



RUSSELL HALL

BUCCANEERING BASSIST

BY MATTY BANNOND

In the city of New York, it's easy to feel like the main character in an epic story. But bassist Russell Hall feels like dozens of main characters across an entire folkloric canon. He self-proclaims similarity to Ace Ventura, the Mad Hatter, *The Karate Kid's* Daniel, Captain Jack Sparrow and a throng of other movie and storybook figures—while dressed, appropriately enough, as a pirate. “In the jazz world, you have to present a persona that carries forth the legacy beyond your human form,” he says. “So I make characters by combining my loves: music, culture, marine biology, philosophy...all this stuff.”

This month Hall presents one of his current personas alongside a small cast at Mezzrow in Greenwich Village. His trio of pianist Esteban Castro and drummer-percussionist Lesley Mok will play tunes from last year's *Dragon of the South* (La Reserve), among other material. He describes the music as brutalist-expressionist jazz that uses shadow and light to evoke a dancing picture. “Russell articulates his love for melody and lushness with grit and a hyper-futurist mindset,” Mok says. “I feel a deep sense of urgency and beauty when we play. It's a unique experience.”

Hall's story began on a farm in Kingston, Jamaica, where he lived until he was 13. As a child, he took acting lessons and dreamed of starring roles on the silver screen. His family then relocated to Fort Lauderdale, FL, and Hall enrolled at the prestigious Dillard Center for the Arts, quickly joining its jazz ensemble as a bass player. That experience exposed him to the swing, bebop and contemporary jazz ideas that now bubble beneath the frothing surface of his compositional cauldron. Attending that magnet school in Florida put Hall in contact with high-profile bassists such as John Clayton and Rodney Whitaker. It also brought his first interactions with trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, who Hall calls his main mentor in life. In fact, Hall claims that Marsalis fed and clothed him for many years. The two still speak on a weekly basis and a quote from the senior figure is positioned prominently on Hall's website: “Russell is so creative, he has a wildness to him. I like that.”

Other formative moments include his first visit to a jazz concert: it featured bassist Ron Carter, who tutored Hall at Juilliard a few years later and adopted a tough-love approach in response to his student's rebellious temperament. Despite their contrasting demeanors, the pair formed a close bond and still communicate frequently. “Russell is a very talented bassist who has learned to inject humor into his bass playing and has not sacrificed learning the bass in the process of becoming famous,” Carter says. “If he were not a bassist, he still would be my friend.” After graduation, Hall stuck around in the Big Apple and picked up work as a sideman while developing his own projects. His self-released first album as leader, *The Feeling of Romance*—a doe-eyed and wistful recording of sparse instrumentation—was released in 2019, with

Hall's sweet-sighing vocals prominent in the mix. Carter's lessons in lyrical phrasing echo through its carefully etched melodies. For a debut, it is marked by unusual willingness to express vulnerability. Hall's sophomore effort, *Black Caesar* (s/r, 2022), communicates a starkly different vibe. It's an in-your-face release that foregrounds the bassist's chaotic spirit. Instead of crooned singing and warm-hearted ballads, listeners will find snarling rap vocals and punchy horn arrangements. There's a more Mingus-like, defiant attitude to the material and Hall's lyrics swap sensitivity for a confrontational tone that spotlights his rambunctious streak. On top of his adventures as a bandleader, Hall has regularly played secondary characters in other artists' work. His eclectic style won opportunities to collaborate with pianists Emmet Cohen and Joey Alexander, drummers Herlin Riley and Tyshawn Sorey and trumpeters Etienne Charles and Benny Benack III. Says Cohen, “Russell has an extraordinary breadth of musical understanding and curiosity. You can hear the full lineage of Black music in what he does, but it never feels like imitation—it's his own voice. Creating with him feels like tapping into something deeper than the notes on the page.”

This month the bassist's distinctive musical voice will narrate the next chapter in his story: the release of *COLORZ*, a showcase for Hall's project Bessie and the Rainbowkids, a sextet he describes as a rock and roll version of Bob Marley and the Wailers. Via his alter ego, Captain Bessie Suave, the album explores Hall's research into spiritual traditions from across cultures. It offers 26 tracks, with some duplicate takes. The compositions are shaped by wide-ranging influences such as Parliament Funkadelic, Black Sabbath, Willie Nelson and Johannes Brahms.

Another release, *The Wildcard*, is scheduled for this fall, aiming to take listeners on a journey through Hall's investigations of absurdist philosophy. That record involves the same personnel as the Rainbowkids but is constructed around a different character. “*The Wildcard* is like a guy from a Scorsese film, but also a kind of mad scientist or magician,” he explains. “The album is a bebop memoir and we play free, sporadic stuff that combines different kinds of music. It also uses voice memos, so you can hear my phone scratching around in my pocket.” This recording method reflects Hall's commitment to authenticity. At face value, that commitment may seem to conflict with his penchant for addressing listeners via imaginary figures. But Hall's fiction aims to reveal aspects of truth that reality obscures. His conjurer persona encourages audiences to question the sleight of hand behind the tricks. His buccaneer spirit puts history center stage, while also implying the link between music and theft in today's music industry. “The only fear I ever had was that people thought I was inauthentic,” he says, rubbing his many-ringed hands together. “But the lore of a person's life just develops. And I try to weave my lore and my rebellion into the fabric of the music that I play.”

For more info visit russellhallbass.com. Hall is at Mezzrow Apr. 16 (as leader). He is also at Close Up Apr. 4 (with Birsa Chatterjee), Smalls Apr. 6 (with Domo Branch) and Mezzrow Apr. 10-11 (with Ehud Asherie). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Herlin Riley — *New Direction* (Mack Avenue, 2015)
- Emmet Cohen Trio — *Dirty in Detroit* (s/r-MOCLOUD, 2017)
- Russell Hall — *Black Caesar* (s/r, 2022)
- Tyshawn Sorey Trio +1 (with Greg Osby) — *The Off-Off Broadway Guide to Synergism* (Pi Recordings, 2022)
- Stemeseder Lillinger Quartet (feat. Peter Evans & Russell Hall) — *Umbr II* (Intakt, 2023)
- Russell Hall — *Dragon of the South* (La Reserve, 2025)

1066 Nostrand Ave.
Brooklyn, NY 11225
www.barbayeux.com

BAR BAYEUX

APRIL 2026 JAZZ CALENDAR

<p>TUESDAYS 8 - 11 PM Weekly Jam Session House Band: Diego Voglino with guests</p>	<p>WEDNESDAYS 8 & 9:30 PM George Burton Dark Science (4/1) Shogo Ellefson Band (4/15) Alex Harding/Lucian Ban Quartet (4/22) Sami Stevens Band (4/29)</p>
<p>THURSDAYS 8 & 9:30 PM Adam Kolker + Jeremy Stratton with guests: Marc Copland (4/2) Santiago Leibson (4/16) TBA (4/9) TBA (4/23) Matt Mitchell (4/30)</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; width: fit-content; margin: auto;"> <p>NO COVER ONE DRINK MINIMUM</p> </div>
<p>FRIDAYS 8 & 9:30 PM Marta Sanchez (4/3) Alex Goodman, Ben Street, Adam Arruda (4/10) Greg Ward (4/17) Jerome Sabbagh (4/24)</p>	
<p>SATURDAYS 6 - 7:30 PM DUET SET(S), followed by 8 & 9:30 PM sets: Garvin Blake Quartet (4/4) Jeonglim Yang (4/11) Max Light (4/18) Alex LoRe (4/25)</p>	

JAZZ GENIUS

151 Essex St, NY, NY 10002
212-875-JAZZ (5299)
<https://buytickets.at/jazzgenius>
email: theJazzGenius@gmail.com

Apr. 9-11	Jonny King Trio with Dezron Douglas (4/9-10), Alex Claffy (4/11), Billy Drummond
Apr. 23-25	ELEW Trio with David Hawkins, Bar Filipowicz
Apr. 1, 8, 15, 22, 29 *7:30-10:30 pm	Jam Session led by Michael Shekwoaga Ode <i>(\$10 which includes one drink. ALL musicians welcome!)</i>

FOR FULL SCHEDULE, SCAN CODE

*7, 9 pm sets unless otherwise noted

\$30 music charge for all sets

gluten free kitchen

“Improvisation is Genius”