

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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