

ENCORE



EDWARD WILKERSON, JR.

MORE SEE-THROUGH FOR A BOLD SOUL

BY KURT GOTTSCHALK

Back in the '90s, Ed Wilkerson led the hottest jazz band in greater Chicagoland. Over four albums and 15 years, 8 Bold Souls built a reputation as one of the most exciting working bands then active within the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), the germinal organization from which sprung Anthony Braxton, Henry Threadgill, the Art Ensemble of Chicago and dozens of others. In 2000, Wilkerson and company released the perhaps prophetically titled *Last Option* on Thrill Jockey, joining the label's other such adventurous acts as the Chicago Underground Duo, Isotope 217 and Tortoise, as well as the more pop-leaning Freakwater, Mouse on Mars and the Sea and Cake. The Souls seemed the heirs apparent to Threadgill's Sextett, acclaimed for complex arrangements, strong horn lineups and cellos in the rhythm section. But *Last Option* was to be their last.

Of course, bands come and go, but what was surprising was that Wilkerson seemed to fall silent: not his horns, but his pen. His recognizable tenor sax and alto clarinet—the murmurs that sounded like Ben Webster under a blanket but rose in plaintive, articulate, economical cries—were still to be heard, but generally on other peoples' albums. After his big band Shadow Vignettes, and after the 8 Bold Souls, it seemed as a composer, he'd run out of ink. Today, Wilkerson talks easily and directly about the veer he took. "I was doing a lot more writing because I had a vehicle to express that," he says. "You've got to keep cranking out more, there's a need for it. After the Souls I was writing for bigger groups—it's hard to get that stuff performed."

In 2024, he appeared on eight different albums by other people, including bassist Jason Roebke's excellent *Four Spheres*. This year's discography has included *Of the Essence* by Ra Bishop (a quartet co-led by drummer Avreeayl Ra and trombonist Jeb Bishop) and just last month another "last." Wilkerson has been playing with Extraordinary Popular Delusions for about a decade and *The Last Quintet* features him alongside the band's

original saxophonist, Mars Williams, in a concert recorded just three months before Williams' death. Known for a tireless work ethic, Williams recorded with such pop groups as the Psychedelic Furs and the Waitresses along with numerous Chicago jazz and improvising groups. "Mars was kind of a mainstay in Chicago," Wilkerson says. "He was just so prolific. He was always doing something. He was a big influence on me on the business side of things. He always had money coming in from various projects. He was a real fiery player. He would just push through. Even when he was sick, he kept playing."

Williams had only planned to attend the August 2023 concert heard on *The Last Quintet* but ended up joining the band onstage. "He knew his time was coming," Wilkerson adds. "He was in rare form. It ended up being a really fun concert." Wilkerson sees his presence in the band (whose name he shortens to a quick "EPD") as very different than it was with Williams, providing for a strong contrast on the album. "I think I contribute in a different way than he did," Wilkerson says. "I never liked playing with my back to the group. I always arrange my groups in a horseshoe. I want to hear everybody and see everybody. I like to be in the weeds and play support, pushing ideas out." Wilkerson's playing in foreground and background can be heard in the *Katalyst Conversation*, a quartet with percussionists Vincent Davis and Preyas Roy and former Bold Soul Ari Brown on piano and saxophones. Wilkerson first encountered Brown in the early '70s, with his band The Awakening. "It was a killer group," Wilkerson reports. "I was really enamored with him, he was always really kind and really approachable. We'd get together and play and he'd show me things on the saxophone. Ari will always be my mentor in certain ways, I've worked with him so much." He adds: "His approach to playing and his sound has influenced my playing. We share some similarities with the tenor but still I learn."

It was a time of discovery for Wilkerson. He was also introduced to AACM co-founder Muhal Richard Abrams, who was leading a successor to his famed Experimental Big Band, which laid the groundwork for the AACM. That band never recorded, and Wilkerson never played with them, but in 1975 he became an AACM member. "I wanted to be in that band but I just wasn't strong enough," he remembers. "It was really a formative time for me. It was good for me when I started writing for (25-member) Shadow Vignettes. I

feel very lucky to have been in Chicago around that time." It was also around this time, only a few years after Chicago percussionist Kahil El'Zabar founded the Ethnic Heritage Ensemble, that Wilkerson became an early member of EHE, with which he performed for the next two decades.

Today, the *Katalyst Conversation* resonates with the ritual and groove of the AACM and the long history shared with Brown. It might not mark Wilkerson's return to composition, but they do play with a commitment to new, group discovery, as can be heard on the recently released *Live in Brussels*, which came out last year on *Katalyst Entertainment*. (The band was convened by label head Kevin Beauchamp, and shares the label's name.) "We're trying to keep it for that moment," Wilkerson says. "It's hard to improvise and really keep it fresh because it can become stale. People all have their comfort zones and you can get kind of stuck."

However the music comes about, the *Katalyst Conversation* is an exciting new entry in the somewhat scattered discography of a key figure in the AACM who never entirely disappeared. And as it turns out, Wilkerson's bandleader days might not be entirely behind him. "I'm busier now but I've been doing less writing," he said. "I'm probably going to put a group together. I've got some ideas of stuff I want to do. I've been writing some things, little delicate pieces, a little more see-through."

For more info visit facebook.com/edward.wilkerson.jr.2025. Wilkerson is at *Solar Myth* (Philadelphia, PA) Oct. 15 and *Nublu* Oct. 16 (both part of *Katalyst Conversation*). See *Calendar*.

Recommended Listening:

- Ethnic Heritage Ensemble—*Three Gentlemen from Chicago* (Moers Music, 1981)
- 8 Bold Souls—*8 Bold Souls* (Sessoms, 1986)
- Edward Wilkerson—*Light on the Path* (Sound Aspects, 1992)
- trio WAZ (Edward Wilkerson, Tatsu Aoki, Michael Zerang)—*that's what it WAZ* (Asian Improv, 2008)
- Extraordinary Popular Delusions (Mars Williams, Edward Wilkerson Jr., Jim Baker, Brian Sandstrom, Steve Hunt)—*The Last Quintet* (Corbett vs. Dempsey, 2023)
- Vincent Davis, Ari Brown, Edward Wilkerson Jr., Preyas Roy—*The Katalyst Conversation* (*Live in Brussels*) (*Katalyst Entertainment*, 2024)

LEST WE FORGET



BHEKI MSELEKU

SOUTH AFRICAN FOOTPRINTS

BY JEFF CEBULSKI

The deep well of South African jazz piano includes the chief practitioner, nonagenarian Abdullah Ibrahim (previously known as Dollar Brand) and the late Blue Notes and Brotherhood of Breath pianist-bandleader Chris McGregor (1936-1990), plus more recently, Nduduzo Makhathini and Bokani Dyer, as well as American disciple, Rodney Kendrick. Yet, significantly influential was late South African pianist and multi-instrumentalist Bheki Mseleku. A preternatural music talent, his dreams were nearly throttled by a stern and religious father, as well as a tragic accident that permanently injured his right hand. But the boy's curiosity and a sympathetic mother led to a

surreptitious union with that piano, and the world is better because of it. For Makhathini and Kendrick, Mseleku was inspiring. "Mseleku, my teacher and mentor, became a prototype of what it might look and sound like to consider spirituality and cultural practices in South Africa. He has influenced my own musicality and the ways I deal with being in the world," observes Makhathini. Kendrick adds: "He exhibited part of the struggle of creating in a hostile society. He had this joyful thing even though he came from this apartheid society. He was a beautiful soul."

Bheki Mseleku was born Bhekumuzi Hyacinth Mseleku Mar. 3, 1955, in Durban, South Africa. His musician father, who had strong religious beliefs, ironically led him to attempt to prevent his children from music: the family's upright piano was locked away in a closet. But in her husband's absence, Mseleku's mother let him into the room. Later, that piano was used as firewood. Another challenge occurred when the pianist suffered a serious hand injury from a go-karting accident, leading to the loss of two finger joints in his right hand, his recovery thwarted by restricted health care under apartheid. Eventually, he adjusted,

developing a softer but quicker keyboard approach, influenced by John Coltrane's pianist, McCoy Tyner. South Africa-born, US-raised Seton Hawkins, host of *South African Jazz with Seton Hawkins* on SiriusXM, explains that South African pianists "heard in McCoy Tyner a kindred spirit in his pentatonic scale use in the quartal and quintal voicings; they heard in him a resonance and a dialogue with Africa."

For Mseleku, music was his escape from the South African struggle. He began in Johannesburg as an organist for Spirits Rejoice in the mid '70s, as well as keyboardist (synthesizer, organ, electric and acoustic pianos) for The Drive, with which he recorded a handful of albums (1975-80). He was also a member of Philip Tabane's band Malombo, which performed at the 1977 Newport Jazz Festival. It was there he met Tyner and Alice Coltrane, who bequeathed to him the mouthpiece that John Coltrane used on *A Love Supreme*; it would be Mseleku's prized possession. Mseleku, who had developed a religious hybrid involving African spirits, Hinduism and Christianity, began moving around: to

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cross-genre musical ventures (e.g. he continues his decades-long association with Sting), he delivered a great performance with his longtime quartet of Joey Calderazzo (piano), Eric Revis (bass) and Justin Faulkner (drums). Their set included “Long As You Know You’re Living Yours”, from the group’s recently released Keith Jarrett tribute, *Belonging* (Blue Note). Bassist **Marcus Miller**, who continues to carry the jazz fusion torch, performed a rollickingly funky set (featuring trumpeter Russell Gunn and saxophonist Donald Hayes in the frontline), ending in the most Washingtonian way possible, by bringing out a District legend: Sugar Bear of Washington’s Experience Unlimited (also known as EU), the go-go/funk band most popular in the ‘80s and early ‘90s. Together they performed EU’s 1988 crossover hit “Da Butt” (which Miller wrote). The crowd lapped it up. It wasn’t jazz, but it was a blast.

Unlike Miller’s fusion, Sunday’s co-headliner could not have been more straight-ahead in honoring the jazz tradition. Legendary bassist **Ron Carter**’s quartet gave the audience a characteristically masterful performance. The band was in a jovial mood, too, with Carter treating the audience to some dry humor, eliciting genuine laughs, though not before playing for 45 minutes without pause, a feat for anyone, even those of us who aren’t 88 years young like Carter. Serving as DCJF co-artist-in-residence, he also serves on the festival organizer’s Board of Directors.

While the local political climate was never far from thought throughout the festival, the artists mostly avoided making overt political statements (although local pianist-vocalist Eric Byrd proudly showed off his Barack Obama socks). One notable appearance was vocalist **Christie Dashiell**, who recently participated

on an album update of Max Roach’s seminal *We Insist!* with drummer Terri Lyne Carrington. Dashiell mostly stuck to her recent *Journey in Black* album, though, delivering poetic, meaningful reflections, often in hushed tones (though sometimes interrupted by sound bleed from another festival stage). Other notable artists participating in the festival included young straight-ahead piano star Emmet Cohen, veteran guitarist John Scofield, beloved husband-wife gospel duo The Baylor Project, alto saxophone master Gary Bartz and vocalist extraordinaire Jazzmeia Horn. Local bassist **Corcoran Holt**, who served with Carter as another co-artist-in-residence of the festival and led late-night jam sessions after the main performances, also fronted a supergroup featuring Billy Harper (tenor), Sean Jones (trumpet), Steve Turre (trombone, conch shells), George Cables (piano) and Jeff “Tain” Watts (drums).

Local trio, **The String Queens**, three Washington public schoolteachers, treated the audience with their various musical interpretations. DCJF also partnered with several embassies to bring international jazz stars to Washington, including Italian pianist **Dado Moroni**. International jazz bands were additionally heard competing in the finals of Washington’s annual DCJazzPrix competition, with last year’s winner, the **Hiruy Tirfe** Quartet, performing on the final day of the festival. There were also some remarkable educational offerings, including a dream panel of Allen, Carter and Cables, as well as the festival’s Artistic Director (as well as author and NEA Jazz Master) Willard Jenkins, moderated by DCJF President/CEO Sunny Sumter. The panelists, all absolute treasures, imbued several lifetime’s worth of jazz experience to attendees, who were privileged to have been in their presence.

The festival concluded with a tribute to the recently departed and much-loved and venerated Latin jazz icon **Eddie Palmieri**, featuring Palmieri band alumni (including trumpeter Brian Lynch, trombonist Jimmy Bosch, bassist Luques Curtis and Little Johnny Rivero on congas) with some of his family also in attendance. The band was tight and energetic, performing brilliant renditions of such classics as “Puerto Rico” and “EP Blues”. The tribute turned out to be a perfect way to conclude a marvelous festival, with audience members dancing in the aisles and the same warm, loving feeling continuing to permeate all concerned, as it had from the start.

For more info visit dcjazzfest.org/dcjazzfest

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Botswana to London to Stockholm and back to London, where he was discovered in 1987 at Ronnie Scott’s Jazz Club, performing on piano and saxophone. But by this time he was already dealing with diabetes and mental health issues. Nonetheless, in 1991, he recorded his debut album as leader, *Celebration* (World Circuit) with, among others, Courtney Pine (soprano), Jean Toussaint (tenor), Marvin “Smitty” Smith (drums) and Michael Bowie, who would become Mseleku’s longtime bassist. He gained critical praise and got the attention of French music entrepreneur Jean Phillippe-Allard, who brought Mseleku to the US and became a key influence. There he met and played with the likes of Joe Henderson, Randy Weston, Abbey Lincoln and Elvin Jones. In NYC, he lived with Kendrick, part of Allard’s Gitanes troupe, who introduced Mseleku to a wide range of New Yorker pianists. Says Kendrick, “We learned as much music from Jean Phillippe as much as the [other, better known] cats.”

From 1992-97, Mseleku released four albums for Verve/Polygram, mostly post-bop explorations with African-tinged hybrids: *Meditations* consists of two long solo pieces that established his spiritual inclinations and his lilting African-scatting voice; *Timelessness* with guests including Henderson, Lincoln, Elvin Jones and Pharoah Sanders; the trio excursion *Star*

Seeding (with Charlie Haden and Billy Higgins) and *(Beauty of Sunrise)* featuring cornetist Graham Haynes. According to Hawkins, “Ntuli Street” (one of the tunes on *Timelessness*) has Wynton Marsalis’ fingerprints on the arrangement. After that fruitful period, Mseleku made one more attempt to establish himself in South Africa. But his stated vision for his music to “support a change in the consciousness of the world as the solution to our problems” was stymied by the travails of post-apartheid change and his increasing mental and physical problems, exacerbated by the loss of his prized Coltrane mouthpiece in a robbery and his Steinway upright in a bad business deal.

Ultimately, Mseleku returned to London in 2003, reestablished himself, and recorded *Home At Last* that year. His diabetes restricted him from moving forward, though, and he was found dead in 2008. His final 2003 recordings surfaced in 2021, over a dozen years after his passing, with the posthumously released solo piano album *Beyond the Stars* (Tapestry Works). Bheki Mseleku’s musical footprint and legacy continues to be felt and honored to this day, with a tribute being held this month at Jazz at Lincoln Center.

For more info visit facebook.com/groups/604998146297601. A Bheki Mseleku tribute is at Rose Theater Oct. 24-25 (featuring Nduduzo Makhathini and Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- The Drive — *Can You Feel It* (RCA Victor, 1975)
- Bheki Mseleku — *Meditations* (Samadhi-Verve, 1992)
- Bheki Mseleku — *Timelessness* (Verve, 1993)
- Bheki Mseleku — *Star Seeding* (Verve, 1995)
- Bheki Mseleku — *(Beauty of Sunrise)* (Verve, 1995)
- Bheki Mseleku — *Beyond the Stars* (Tapestry Works, 2003)

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cassettes and have been sitting on the tapes for about three decades. I started thinking about the possibility of our existence, of being here at all, at this time, in this space, together. Who are the people that led up to our existence? I think as a Black person in the US there’s only so far you can go back. Black memory, our histories, our stories are the most powerful weapons we have against erasure. Not weapons, but the most powerful resistance. This interconnectedness, this great sacred web that connects all of us. This environment, this atmosphere of extreme fear, can only be met with extreme courage, radical courage, in whatever form you can engage, with whatever resources you have. Building spaces where we can continue to tell the truth. I’m convinced that in the times that we’re living in now, we have to combine art, medicine, food, all of the necessities that may be restricted. This is really a time for knowing your neighbors. making sure that we have certain kinds of necessities. Open doors, open pantries, open closets, whatever, because not too long ago, something like this would have seemed unimaginable. But I do believe in redemption, and I do believe in resilience. I have to.

For more info visit melanievioladyer.weebly.com. Dyer is at *Roulette with Siren Xypher* and *with Vertical Sounds* Oct. 4 (part of M³ Festival). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Salim Washington — *Live at St. Nick’s* (CIMPol, 2007)
- WeFreeStrings — *Fulfillment* (s/r, 2017)
- WeFreeStrings — *Love in the Form of Sacred Outrage* (ESP-Disk’, 2021)
- Ununu (Todd Capp, Kurt Ralske, Melanie Dyer, Anna Gruman) — *Ununu* (Innova, 2021-22)
- Sun Ra Arkestra — *Lights on a Satellite* (In+Out, 2024)
- Gwen Laster New Muse 4tet — *Keepers of the Flame* (Muffymarie, 2025)

