



TYRONE BROWN

THE MUSICIAN'S MUSICIAN

BY HARI ADIVAREKAR

Philadelphia bassist Tyrone Brown (86 as of Feb. 1) only took to music in his early 20s, giving up a job as a furniture upholsterer. He would visit his sister and her husband, famed Coltrane drummer and Philadelphian Rashied Ali, who had a stellar record collection and stereo set up. "I was always attracted to the bass," Brown explains, "particularly when I heard Charles Mingus' *The Clown*. I was really sold. I knew that I had to have a bass in my life." He remembers his first bass was made of plywood and cost him \$125 in the early '60s, *sans* case because he couldn't afford one. He recalls, "They wrapped the bass in paper before I even played it. I had to take it home in a cab. It wasn't till I brought it home, unwrapped it and plucked it that I just fell in love and it caused a great big smile that has not gone away."

Brown would eventually purchase a piano, installing it in his parents' basement rec room for two reasons: to encourage jams—he'd heard a lot of musician friends didn't have a place to play—and to learn from John Ellis, a piano player who was Brown's first teacher. "I learned a lot just listening to (Arthur) Harper and (Reggie) Workman. I used to watch their fingering and the way they stroked the instrument. I can see an image of myself sitting on my stairs to the room and watching them play." Saxophonist Bobby Zankel, a longtime friend and musical collaborator, adds: "He was always opening up his house for rehearsing. His place was so comfortable."

Temporarily relocating to Indiana, where he recorded for Jamey Aebersold's Play-a-Long series of books, he returned to Philadelphia to join the Model Cities art program, soon becoming its director of music. "Tyrone and I met at Model Cities, where Philly Joe Jones and lots of Philadelphia musicians were always working at the time," saxophone legend Odean Pope recalls. "It was with (pianist) Eddie Green and (drummer) Sherman Ferguson, that I first

played with Tyrone, in the group Catalyst." Each of the four members were instructors at Model Cities and the formation of their pioneering jazz-funk band in the early '70s opened up the bassist's creative soul. Through three searing albums with Brown on Muse (*Perception*, *Unity* and *A Tear and a Smile*), Catalyst began to develop a cult despite a lack of commercial success. Brown praises the band's seamless dynamics: "Eddie Green said that there was no individual leader. He wanted everybody to contribute and feel that they were an equal part. Same source, same feeling, the same attitude about the music...the group was 100% based on our musical chemistry."

Catalyst was afforded a rebirth of sorts in 1999, when 32 Groove (now defunct) reissued all four albums as a two-CD set entitled *The Funkiest Band You Never Heard*. "When that album with that slogan came out we were all shocked because we had no idea about the impact that it would have," shared Brown about Catalyst's reaction, adding that, "There were phone calls and we did get together in person and listened to the recording." The albums were again reissued a decade later by Porter Records. More recently, a 180gr vinyl re-issue of the group's *Perception* was released by Craft Recordings last year.

Over the years, Brown would work with heavy hitters including vocalist Lou Rawls, guitarist Pat Martino (he recorded on four of the guitarist's albums) and Max Roach. Pope recommended Brown to Roach when the group's prior bassist, Calvin Hill, went MIA. All it took was a tune and a half, according to Brown; Roach put down his drumsticks and said "let's talk business," inviting the bass player on a 13-country, 27-day tour, leading to an almost two-decade association until the drummer's retirement. The only caveat was that he would have to play electric bass, owing to many double basses damaged or going missing on previous Roach tours. Eager to play with the great drummer, Brown says, laughing, "I wouldn't have cared if he had asked me to play the kazoo!" He still regards Roach among his favorite bandleaders, along with Grover Washington Jr. and Rachelle Ferrell.

As a sought-after sideman, Brown has appeared on over 100 albums and has additionally played with the likes of saxophonists Pharoah Sanders, Charlie Rouse, Sonny Stitt and Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis; trumpeters Dizzy Gillespie, Freddie Hubbard and Roy Eldridge; as

well as pianist Red Garland, drummer Philly Joe Jones and vocalist Etta Jones. "He took great pride in being the connective tissue for both the creative journey as well as the start of the journey whenever he played," says Zankel. These collective experiences informed Brown's own work as a sensitive, wise composer, including his idea to compose for strings, which came from Roach: "That was my first time trying to express myself with strings. So I put together my own string group." He recruited violinist John Blake and added pure classical string players to the mix. The result was incandescent albums including *Song of the Sun* (Naxos Jazz, 1999) and *Between Midnight and Dawn* (Dreambox Media, 2005). Brown's successful forays into composition led to a commission from the University of Rochester for a work based on the lives of Black intellectuals and artists, Frederick Douglass, John A Williams and Herbert Gentry.

More recently, a mysterious ailment affected Brown's left hand, causing him to stop playing—but miraculously, the condition that baffled doctors disappeared two years later, allowing Brown to begin playing again, although he explains, "It's private now, because I still love to play at home for my own pleasure." Creatively, he expanded into textile design, abstract art and writing a self-published book of short stories. Brown, a true gentleman of jazz, has supported dozens of musicians along his journey. "Tyrone Brown... always a friend, a person who you knew you could trust, in music as in life" says pianist, collaborator and fellow Philadelphian, Dave Burrell. Pope adds: "Tyrone is one of the greatest bass players, and Philly has a strong tradition of bassists, which includes Alphonso Johnson, Arthur Harper, Spanky DeBrest, Percy Heath, Gerald Veasley, Lee Smith, Christian McBride, Stanley Clarke, Reggie Workman, Jymie Merritt, Jamaaladeen Tacuma—and Tyrone."

The occasional opportunities to collaborate with fellow bassists have served as rare, but certainly special, even momentous occasions for Brown over his prolific career. One of his most recent recordings was with classical bassist Gary Karr (*Bass Brothers*), and according to Brown, it remains as "among my most treasured recordings and experiences, up there with the Gold Records I did with Grover." Before the turn of the

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LEST WE FORGET



DOUG WATKINS

BASS ENGINE FROM THE MOTOR CITY

BY KEN WAXMAN

One of quite a few jazz musicians killed in an auto accident, bassist Doug Watkins' death on February 5, 1962 was particularly tragic since he was only 27. (Ironically, sadly, another significant bassist, Scott LaFaro, died in an auto accident just seven months earlier at age 25.) Not only was Watkins an original member of The Jazz Messengers and the Horace Silver Quintet, but he maintained a busy sideman schedule through his ever-brief seven-year jazz career. Only three months before Watkins' death, when Charles Mingus recorded an album playing piano (*Oh Yeah*, Atlantic), it was Doug Watkins in the bass chair.

Born in 1934, he took up the bass while attending Detroit's Cass Technical High School. Another bass student was Paul Chambers; the two were such good

friends that many accounts erroneously claim they were cousins. The 1950s saw a jazz explosion in Detroit with such players as trumpeter Donald Byrd and pianist Tommy Flanagan on the scene, and soon Watkins, who honed his hard bop skills, relocated to NYC in 1954 and soon joined The Jazz Messengers with Art Blakey, Hank Mobley, Kenny Dorham and Silver. Within a year, he and Silver left and formed the pianist's quintet: Watkins and Silver were clean and weary of being hassled as suspected drug users like other band members. Drummer Louis Hayes (another Detroiter), who first met Watkins at a Michigan after-hours club, impressed Watkins enough with his playing that the bassist convinced Silver to hire him. Watkins and Hayes would record together on numerous occasions, from Silver's *6 Pieces of Silver* (Blue Note) to Curtis Fuller's *The New Trombone* (Prestige), Kenny Burrell's *K.B. Blues* (Blue Note) and with John Coltrane on *Mainstream* 1958 (Savoy) and *The Cats* (New Jazz), as well as a single, bonus track that Hayes appears on from the reissue of Watkins' *Soulnik* (New Jazz).

Saxophone giant Sonny Rollins used Watkins on probably the bassist's most high-profile session: *Saxophone Colossus* (Prestige), alongside Flanagan and Max Roach. This 1956 recording, cited by musicologist

Peter Niklas Wilson as "one of the classic jazz albums of all time," made Watkins better known than he had been, though his only other Rollins recording was *Newk's Time* (Blue Note, 1957). But these dates seem to have happened by fluke. Rollins, who had not worked with, or even seen Watkins play beforehand, recalls "We—the guys my age—were giving Doug a chance to meet the guys and get into the habit of playing with older fellows. There were other young guys coming to New York that deserved to play with somebody famous. It was Doug's turn and then it was somebody else's." Yet within this quasi-system, Rollins does praise Watkins' skills: "It took a while before we got to any real deep playing, but he did well for a youngster." Doing well may be an understatement since Watkins never lacked for work in NYC. He recorded prolifically for independent jazz labels such as Prestige, Blue Note and Savoy, with leaders as varied as saxophonists Gene Ammons and Jackie McLean, an output totaling 75+ sessions as a sideman. His freelance status, though, may have inadvertently led to his death. In February 1962, filling in for the band's bass player, Watkins joined drummer Philly Joe Jones' touring quintet. Sharing driving duties

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bright flutters, muted tones and acoustic effects, like the sheer sound of air passing through his trumpet. The strings built an alluring coat of sound for stretches, with sparse enunciations from Smith and Bro, as the work demanded. After partnering with Craig Taborn at NYC's Jazztopad edition, bassist **Ksawery Wójcikski** was paired with Birmingham, England reedsman **Xhosa Cole**, who's recently released an album of Thelonious Monk's music and currently works with pianist Pat Thomas. The lighting and deck chairs dispatched around the players encouraged meditative listening. After a start at the threshold of silence, unforced notes began to naturally appear. A pattern emerged and the pair delved into a generous modal improvisation, Cole spontaneously quoting from John Coltrane and Wayne Shorter. The playful and diverse set also included a medieval-sounding hymn and a tune with a North African flavor.

Hailing from Australia, bass clarinetist, tenor saxophonist **Jeremy Rose's Disruption!** proved a festival high point, with its setup of two drummers, Simon Barker and Chloe Kim, in unison or in dialog, and around whom the musical edifice was built. "The drums have the ability to transform brainwaves and accompany protests and rituals," according to Rose. In addition to field recordings, the electrified tenor à la Eddie Harris was bathed in a cloud of resonance. The rhythm-heavy aesthetic reminded of '90s-era Ginger Baker with a dash of the Kodo Taiko Percussion Ensemble.

"Ethnic Cleansing—An American Tradition" premiered at Lincoln Center earlier in the year. During the talk he gave prior to the concert, saxophonist **Immanuel Wilkins** didn't mince words, referring to the US lynchings during the Jim Crow-era as well as the current outrages in Palestine as inspiration for the composition. Strangled sounds, dissonances and a sober lyricism proved consistent with the subject matter and an extensive, unaccompanied alto solo formed the suite's central segment—a brave new direction for the Blue Note recording artist.

Joanna Duda (piano), **Sunny Kim** (vocals) and **Helen Svoboda** (bass, vocals) presented *The Great Reset*, a collaborative electro-acoustic suite about the threshold humanity is at, each track reflecting on current destructions and political aberrations, and expressing changes the three women hope to see. The unifying theme was translated into striking music and fierce lyrics, rendered through various effects from all members, whose instrumental prowess proved impressive. Some Boomers fled towards the exit doors, maybe feeling a pang of guilt! **Ghosted** coasted with lethargic guitar loops and atmospherics over immovable mid-tempo grooves. The stubborn repetition, not always airtight at that, proved discouraging to the most patient listener, with neither deviation or surprise.

Charles Lloyd and the festival have had a strong relationship. It was the saxophonist's sixth visit to Wroclaw. A live performance at Jazztopad released as *Wild Man Dance* actually signalled the tender warrior's move to Blue Note after a long, prolific stint with ECM. Lloyd's Sky Quartet is named after *The Sky Will Still Be Here Tomorrow*, and as on that recording, had Jason Moran (piano) and Larry Grenadier (bass), with Kweku Sumbry (drums) the newcomer. Unhurried ballads made up the lion's share of the repertoire, which also included the bustling "Harvest" from 1972's *Waves*. Lloyd's fluid playing, easygoing demeanor, full tenor sound and reliable sidemen made this a pleasant stroll through serene waters, even as no new ground may have been broken.

The weekend afternoons were spent at the Concerts in Living Rooms series. Eight houses hosted several sets and lineups each, with unannounced players from both the local pool of talent and festival headliners, such as Stewart, Sánchez and Harding. Address locations were also kept secret until the day of the sessions. Musicians

who played together would likely not have crossed paths otherwise, some of them only meeting and shaking hands seconds before playing. The hospitality was priceless, though an overabundance of cameramen sometimes endangered the sought-after connection between artists and onlookers.

The Mleczarnia is an old-school café, whose basement was home to the late evening jam sessions centered around ace trio **Sundogs** (Mateusz Rybicki, Zbigniew Kozera and Samuel Hall); and which welcomed every patron from wavering dabblers to major guests. The venue also hosted three official gigs: Canadian quartet **Kneejerk** displayed more vigor than subtlety; Amsterdam-based quintet **Önder** explored the low register with two bass clarinets, bass and bass guitar; and the leaderless **Presencia**—Camila Nebbia (tenor), James Banner (bass) and Moritz Baumgärtner (drums), which made the best impression. All substance and no fooling around, the trio offered thoroughly written sections, with openings for shape-shifting. Ever-churning forward, the three commanded undivided attention in the fully packed café. Their set was one of several artistic achievements at Jazztopad, assuredly one of the key European festivals of the season, its programming choices rewarded by a sizeable attendance with most concerts sold-out.

For more info visit:
nfm.wroclaw.pl/en/festivals/jazztopad-festival

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with others, a few miles east of Holbrook, AZ, on his way to San Francisco to meet up with Jones, he fell asleep at the wheel, crashed into a pickup truck and was killed.

Oddly enough, for a musician who recorded so much, Watkins led only two sessions: the mostly blowing session *Watkins at Large* (Transition, 1956), recently reissued by Blue Note's Tone Poet series, and *Soulnik* (New Jazz, 1960), the much more progressive of the pair. The latter includes Yusef Lateef (flute, oboe), Hugh Lawson (piano) and Lex Humphries (drums), with Watkins on pizzicato cello. Steve Siegel (whose *Jazz Profiles* article is an excellent source of information on the bassist) notes that "Watkins never plays with his bow and must have chosen the cello primarily for its six-octave range, versus four octaves for the bass, which allowed him the much more expressive presentation." Dismissing liner notes that Watkins eschewed the cello (before first playing on the instrument only days before the *Soulnik* recording), Hayes insists that "Doug played the bass and cello equally well." Another perplexing detail that Siegel reveals, is that according to several sources, at the time of death, Watkins was carrying an airplane ticket to Japan. Although the Jones' San Francisco gig was closer to that country, whether the bassist wanted to visit Japan or establish a musical career there will never be known. This and other episodes in Watkins' life remain mysteries. But we can still listen to the high quality bass work he left behind.

As Hayes states: "Doug had a unique sound and interpretation of the music. He made many famous recordings with other people, and I'm sure he would have made more on his own."

For more info visit bluenote.com/artist/doug-watkins

Recommended Listening:

- Horace Silver—*And The Jazz Messengers* (Blue Note, 1954-55)
- Sonny Rollins—*Saxophone Colossus* (Prestige, 1956)
- The Jazz Messengers—*The Jazz Messengers* (Columbia, 1956)
- Doug Watkins Quintet (featuring Yusef Lateef)—*Soulnik* (Prestige-New Jazz, 1957/60)
- Tina Brooks—*Minor Move* (Blue Note, 1958)
- Donald Byrd—*Fuego* (Blue Note, 1959)

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century, Tacuma (Ornette Coleman's longtime bassist for almost four decades, from the mid '70s until the saxophonist's passing in 2015) developed a bass quartet in the '90s called *Basso Nouveau*, which included Brown on upright electric stick bass and acoustic bass guitar, Tacuma on four-string electric bass, along with Veasley on six-string bass guitar and Warren Oree (another veteran Philly bassist, who passed away in 2020 at age 76) on acoustic upright bass. That group would release the appropriately-titled album *All Basses Covered* (Moers Music, 1996). Decades prior to that, Brown was Tacuma's bass guitar and music instructor, and, in the words of Tacuma, he was also "a mentor, uncle, close friend, one of the greatest bassists of our generation—and one of the most lovable human beings."

Innovative and hard-working, kind and broad-minded, there's a continuum for Brown, which dates back to his parents' generous natures. There's the life philosophy that he has always lived by: "I would never really feel that I was the best that I can be. I always felt that there was room for growth and that I had to continue to grow. You have to continue to be humble." And that is the key to Brown: remaining humble.

Recommended Listening:

- Pat Martino—*Desperado* (Prestige, 1970)
- Catalyst—*Perception* (Muse, 1972)
- Max Roach Quartet—*Scott Free* (Soul Note, 1984)
- Tyrone Brown String Sextet—*Song of the Sun* (Naxos Jazz, 1999)
- Dave Burrell (with Tyrone Brown)—*Recital* (CIMP, 2000)
- Gary Karr/Tyrone Brown—*Bass Brothers* (AMATI Productions, 2016)

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