene. I came up to NYC and sat in with Branford (Marsalis) at the Village Vanguard, maybe one Thanksgiving weekend. I sat in almost every night before Lorraine Gordon stopped me coming down the stairs one night! We shared a few laughs about that incident in the years following when I started working there more frequently with different bands. I also sat in with pianist Kenny Kirkland at Fat Tuesdays once. Saxophonist Joe Ford and "Tain" were on that gig. So I was coming back and forth, just trying to get the word out that I was moving to NYC.

There was a festival in St. Thomas back in 1987, which was a year after I graduated from Northwestern and they had invited Dizzy Gillespie to be a headliner, as well as Gary Bartz. I had been going home to St. Thomas to teach in summer music programs ever since I finished high school. I met Dizzy, Bartz, alto saxophonist Richie Cole, Bobby Hutcherson, Jimmy Hamilton and got the opportunity to be on the bandstand with them. Life changing to say the least. So I was home for that summer teaching, went back to Chicago for three years, Tampa for two years, then finally moved to NYC in 1992. And that was it! That was the beginning of it for me.

TNYCJR: Do you remember your first gigs in NYC?

BLAKE: My first gigs in New York was just hanging out and listening to so many great musicians. I think the very first gig anyone hired me for was Bartz. He was playing at Mark Morganelli's summer series at the 79th Street Boat Basin. Gary hired me, drummer Dion Parson and pianist Marc Cary. Dion and I lived in the same building as Marc. I got to meet bassists Tarus Mateen, Dwayne Burno and Tyler Mitchell at Marc's place. Everyone came through. Art Taylor, who Marc was working with, would drop by from time to time. That's where I met Roy Hargrove. I would also hang at Augie's Jazz Bar, where alto saxophonist Jesse Davis was running the session. I met a lot of the musicians who became the fabric of the jazz scene today at that jam session. Burno and pianist Kevin Hays, who Dion and I played with on occasion, were working with Benny Golson during my first months in the city and they told him about me. That kind of started a whole other thing. Benny started to invite me to sit in on his gigs, which helped a lot early on. Then six months after I moved here, I got the call to join Hargrove's quintet. That was after I had spent several months off and on hanging with him at Marc's apartment. Sometimes it was just drums, piano and the two horns, and we'd play some original music and experiment with ideas, but that's how that started. After Antonio Hart went off to do his own thing, Roy's manager gave me the call. We went out and immediately started recording *Of Kindred Souls*. The first gig I did with Roy was that NPR New Year's Eve Across America broadcast in Minneapolis at the Dakota.

TNYCJR: You just played tenor and soprano with Roy, putting down the alto and baritone, correct?

BLAKE: That's right.

TNYCJR: You also started playing with veteran flumpeter Art Farmer around that time.

BLAKE: Yes, Art was looking for a tenor player when Clifford Jordan had become ill. Benny, I called him "Uncle Benny," recommended me to Art, shortly after I had started working with Roy. So those were the two gigs I did the first couple years that I was on the scene. Art added veteran saxophonist Jerome Richardson, who played tenor and soprano, with me also on tenor and soprano. Yeah, so that was, again, invaluable training.

TNYCJR: What about Haynes? You worked with that Roy too.

BLAKE: That was the first major leagues gig where I was the only horn player on the front line. It was a great learning experience. That was another recommendation through "Uncle Benny." It was intense, and on a whole other level. The energy! Roy hired me three weeks before a Japan tour. He had a lot of music in his book, and I had one rehearsal with him at his house, then we met at the airport and flew to Japan. I was with Roy for almost four years, and I tell you I learned so much music. It was quite a job learning all those songs—and I remember he wanted me to memorize the entire book before we left for that tour. I was like 'that's not gonna happen!' But things got better in time. I learned the book and we had a great run. The band was awesome, with Burno (bass) and Dave Kikoski (piano). Then I started working with Christian McBride, in what became CMB, and that kind of took over. Working with Christian has been one of my longest professional relationships. After Christian's gig—or during it I should say, since we still work together—I started working with Yerba Buena and playing bari again. I also did a tour with Meshell Ndegeocello, then freelanced for a while before signing with Mack Avenue. And in 2005 I got the gig with the *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) band playing baritone and flute.

TNYCJR: Your newly released *SCRATCH Band* is a less is more concept while digging into your Caribbean roots.

BLAKE: The concept for the name of the band was really just paying tribute to local bands in the Virgin Islands, which play a style of music now called Quelbe. The name ("scratch band") that was given to those bands, I believe is because of the scratching sound of the güiro in the rhythm section. The recording session really started out with bassist Reuben Rogers and I getting together to do something because we weren't working that much during the pandemic. I was fortunate to be doing *SNL*, but there wasn't much else going on as far as other playing, so we went into the studio. We recorded at Brooklyn Recording, where they felt comfortable enough to accommodate two people coming into the studio, being isolated and all that, and then eight months later we did another session with John Hadfield (drums, percussion). I had been letting the concept for the album develop on its own, and the initial takes seemed reminiscent of the music that I listened to growing up in the Virgin Islands. Just the sound of it, the sparsity, the simplicity of a good groove, a good bass line and a good melody—developing things more from a melodic standpoint—it just sounded to me like what I remembered listening to growing up. So that's the name of the record and where it comes from stylistically. I like to think of my instrument as a voice, a vocalist as opposed to an instrumentalist, in

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that space of no chordal instrument. I just leaned into that a lot more and allowed the music to unfold.

TNYCJR: Well you're a lyrical player, so it works quite well. You don't need the harmonic underpinning because there's a lyricism to your improvisations that helps make it work.

BLAKE: I think that the cool thing for me was that I got hip to that early on with drummer Gregory Hutchinson, who I worked with in the Roy Hargrove Quintet, playing in ways that gave me a lot more space. And also, playing alongside Art Farmer was a lesson in playing with space and lyricism. There can be a lot of great interaction with a rhythm section but it's not always needed. I leaned into incorporating more space and including the rhythm section in the conversation of my improvisations. That has always drawn me to the music, such as the eclecticism and the lyricism of how Wayne Shorter or Von Freeman played. There's a lot of stuff going on around them musically, which you could hear them listening to and interacting with, but they seem to sing on top of all that.

For more info visit ronblakemusic.com. Blake's *SCRATCH Band* album release concert is at Dizzy's Club Aug. 13. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Roy Hargrove Quintet — *Of Kindred Souls (Live)* (RCA Novus, 1993)
- Ron Blake, Gregory Hutchinson, Peter Martin, Rodney Whitaker — *4-Sight* (N2K Encoded Music, 1998)
- Christian McBride — *Live at Tonic* (Ropeadope, 2005)
- Ron Blake — *Shayari* (Mack Avenue, 2006-7)
- Ron Blake — *Mistaken Identity* (7tēn33 Productions, 2018/2021)
- Ron Blake — *SCRATCH Band* (7tēn33 Productions, 2021)

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had to cancel the gigs."

Still, Grossman produced some of the more intriguing fusion-era music, including his debut *Some Shapes to Come* (PM, 1973) and *Terra Firma* (PM, 1977) with Hammer, Perla and Alias, as well as *Perspective* (Atlantic, 1979): an ensemble featuring bassists Marcus Miller and Mark Egan; drummers Steve Jordan, Victor Lewis or Lenny White; pianist-keyboardists Onaje Allan Gumbs or Masabumi Kikuchi, and others. As Stryker states, "[Grossman] was going for *something*, even if it wasn't always clear what exactly it was." Then Grossman pulled a disappearing act, moving to Europe (landing in Italy) and remaining relatively quiet until he reemerged in 1984, having embraced a Sonny Rollins straight-up style that dominated his comeback albums, starting with *Way Out East Vol. 1 & 2* (Red). His fourth record for the Italian Red label, *Love Is the Thing* (1986), which includes Cedar Walton (piano), David Williams (bass) and Billy Higgins (drums), does have some Coltrane-ish moments and is as solid an artistic statement as the saxophonist could muster, although his collaborations for Dreyfus Jazz in the late '90s to early 2000s with pianist Michel Petrucciani and fellow emigrant saxophonist Johnny Griffin — come close.

By 2005, Grossman was clearly in failing health and was even fired by Perla for poor performance while in Italy, which may have been the reason Grossman finally turned himself in for treatment. But by 2015, when he had returned to the US, the troubled saxophone genius was finished as a player and five years later he died at age 69 in Glen Cove, NY. His

tenor saxophone, though, remains in the hands of Perla, and saxophonist/Grossman loyalist Ryan Devlin will be playing it during a tribute concert with Perla at Zinc Bar in commemoration of Grossman's five-year deathaversary this month. Devlin, who, like the late Michael Brecker, was taken by Grossman's debut album, originally offered to restore the relic, "just in honor of Steve." After Perla restored the saxophone, he loaned it to Devlin, who recorded two albums with it. Three years later, the memorializing of the influential and tragic Steve Grossman continues, via Devlin, Perla, and what is fortunately archived.

For more info visit pmrecords.com. A Grossman tribute is at Zinc Bar Aug. 26-27 (with Ryan Devlin, Gene Perla, Billy Hart, et al.). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Miles Davis — *At The Fillmore (Miles Davis 1970: The Bootleg Series, Vol. 3)* (Columbia-Legacy, 1970)
- Elvin Jones — *Live at the Lighthouse, Vol. 1 & 2* (Blue Note, 1972)
- Steve Grossman — *Some Shapes to Come* (PM, 1973)
- Stone Alliance — *Stone Alliance* (PM, 1975-76)
- Steve Grossman — *Bouncing with Mr. A.T.* (Dreyfus, 1989)
- Steve Grossman Quartet — *With Michel Petrucciani* (Dreyfus, 1998)

(LABEL SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

Thomas, who first appeared on "scatter" thirty years ago on one of the label's original six CDs. There are numerous recent releases of Thomas' electronic music on scatterArchive as well as a recent duo, *Elements and Properties*, where his interior/exterior piano playing meshes perfectly with Dominic Lash's electric guitar. Saxophonist John Butcher and ten members of the Oxford Improvisers appear on *Chakrasana*, recorded in 2022 and released in 2024. Two tracks have Butcher playing solo, and two others with the ensemble, fine examples of inspired listening and interaction. There is also a wind trio recording drawn from the larger ensemble.

Another major figure, pianist Veryan Weston, presents *Water*, a 2023 release of a 1988 cassette that documents his energized, creative virtuosity as he prepared for an upcoming solo performance. A recent album of note is *Scratched Earth*, an eerie recording by N.O. Moore and veteran percussionist Prévost, that might suggest a haunted factory. Moore's guitar can sound like a didgeridoo, electric saw and car engine, while Prévost's kit seems to include clattering pottery. Moore's online note concludes with the observation, "Scratch a line in the earth; the sacred is always on the other side of that line." Just 24 minutes long, the track might be too short for CD release on Prévost's Matchless label, but it's significant work.

In recent years, scatterArchive's appeal has reached artists around the globe, including North America. The distinguished Canadian trio of Arthur Bull (guitar), John Oswald (saxophone) and Scott Thomson (trombone), members who inhabit three different provinces and rarely assemble, recently released *Prophet Marginals*, a stellar example of collective invention. An homage to an early "scatter" masterpiece, was released by San Francisco guitarist Ernesto Díaz-Infante, who recorded *Pocket Strings*, named for a practice tool that "nevertheless is made of real strings, real frets and a strum-pad for rhythm." He improvised on it while "listening to Derek Bailey's *Drop Me Off at 96th* on one earbud," a remarkable act of homage that sounds something like a pipa, the Chinese lute.

For more info visit scatterarchive.bandcamp.com. scatterArchive artists performing this month include Sandy Ewen at Nublu Aug. 5. See Calendar.



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