



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*

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 32)