



# 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 classroom teacher. 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 attending Tennessee State before joining the Navy. 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. Re-establishing his Yoruban, ancestral identity, 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 icon 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.*

#### 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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