



# OLU DARA

RECONNECTING JAZZ TO BLUES AND BACK

BY JEFF CEBULSKI

At this month's Festival of New Trumpet (FONT) Music, an "Award of Recognition" will be bestowed—in absentia (due to health issues)—to the respected cornetist, trumpeter, guitarist and vocalist Olu Dara, now 84. Fellow trumpeter, creative jazz provocateur and FONT Music director Dave Douglas stated, "(Dara's) unusually vocal approach on the cornet brought percussive shouts, burnished melodic sensibility and a deeply developed intervallic sense. But the greatest significance of Olu's sound, after all that, is the personality. To be able to remain oneself, through whatever musical situation, is something Olu exemplifies."

Olu Dara was born Charles Jones III Jan. 12, 1941, in Natchez, MS. His father was a traveling musician. The story goes that when Charles was a boy, a musician formed a band and taught the youngster to learn to play a horn by blowing into a balloon. Beginning on clarinet, he would then switch to cornet. The band-from-scratch actually toured Mississippi and Louisiana, giving the young cornetist a chance to experience the environment of live music. His propensity for cross-cultural expression began after joining the Navy at age 18. In James Guida's 2010 article for *Politico*, the cornetist said the experience, which took him to exotic locations, "opened me up greatly, as far as being a musician, and just as a person." After the naval stint, in the mid '60s, he landed in Brooklyn and became involved with a Yoruba congregation. Perhaps endeavoring to develop a cosmopolitan persona, Charles Jones III became Olu Dara, which means "The Lord is good."

Always "reading the room," Dara played scintillating post-bop trumpet for people such as Art Blakey, even though he was frustrated by modern jazz' too-serious demeanor; for Dara, joyous spontaneity was the essence of all music. He became part of and flourished in the '70s Downtown loft scene, where he joined his Navy friend, baritone saxophonist Hamiet Bluiett, as older mentors to the more progressive Black music princes such as saxophonist-flautist Henry Threadgill, tenor saxophonist-bass clarinetist David Murray and trombonist Craig Harris, who led a major

jazz movement hatched in the lofts. Murray said, "Olu was always a guiding force for me because he brought all these stories...he was a bridge from the older bebop cats to the younger ones...he could play like anybody but had distinctive Olu chops."

Dara was recorded on two pieces for the now hard-to-find *Wildflowers* (The New York Loft Jazz Sessions) five-volume album series: one with Bluiett, the other with the short-lived Flight To Sanity collective, which featured Byard Lancaster (tenor), Art Bennett (soprano), Sonelius Smith (piano) and Famadou Don Moye (congas). Harris and Murray each claim producers Alan Douglas and Stanley Crouch (both now deceased) recorded long sessions, the results of which have never been released. Murray suggests that some tricksterism was involved: "We were in the studio for weeks and weeks...Olu's idea was to go in there and put his magic all over everything...nothing was ever really finished. He knew how to bilk those record people into paying money for all that studio time and to pay the musicians. You couldn't outthink him." That same year Dara played on Murray's *Flowers for Albert* (India Navigation, 1976) and soon thereafter on other such significant albums as Murray's *Ming* (Black Saint, 1980) as well as Threadgill's *When Was That?* (About Time, 1982) and *Just the Facts And Pass the Bucket* (About Time, 1983). Threadgill, whose approach was perfect for Dara, explained, "I don't ask (band members) for anything...(Olu) was unique. When he interpreted my music, I could always depend on him coming to it so original and so full of depth."

By this time, Dara was predominantly playing cornet. Harris, who spent significant time with him, said, "I remember the day he switched to cornet and I said, 'Why you switch?' And he said, 'I can get a more personal sound out of this.'" Murray added, "He could have been a lead trumpet player, but (he changed) for the facility." That facility can be heard on flute player James Newton's *The African Flower* (Blue Note, 1985). Trumpeter Steven Bernstein said Dara's contribution to that album, particularly its opening track "Black and Tan Fantasy", was notable: "I believe he's just using his hand instead of a plunger mute. And he's playing in the most beautiful, elemental way." In 1995, Bernstein gathered a bunch of jazz' young lions, peppered with sage veterans, to record the Verve Records soundtrack to the Robert Altman movie *Kansas City*. Based on his personal appeal and ability to adapt, Dara was chosen to participate and is featured on two songs: "Pagin' the Devil" and "Lafayette". Bernstein said, "I'd have to write arrangements that were very skeletal, because it's supposed to sound like they're jamming. So I would

pass out these little charts, very basic. Olu says 'Steven you know, I'm not going to play these notes.' I said, 'Of course not. That's why you're here!'"

Over the years, Dara led two bands that celebrated the roots music he reveled in, the Okra Orchestra and the Natchez Dance Band. Yet, asked why he chose to stay in Brooklyn rather than move back home, Dara replied, "Why would anyone head back to Mississippi? There they would face the certainty of segregation and inequality. 'How 'ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm after they've seen Patee?'" But his homeland loomed large on the two Atlantic albums he recorded under his name: *In the World: From Natchez to New York* (1998) and *Neighborhoods* (2001). On the first record, "Harlem Country Girl" symbolizes the artist's cultural double-consciousness, bookending a tale of young love depicted as an NYC travelogue. Douglas thinks *Natchez* is the album interested people should hear first: "His presentation of the material is exactly the way he always talked about doing it. It's a giant American statement."

Those who played with Dara tend to echo Harris' view: "He is one of a kind. You have to listen to all of (his music). He's really one artist you cannot pigeonhole." Indeed, Dara, the father of hip-hop performer Nas, adds brief harmonica and pocket trumpet and narrates Muddy Waters-style on his son's "Mannish Boy" biographical send-up "Bridging the Gap" from *Street's Disciple* (Columbia, 2004). As for Dara, whose last live performance was in 2009 at a Queensbridge outdoor summer concert in NYC, and who no longer plays, says "I hope my music has been fun and made a positive impact. I sing, dance, joke and have a good time. It's easy. I'm glad I was able to reconnect jazz to the blues and move it backward and forward at the same time."

The FONT Music 2025 Award of Recognition for Dara is being presented Sep. 5 as part of FONT Music (Sep. 5-12). For more info visit [fontmusic.org](http://fontmusic.org).

## Recommended Listening:

- David Murray — *Flowers for Albert* (India Navigation, 1976)
- Julius Hemphill Quartet — *Flat-Out Jump Suite* (Black Saint, 1980)
- Henry Threadgill Sextet — *Just the Facts And Pass the Bucket* (About Time, 1983)
- Don Pullen Quintet — *The Sixth Sense* (Black Saint, 1985)
- Olu Dara — *In the World (From Natchez to New York)* (Atlantic, 1997)
- Olu Dara — *Neighborhoods* (Atlantic, 2000-2001)

## LEST WE FORGET



# MEL TORMÉ

THE VELVET FOG CENTENNIAL

BY KEN DRYDEN

With a smooth, mellow vocal tone, he was known as "the Velvet Fog." Mel Tormé, whose centenary we celebrate this year, was not only a singer but a composer, arranger, drummer, pianist, actor and author. Born Melvin Howard Tormé (b. Sep. 13, 1925 – d. Jun. 5, 1999), he achieved extraordinary professional success, even though he's probably most well-known for the classic "Christmas Song" (written with lyricist Bob Wells). His contemporary, 96-year-old jazz-cabaret vocalist and actor, Marilyn Maye, still working and

touring, says in a nutshell, "His singing talent, his genius for improvisation and arranging—the incredible taste he used in presentation and his choice of material is unsurpassed. I knew him very well and loved him so very much."

Tormé was born in Chicago to show business-savvy parents (he was named after the actor, Melvyn Douglas). A child prodigy, he was singing along with standards played in radio broadcasts by the Coon-Sanders Orchestra at the city's Blackhawk Restaurant. When his parents took him there at the age of four, he happily sang along with the band. His crowd-pleasing "You're Driving Me Crazy" led to an invitation from Joe Sanders to weekly appearances with Coon-Sanders for six months. As a teenager Tormé became a radio actor, as well as a singer, sat in on gigs as a drummer and pianist and began songwriting—all self-taught. His only formal music training came from his uncle Al, who played the ukulele. With motivation to succeed, while still in school he auditioned for bandleader-

trumpeter Harry James and was hired to tour with the band as a singer and drummer, which required James to hire a tutor at great expense. But Tormé's first published song, "Lament to Love", recorded in early 1941, and reaching #7 on the radio program *Your Hit Parade*, became a hit for James and others who recorded it. Eventually, Tormé graduated from Hyde Park High School, free to pursue a career unfettered.

At age 20 he wrote what has since become a holiday staple, "The Christmas Song", famously recorded by Nat King Cole and hundreds of others through the years. During the '50s, Tormé led a number of record dates and recorded with arranger Marty Paich's Dek-Tette band as a singer and drummer. But by the mid '60s, labels were pushing him to record pop tunes, an unsatisfying activity, which caused him to take a stand in the '70s to remain authentic and true to his talents. In 1981 Tormé recorded a pair of live albums

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distribution and retailer experience.

So how has Thanatosis been financed in its almost decade-long existence? “Mainly I’ve used money I’ve earned from playing concerts and touring,” explains Zethson. “The musicians most often contribute themselves, but the exact terms depend on if there’s financial support from somewhere, and for example if I have initiated the project or not. Thanks to a still existing, yet rapidly declining, governmental support for culture, I’ve sometimes been privileged enough to get partial funding from the Swedish Arts Council, and in rare instances other foundations,” he adds. “To record on Thanatosis is a misleading description since most often I receive raw or final mixes,” he clarifies. “I’m getting requests from all over the world; some of them who seem really tuned-in to the label profile feel a musical kinship to it and want to be a part of the catalogue.” Adds Ogura, “(It’s) one of the best organizations I’ve ever worked with. There’s a strong sense of trust, professionalism and hospitality.” As for formats, Zethson says: “I love CDs, they’re a piece of cake to produce, plus they don’t take up much storage space and are cheaper (than vinyl) to send.”

Releases are available through Border Music/Redeye Distribution and on most streaming platforms, but Zethson cautions that might soon change. “I value the physical format far more highly and the streaming platform industry is generally exploitative and problematic in so many ways. Streaming doesn’t at all contribute in any mentionable way to sales. Bandcamp on the other hand is an extremely important tool to reach out with the music and to get some sales. I’m doing physical albums and trying to break even or even go to the plus side, so Bandcamp’s selling tools are a huge value.” While more projects are scheduled for this year, there are no designated tenth anniversary plans (except for perhaps a celebratory live event in Stockholm). The new sessions include a collection of all of Helmut Lachenmann’s solo piano pieces in honor of his 90th birthday, produced by Ogura. Thanatosis is, after all, a boutique label.

Zethson notes: “I’m not interested in appealing to as many people as possible. I’m just trying to create something specific with the catalogue and a whole that follows one or a few very different threads.”

For more info visit [thanatosis.org](http://thanatosis.org)

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at Marty’s nightclub in New York. Bassist Rufus Reid was brought in, subbing for Tormé bassist, George Duvivier. Reid recalls that Tormé was initially dubious at the switch, but after assurances from Duvivier, hired him and says that during the gig “it was cool.” Reid adds, “He was a great singer, but he was a hell of a musician...man, this guy had great pitch; he would do an *a capella* thing for almost two minutes, which is a very long time. Then he would finish the phrase and hold out a note, then bring us in. It was always right on the money!”

The late pianist George Shearing had a long association with Tormé and in a 1997 interview with this writer, Shearing explained “in the 1950s, I used to hang out in clubs where we both played. I’d go to hear him and he’d come see me.” They would get together after the shows, playing various tunes. In the ’70s, impresario George Wein put them together at Carnegie Hall for a series of concerts and in the spring of 1982 the pair began recording and touring, which produced six acclaimed albums for Concord Jazz. Shearing said, “I think it’s probably one of the best musical marriages in the business. That man has incredible ears. If I make one change in harmony, because I thrive on spontaneous harmony and changing harmony around

to suit my mood, Mel is on it within an eighth note. You don’t find that with many people.” Pianist-singer Billy Stritch, with his then trio, Montgomery, Plant and Stritch, was their opening act in 1988 at Carnegie Hall. “He couldn’t have been nicer to three kids from Texas,” Stritch says, “and he even greeted my entire family afterward.” Another child prodigy, vocalist Nicolas King shared Tormé’s longtime music director, the late Mike Renzi. King says, “Mel was always among my favorite crooners as a kid, and my appreciation for him only grew when we began doing a lot of Mel’s material. Mel’s musical brain was brilliant, and he heard things that no one else did. When he landed on a certain note, or had an intellectual and soul satisfying arrangement, or take on a song – there’s nothing better.”

Tormé’s career essentially ended after his first stroke in August 1996. Maye met up with him for a visit in his dressing room after his Music Hall concert in Kansas City in June 1996. “As always, when we met, we discussed music, work and laughed a lot,” she remembers. “He was so generous and kind. I must say, he was extremely tired. I’ve never forgotten a remark he directed to me as I was walked down the hall of the theater dressing room area. He called my name and as I turned to answer him, he said, ‘Marilyn,’ and he pointed his finger at me, ‘You take very good care of yourself.’” On August 8, 1999, less than three years later, Mel Tormé passed into musical greatness.

“*Mel Tormé at 100: A Celebration with Billy Stritch and Nicolas King*” is at 54Below Sep. 12, 14. For more info visit [54below.org](http://54below.org). See Calendar.

**Recommended Listening:**

- Mel Tormé – *Gene Norman Presents Mel Tormé at The Crescendo* (Coral, 1954)
- Mel Tormé – *With the Marty Paich Dek-tette* (Bethlehem, 1956)
- Mel Tormé – *I Dig The Duke - I Dig The Count* (Verve, 1961)
- Mel Tormé & Buddy Rich – *Together Again - For The First Time* (RCA, 1978)
- Mel Tormé – *Live at Marty’s/Encore at Marty’s* (DCC, 1981-82)
- George Shearing/Mel Tormé – *An Elegant Evening* (Concord, 1985)

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intense Bill Evans-ish reflections to a funkier approach on a Nord Stage 3 digital keyboard.

The late afternoon included the musically simpatico duo of New York-based guitarists **Frank Vignola** (Long Island, New York) and **Pasquale Grasso** (Ariano Irpino, Italy). Some years and geography separate their origins, but when it comes to performing standards, there’s no barriers. Vignola is an established force with more than 30 albums, while Grasso has had a meteoric rise since moving to the US in 2012. The pair were constantly grinning and pointing at each other during virtuosic trading-off treatments of tunes including Jimmy Campbell, Reg Connelly’s 1928 “If I Had You” (with a nod to Bucky Pizzarelli) and the 1918 Layton, Creamer classic, “After You’ve Gone”. On the latter, the tempo started slowly but was soon soaring with flying notes that were each clearly articulated. As a generalization, Vignola sticks closer to the melody and Grasso wildly improvises, but somehow always makes it back to home base. The younger Grasso is the slightly warmer presence, but both have deep respect for what these songwriters of their day accomplished and left them to improvise from and to share with admiring if not astonished listeners. The duo’s art was most on view for their treatment of “Deep in a Dream” (Van Heusen, DeLange), which has been undertaken by everyone from Chet Baker and Frank Sinatra to Buster Poindexter. It’s inherently a beautiful ballad, but they played it with incredible delicacy, tackling its

implications but staying true to the song. Solo slots had Grasso dissecting “Embraceable You” (the Gershwins) with total aplomb, and Vignola merging “Moonlight in Vermont” (Blackburn, Suessdorf) with “Polka Dots and Moonbeams” (Van Heusen, Burke) in a seamless blend. The set closed with a rousing version of Edgar Sampson’s early ’30s hit “Stomping at the Savoy” as well as Mark Stefani’s recent “Inside Out”, a tribute to jazz guitarist Jimmy Bruno.

Modern technology has allowed clarinetist **Anat Cohen** to perform untethered from a stationary microphone. As the Saturday headliner (it was her fifth year to play LJF), Cohen used that mic freedom of movement dramatically. She was in constant motion around the stage, dancing, gesturing and crouching with a soloist the way a rock star might. Her records may be wonderful, but one really doesn’t get to truly know her music until seeing her perform live. The selections on stage were mostly from her Quartetinho group’s second album, 2024’s *Bloom*, performed by her astounding ensemble, with all three sidemen doubling on second instruments: Vitor Gonçalves (piano, accordion), Tal Mashiach (bass, guitar) and James Shipp (vibraphone, percussion). Each member also writes and are credited as co-creators of much of the band’s music, including “Superheroes in the Gig Economy” and “Coco Roccoco”; Mashiach was featured on acoustic guitar for his “Paco”, a tribute to the late Spanish guitarist Paco DeLucia. The poll-winning Israel-born bandleader noticeably has Middle Eastern influences (and klezmer) blended into her sound, but Anat Cohen has also absorbed and mastered pretty much most to all mainstream to avant garde jazz, which she incorporated into another very personal and exciting LJF presentation.

For more info visit [litchfieldjazzfest.com](http://litchfieldjazzfest.com)

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