



ART BARON

BEYOND CATEGORY 'BONE PLAYER
BY MARILYN LESTER

Some careers are storied. Trombonist Art Baron's is one of them. For one thing, in 1973, Baron, at age 23, was one of the very last musicians hired by the maestro himself to join the Duke Ellington Orchestra (DEO). Baron had already made his mark on the road with Buddy Rich, James Taylor, Lou Reed and Stevie Wonder, a turning point gig when he performed the trombone solo on "Love Having You Around" for Wonder's *Music of My Mind* (1972). And Ellington, ever well-informed was hipped to the trombonist's already developed proficiency on complex, plunger-mute techniques—a hallmark of the Ellington trombone section. Greatest among these were Joe "Tricky Sam" Nanton and Lawrence Brown (the latter who retired from the DEO in 1970). Looking back, Baron says "For me it's all about Lawrence Brown." Ellington had played concerts in Bridgeport, CT, near Baron's hometown of Fairfield, making an impression on the young man: "I was floored." After Booty Wood had replaced Brown, Baron joined Vince Prudente and bass trombone player Chuck Connors on the bandstand.

When Ellington passed on May 24, 1974, his son Mercer took over the band, and aside from touring, came the Tony Award-winning Broadway revue, *Sophisticated Ladies*, from February 1981 through January 2, 1983, with the DEO on stage. Woodwinds player, Patience Higgins, who was in that band, remembers Baron as "a musician with a very high musical IQ who had amazing soloing ability. His reverence for his predecessors was always present and his joy and humor was infectious." But on February 8, 1996, Mercer Ellington succumbed to a heart attack, effectively ending the extraordinary unbroken record of DEO touring and performances. Yet, Ellington karma brought Baron back to Broadway again with the *After Midnight* revue, based on 2011/2012 City Center Encore runs entitled *Cotton Club Parade* and colloquially referred to as "the Duke Ellington musical," which ran from November 2013 through June 2014.

Arthur John Baron, born January 5, 1950, enjoyed a public school music education, like many kids of the day. When it came to choosing a musical instrument

as part of his cultural education, he was attracted to the glockenspiel, which his mother put the kibosh on. "She thought it was too effeminate," Baron laughs. "You're not playing *that*," she said," noting he could have become a vibraphone player. So the trombone called instead and Baron threw himself into music full bore, also picking up tuba and penny whistles. He eventually could play "three different penny whistles, different keys in the same song with no written music." In the sixth grade, his parents bought him a jazz album and by eighth grade he was taking private lessons that got him into the high school jazz band. There he also made Allstate Orchestra auditioning with a "piece of music I'd never played before," adding, "I never played in an orchestra in my life." Yet the teenager had been furiously gigging in clubs and joints around Bridgeport, "soaking it all up." Pragmatically, he entered Berklee College of Music intending to become a music educator, "just in case." But one of his professors took a look at him and, according to Baron, said: "you're a composer, I can tell." He adds, "So I took composing as a major." But Berklee couldn't contain Baron's energy and drive. "There were too many rules," he says. "You'd walk into class and already there were 25 things you can't do." And so he left Berklee behind and the saga of Baron on the road began, leading to Duke and his eventual rise into the "Tricky Sam" Nanton, plunger chair in the DEO.

In the last 25-30 years, Baron has amassed plenty of first-call work and has established himself as an undisputed master of the trombone and plunger mute. He's fronted his ensemble, The Duke's Men, initially with former members of the DEO and he's played in the Lionel Hampton big band, George Gruntz Concert Jazz Band, Mingus Big Band and the Rivbea All-star Orchestra, as well as recording with David Sanborn, Frank Wess, Betty Carter and many others. Fellow trombonist Ray Anderson—who with Baron was in the New York Composers Orchestra, Sam Rivers' Rivbea Orchestra and with the Gruntz Concert Jazz Band, and with whom Baron recorded on Anderson's own big band project—met Baron on a subway platform the second time he took a subway train upon arriving in New York in 1973. "It was one of my luckiest days ever," he says. "He is one of the truly great trombone virtuosos and an exceptionally generous and supportive person. He's an absolute master of the plunger techniques that inspire all of us. I, and countless others have benefited immeasurably both musically and personally from knowing Art." Trombonist Ed Neumeister, who met

Baron in 1980 and who's worked with him frequently, was also an early beneficiary of Baron's skills. "Art was always very positive, jovial and fun to be around and work with," he says. "He was extremely influential to me as a plunger playing—especially with pixie mute—trombonist."

Baron, whose past collaborations additionally include the small groups of Jack Walrath, Elliott Sharp, Mario Pavone, Lou Grassi and Jerome Harris and ensembles Ballin' The Jack and Kamikaze Ground Crew, was also a member of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra (precursor of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra) under David Berger. Many of its players were fellow Ellingtonians, including Britt Woodman, Buster Cooper, Clark Terry, Jimmy Hamilton, Willie Cook, Milt Grayson and Joe Temperley. Saxophonist Andy Farber, who has known Baron since those days, in Ellington-speak, considers him a "beyond category" player, with chops rooted in pure feeling and attitude. "He is strictly an in-the-moment improviser, who creates melodies, and effects that supports the musical environment of the gig he is on, rather than regurgitating licks he has learnt in a practice room," Farber observes.

That philosophy of playing, given his early rebellion at Berklee, defines Baron's observation that young musicians today are over-schooled, graduating from institutions of higher learning, knowing technique first and improvisation and soulfulness second. In the last several years, Baron has encountered a health challenge with motor skills, which he's been addressing with positivity and physical therapies, including boxing. He keeps his chops up with regular practice and looks forward to gigging again, echoing Farber's sentiment: "I hope he soon recovers from his recent struggles, so we may make some noise together very soon."

For more info visit [instagram.com/artbaronmusic](https://www.instagram.com/artbaronmusic)

Recommended Listening:

- Duke Ellington and His Orchestra—*The Last Tour: Farewell From Vienna* (ORF, 1973)
- Bobby Watson—*The Year of the Rabbit* (Evidence, 1987)
- Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra—*Portraits by Ellington* (Columbia, 1991)
- Jerome Harris Quintet—*Rendezvous* (Stereophile, 1998)
- Ballin' The Jack—*Jungle* (Knitting Factory, 1999)
- Mark Masters Ensemble—*Masters & Baron Meet Blanton & Webster* (Capri, 2019)

LEST WE FORGET



LARANCE MARABLE

BEBOP'S UNDERSUNG RHYTHMIST
BY LAURENCE DONOHUE-GREENE

With all the semiquincentennial celebrations planned nationwide, this Fourth of July also represents the landmark occasion of the traditionally-celebrated birthday of Louis Armstrong—the only thing more American than baseball and apple pie—with 2026 representing his 125th birthday (though he was actually born Aug. 4). But among the more under-the-radar July 4th occasions we commemorate is the 14-year deathaversary of one who, during his final years of playing, many considered to be one of the last real bebop drummers: Larance Marable (1929–2012). Marable may best be known for his decade-plus

tenure in bassist Charlie Haden's Quartet West—in essence his swan song affiliation, and notably a high profile one—before he suffered a stroke and stopped playing altogether. Dig deeper, though, and one quickly realizes that he was not only one of the last real bebop drummers, but one of the best bebop drummers period.

A distant relative of early 1900s pianist, riverboat bandleader Fate Marable (whose bands served as springboards for a vast array of prominent jazz figures, including Armstrong, Henry "Red" Allen, Johnny and "Baby" Dodds, Jimmie Blanton and Zutty Singleton), Larance (also less-commonly spelled "Lawrence") Marable was born May 21, 1929 in Los Angeles, CA, where he quickly became an integral part of the West Coast jazz scene. Largely self-taught, he was originally influenced by Kenny Clarke and Art Blakey, and would quickly become a dependable presence behind the kit for numerous bandleaders, respected for his powerful cymbal work, reliably driving snare technique and impeccable timing. His professional debut was in 1947, and as a teenager,

he played with bebop pioneer, alto saxophonist Charlie "Bird" Parker (Marable can be heard on quite a few Bird bootlegs, recorded in L.A.). Soon he would accompany most every significant West Coast-associated horn player: tenor saxophonists Dexter Gordon, Wardell Gray, Teddy Edwards and Harold Land; alto saxophonists Frank Morgan, Herb Geller and Art Pepper; and trumpeters Chet Baker and Jack Sheldon. Marable recorded with many and additionally played behind countless others at numerous jam sessions. One go-to location for such regular jams was the famed, hallowed jazz venue The Lighthouse (in Hermosa Beach, CA), at which he was the house drummer as a member of bassist Howard Rumsey's Lighthouse Allstars. In addition to Rumsey, The Lighthouse's house trio included pianist Hampton Hawes, with whose trio Marable debuted on his first jazz recording in 1951 (the drummer possibly may have recorded prior to that in 1950 with early R&B pianist-vocalist Amos Milburn). *The Hamp Hawes*

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Trio was recorded live at L.A.'s legendary jazz venue, The Haig, a well-known epicenter showcasing such pioneering jazz ensembles as the Gerry Mulligan/Baker pianoless quartet and the Red Norvo Trio (with a young Charles Mingus and guitarist Tal Farlow).

Through the '50s, Marable memorably recorded with pianists Carl Perkins and Kenny Drew, vibraphonists Teddy Charles and Milt Jackson, trumpeter Conte Candoli, alto saxophonist Sonny Criss, saxophonist-clarinetist Jimmy Giuffre and others. In 1956, the drummer recorded his sole album as leader, *Tenorman* (Jazz West). Released as the "Lawrence Marable Quartet featuring James Clay" – with Sonny Clark (piano) and Jimmy Bond (bass) – it was recently given the Blue Note Tone Poet 180g vinyl-only reissue treatment. The original record label may have only briefly been in existence (1954-56), but in that short window of time Jazz West put out a handful of significant releases, *Tenorman* included. Label founder and record producer, Herbert Kimmel describes Clay in the album's liner notes as "Marable's discovery...a voice that could speak right out, unschooled, unrefined, free and clear of...restraints." Six years younger than Marable, and not yet even 21 at the time, Dallas-born Clay had just arrived in L.A., two weeks before the drummer took him into the studio to record this now-classic, which marks the recording debut of the tenor saxophonist (who would also become known as an equally-estimable flute player) and the sole album under Marable's name.

In the late '50s to early '60s, Marable played and recorded with saxophonists Johnny Griffin and Curtis Amy, pianist George Shearing, organist Richard "Groove" Holmes, The Montgomery Brothers – with guitarist Wes, pianist (and vibraphonist) Buddy and bassist Monk – as well as continuing connections with the likes of Dexter Gordon and Teddy Edwards. But between his 1962 recording on pianist-vibraphonist Victor Feldman's *Stop the World I Want to Get Off* (World Pacific) and saxophonist Joe Farrell's 1979 album *Skate Board Park* (Xanadu), Marable was for all intents and purposes basically off the scene due to an extended period of drug addiction issues and time served in prison. It was that very Farrell session, with pianist Chick Corea and bassist Bob Magnusson, which marks the drummer's official return. In a recent conversation, Magnusson recalls the session like it was yesterday: "It was really a thrill for me to play with Larence on that Don Schlitten-produced Farrell record with Chick. It was the only time I got to play with Larence, but it was a total joy. He was in prison for drugs, then got himself together to display his talent and again earn a living. The album was basically a blowing session and Larence just played beautifully on everything. He had an intense, fiery energy. 'Speak Low' was so wonderful. And Chick's 'High Wire-The Aerialist', how beautifully Larence played in that style. Intuitively and musically he could move from a straight-ahead bebop thing to a two feel. For me, just a real treat. He's unheralded, how great he was."

By the '80s, Marable was looking to get back in full swing. He had joined vibraphonist Bobby Hutcherson for two years and reunited with past employers such as Milt Jackson and Johnny Griffin, as well as joining saxophonist Med Flory's Supersax (which included a prior West Coast associate in trumpeter Candoli). Native New Yorker Jon Mayer first started playing with Marable (a decade Mayer's senior) around the time the pianist became an L.A. transplant, just before the drummer would join Haden's Quartet West. Mayer recalls contacting Larence "for a couple of trio gigs. He had that authentic feel of drummers I had grown up listening to, that East Coast sensibility, like Art Taylor and Philly Joe Jones. It was really a joy

playing with him." It was through Marable's playing that both Mayer and the drummer first met Ernie Watts, a serendipitous occasion, as Watts happened to be window shopping and walked by and heard the drums from an open window to one of Mayer's trio gigs. Watts walked in for what was the end of a set, introduced himself and the rest, as they say, is history – or as Watts recalls one of Marable's many favorite sayings: "It's a small world but I'd hate to have to paint it!" The two would soon become bandmates in Quartet West after the group's original drummer, Billy Higgins, became too busy (including touring with the *'Round Midnight* allstar band, which played with frequency upon the release of Bertrand Tavernier's 1986 titled movie). Watts recalls that it was Higgins who was the one that recommended Marable to Haden as his replacement, as he was a frequent visitor to Higgins' The World Stage (the educational and performance art space, located in South L.A.'s Leimert Park Village, which Higgins founded in 1989). Says Watts, "That's where Marable worked with young people. (And) they took care of him over there."

Over the course of almost a dozen years, Marable recorded a half-dozen albums for Verve with Quartet West (the group rounded out by founding pianist Alan Broadbent), starting with *Angel City* (1988), ending with *The Art Of The Song* (1999). Following a stroke, though, he would eventually develop dementia and start to drift, living in a health care facility before passing away at the age of 83 on Jul. 4, 2012. Watts frequently visited Marable's home in the Little Ethiopia district of L.A. "We had become like family. He hardly recognized us, though. One time my wife and I got a CD player for him and we put on some Bird. All of a sudden, he sat up and started tapping and playing. There was another part of his mind, another aspect, that was triggered. He wasn't talking, but the music of Bird certainly triggered him!"

Marable's legacy has been cemented with a two and a half+ hour long, oral history interview from the UCLA Library Center for Oral History Research (COHR), part of its archival "Central Avenue Sounds" series. The significance of this amazingly vast resource (based on dozens of interviews, mostly conducted in the 1990s by Steven Isoardi) cannot be understated. Collectively it became the foundation for the oral-history project and served as the impetus for the impressive 1998 publication of the 442-page *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles* (University of California Press). Marable's interview is available as a transcript as well as an audio recording, alongside many of Marable's West Coast contemporaries, including Buddy Collette, Frank Morgan, Gerald Wilson, Melba Liston, Hadda Brooks, Ernie Andrews, Britt Woodman, Lee Young, Vi Redd and others.

For more info visit oralhistory.library.ucla.edu

Recommended Listening:

- Hampton Hawes – *The Hamp Hawes Trio* (Vantage, 1951)
- Lawrence Marable Quartet (featuring James Clay) – *Tenorman* (Jazz West-Blue Note, 1956)
- Teddy Edwards Octet – *Back to Avalon* (Contemporary, 1960)
- Dexter Gordon – *The Resurgence Of* (Jazzland, 1960)
- Milt Jackson – *Night Mist* (Pablo, 1980)
- Charlie Haden Quartet West – *Haunted Heart* (Verve, 1991)

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two high-hats and two kick drums simultaneously without ever losing his funky feel, while Tyler Gilmore mirrored and manipulated Moran's previously played

phrases, mixing them right back into play, creating the illusion that the pianist was having an acoustic/electric conversation with himself.

The festival was in full swing by the weekend, as Saturday offered 28 shows from noon until almost midnight (Sunday upping that to 29). **Matthew Shipp's** solo piano set in the Theatre for a New Audience at Polansky Shakespeare Center, as viewed from a seat in the top tier (close to the high-vaulted ceiling, directly behind, almost over, the piano) was a marvel of aural animation. Shipp moved like a boxer, shoulders and upper torso panning left and right, long limbs and fingers flailing forward over the keyboard with deft, rapid-fire hooks, jabs, crosses and haymakers, his touch growing more delicate as his tempos accelerated, abruptly down-shifting to slower, heavier motions, hunkering down at last on a few thick, T-bone steak-sized chords. Somewhere in all this unified anarchy were threads of themes, glimpses of swing, even a B-flat blues.

The Percussion Collective's performance of "Dressur", a sticks-cum-schtick composition by Mauricio Kagel, staged at the Church of St. Luke & St. Matthew, combined slapstick and other low comedy and pantomime with sophisticated hijinks and innovative eccentricity. The trio of rhythmic tricksters plied unusual home-grown and found wooden instruments (e.g. a pair of clogs) with equal attention paid to fun and finesse, earning as many laughs as they did oohs and aahs for their efforts.

The final day of the festival opened with an immersive piece played by 30 or so musicians on the terrace at the top of Fort Greene Park, just in front of the Prison Ship Martyrs Monument. No one was conducting. Each aerophonist or percussionist seemed to operate independently, spread out over a large area. (It was later discovered that they'd been following pre-taped cues coming from their ear buds.) All seemed to loiter around the key of C, though their short, overlapping motifs never quite meshed. Over the course of an hour the performers slowly moved towards the center of the terrace, as if drawn by a magnet, never acknowledging one another's presence, then reversed this inward migration in the second half hour of the piece, the quality of the music changing as a flute player passed close by a xylophonist or bass drummer. Listeners/spectators could change that quality for themselves by striding or idling in and among the temporarily planted performers – in sum, another example of potentially monotonous material achieving depth and variety.

One of the fest's most sizzling sets came later that evening at Brooklyn Music School with the onslaught of **Marty Ehrlich's** saxophone sextet playing arrangements by the late Julius Hemphill. Comprised of Ehrlich, Caroline Davis (whose soon-to-be-born baby had the best 'seat' in the house), Cleave Guyton, Alex Harding, Brian Landrus and Brian Settles, the ensemble swung and funk'd their collective butts off, playing beautiful lush ballads and attained ecstatically skronking collective climaxes on tunes including "Mirrors" and "Mr. Critical". They ended with a soulful take on "The Hard Blues", buoyed by Harding's bad-ass baritone saxophone. Back at Shakespeare Center, pianist **Kris Davis'** trio – with Robert Hurst (bass) and Jeff "Tain" Watts (drums) – thrived on the polar musical personalities of the pianist and drummer: she mercurial and quicksilver, light and lightning fast; he, sturdy but supple, obviously tickled by the flow of her imagination, shadowing, shunting and variously supporting her with uncanny ingenuity. Back at Roulette, the packed house was treated to an exuberant rendition of **Philip Glass'** seminal *Glassworks*, the composer himself on hand to appreciate the proficiency and unfettered enthusiasm of the Long Play All-Stars' performance.

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