

## JAMAALADEEN TACUMA

## NOTHING LIKE IT

BY JASON GROSS

SOUND EVIDENCE



Philadelphia-raised funk, avant garde bassist, composer and producer Jamaaladeen Tacuma, born Rudy McDaniel, rose to prominence in the '70s through his association with jazz icon, alto saxophonist Ornette Coleman. It was in 1960s Philly that a young McDaniel became soaked in the R&B and soul acts that came into town through the Chitlin Circuit, including Motown acts as well as local stars who eventually became national contenders, such as The Stylistics and The Delfonics. The city itself had also long been a hotbed for bassists. "You had Stanley Clarke, Jaco Pastorius, Anthony Jackson, Alphonso Johnson," Tacuma remembers. "I was completely inspired by all the musicians who came before me."

The aspiring bassist showed interest in music at a young age and in high school hung out with the music program kids, leading him to learn the instrument. By the mid '70s, the teenaged McDaniel was gigging with organist Charles Earland, before two of the bassist's mentors in saxophonist Odean Pope and drummer Sherman Ferguson (both founding members of the Philadelphia-born funk/jazz group Catalyst) would introduce him to bassist and record producer Reggie Lucas and percussionist James Mtume, who at the time were both playing in Miles Davis' electric band. Lucas and Mtume in turn were responsible for McDaniel's connecting with Ornette, a meeting that marked the beginning of a very fruitful mentorship, as Coleman was looking to put together his new electric project. The electric bassist would soon become a member of Coleman's Prime Time band, which included the band's double quartet edition consisting of two drummers (Denardo Coleman, G. Calvin Weston) and two guitarists (Charles Ellerbee, Bern Nix). Tacuma's association in Coleman's band endured into the mid '80s and his friendship lasted until Coleman's passing just over ten years ago. "We had a very close relationship as with other members of the band," he says of those early years with Coleman. "We'd sit for hours and just discuss music. It was very easy for us to take one particular song, and do it 25, 50 times each rehearsal. So all of that information that I was able to absorb, I'm really honored and grateful that I was able to be in that situation with him. It 'only' helped me in everything I do!" It was also around this time, in the late '70s, when McDaniel converted to Islam, taking the name Jamaaladeen Tacuma.

The bassist's solo career would get off to a running headstart with 1983's aptly-named debut album, *Show Stopper* (Gramavision), and thence he became known for his breadth of collaborations, including jazz luminaries such as guitarist James "Blood" Ulmer (who made a guest appearance on *Show Stopper* and who featured Tacuma, along with Coleman, on 1979's *Tales Of Captain Black*), as well as saxophonist David Murray, avant rockers The Golden Palominos, electro-funk band Cosmetic and later hip-hop legends The Roots and DJ Logic. With his hyperkinetic bass playing, he easily maneuvered and continues to maneuver through all these styles, as he explains: "With Coleman, he freed our minds, in terms of our instruments. And so we also became free from styles. It didn't matter if we played in a funk or harmolodic or old style that was 'jazz' — all of these are titles that have been made up for marketing concepts for business and the industry. But music is just a base of sound and pure rhythm."

One might wonder if Tacuma has strong preferences for the many brands and variety of styles of basses he's played over the years. Though he admits to not being too worked up over basses, he does note the cool retro style of the Belvedere Bass (which he designed with DiPinto Guitars and which remains a favorite in his arsenal), as well as the Steinberger brand with its distinct sound. He also mentions the Rickenbacker, played on his early albums with Coleman, such as *Dancing In Your Head* (Horizon-A&M, 1977). "(But) I have never really been a gearhead. I don't go crazy for these basses (as much as) I do enjoy them. I utilize them as instruments and they do have different sounds...If I am doing a project, I will pull an instrument that will contribute sound-wise to that project. I'll play with what's available. That might not be a cool thing to say because I'm a professional musician, but that's the truth: it really comes from your fingers!" About the trajectory of his playing style and technique, the bassist notes it hasn't changed much over the decades. "What I play to this day is still strange to me," he says. "When I hear myself play, I'm like, 'that is a wild-sounding bass guitar guy!' I know it'll come from a humble place, but it is a very unique kind of thing that I do. I think of really great grooves happening as opposed to the breaks." He does reveal that one item in his catalog of abilities has changed: "I think that my knowledge base has increased in terms of what I could and can do." Somewhat surprisingly, Tacuma admits that the bass actually boxes him in somewhat: "You are limited by your instrument because there are a lot of things that I hear that I can't do or the instrument doesn't allow it to happen."

As to the discipline of practice, he leans towards the uniqueness of the individual: "If you ever see me play, I'm giving it my all. I'm coming with my A-game, leaving it all there. And so, every night, I'm doing that: giving it to the audience, giving it to the band, giving it to myself. I'm getting into it. When I come home, that bass guitar goes in the corner. I don't want to look at it. I'm just not one of those kinds of musicians." Clearly, his experience and personality has led to an appreciation of balance between work and personal life. When he's on tour, he plays hard, but when he's home, he wants to go to the movies, go shopping and spend some of the money he's made taking out his grandkids and his wife. "I don't want to be sitting around playing bass guitar!" And in what many would see as enlightenment, Tacuma doesn't see himself defined by his career, as the kind of musician who thinks that music is the only aspect of his life. "My life is my life," he asserts forcefully. "Music is one of the things that I do and I enjoy my life. If something happened to my fingers, does that mean that I'm not a human being? Would I just die? No." Looking ahead, Tacuma hopes to be able to move into other projects related to music: production, arranging, film scoring, reading, creating. "(But) I don't look at it like music is the only thing I know."

Another interest is teaching and fostering new, upcoming generations of musicians in Philadelphia, where he still resides. "I do master classes where I talk to musicians about the things they should be concerned about in their career, and some of the things they can look out for, things that nobody told me when I was coming up," he says. "I love the fact that I'm able to share that with them, at universities and music schools. Younger musicians know my track record, they see what I've been able to do. They feel

comfortable with me." On a less formal basis, Tacuma also proactively works with the local up-and-coming generation of musicians, elaborating: "I'm continuing the musical legacy here, but also connecting myself with younger musicians — collaborating with them, writing with them." As for what he draws inspiration from nowadays, he returns to his youth and some local legends. "There's this beautiful song, 'I'll Always Love My Mama' (by The Intruders) written by Gene McFadden and John Whitehead. And producers, songwriters, like Thom Bell with 'Break Your Promise' (The Delfonics)," he remembers. "They were from the 'hood and they were writing about real life. So it's these things that inspire me. It's life." Not one to rest on his laurels, Tacuma also continues to be exploratory. Directly influenced from his time with Coleman and Coleman's unique style of collaborating with any traditional music and rhythm he encountered, Tacuma has been blending jazz with musical traditions from around the globe for 40+ years: from South Korea (Samul Nori & Red Sun), Turkey (*Groove Ala Turca* with Burhan Öçal) and Morocco (*Gnawa Soul Experience*) to a south-of-the-border project called The Mexico City Experiment.

After playing on and writing bass arrangements for Sun Ra Arkestra leader Marshall Allen's debut album as leader, *New Dawn*, and producing the upcoming release, Allen's *101: An Audio Odyssey*, he'll also be producing a record featuring saxophonist Isaiah Collier, as well as again organizing The Outsiders Improvised and Creative Music Festival. Additionally, Tacuma is music supervisor, score composer and appears in the newly-released *Tenants of Lenapehocking in the Age of Magnets*, a documentary about the history of North Philadelphia. And he continues his work with the Philly Improv Society, as well as working on a book about Ornette. And next year he launches a 70th birthday world tour, with dates including France, Austria and the UK. Needless to say, Tacuma continues to have a full life and a packed schedule.

This month, with his co-led free funk trio Free Form Funky Frëqs (with guitarist Vernon Reid and drummer G. Calvin Weston), which is zeroing in on its 20th anniversary (2026), he makes a special visit to NYC. The artistic glue that holds this band together, in Tacuma's words: "We don't soundcheck. We don't discuss music. We just hit 'go' onstage and get right into it. It's very organic, fulfilling and there's *nothing like it!*" Are there three better words that sum up the sound and life of the one and only Jamaaladeen Tacuma?

For more info visit [jamaaladeenmusic.com](http://jamaaladeenmusic.com). Tacuma is at The Stone at The New School Aug. 9 (with Free Form Funky Frëqs). See Calendar.

## Recommended Listening:

- Ornette Coleman — *Of Human Feelings* (Antilles, 1979)
- Jamaaladeen Tacuma — *Renaissance Man* (Gramavision, 1983-84)
- Jamaaladeen Tacuma — *Dreamscape* (DIW, 1995)
- Jamaaladeen Tacuma — *Groove 2000* (Caramelle, 1998)
- Jamaaladeen Tacuma — *For the Love of Ornette* (Jazzwerkstatt-Jam All Productions, 2010)
- Free Form Funky Frëqs (G. Calvin Weston, Vernon Reid, Jamaaladeen Tacuma) — *Hymn of the 3rd Galaxy* (Ropeadope, 2020)

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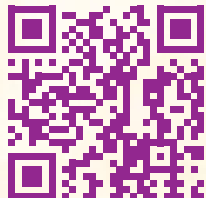
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