



T.K. BLUE

HONORING THE ELDERS

BY ANNA STEEGMANN

For more than five decades, saxophonist, flutist, composer and educator T.K. Blue (Talib Kibwe) has been weaving the rich threads of his West Indian heritage and African rhythms into a deeply lyrical, hard-driving sound. Best known for his 38-year association with Randy Weston, Blue has bridged continents and generations through his mastery of alto and soprano saxophones, flute and kalimba. With more than 90 recordings (15 as leader), his work is both searching and grounded, equally at home in tradition and the open horizons of improvisation.

THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD: Talk about your musical journey. Did you grow up in a musical family and was playing an instrument encouraged?

T.K. BLUE: Nobody in my household played an instrument. I grew up listening to the popular music of the day, R&B, Motown. My parents had calypso records, island music and jazz records by Louis Armstrong and Horace Silver. I started playing the trumpet because of Armstrong. I wanted to emulate him with the trumpet, his handkerchief and all of that. I played trumpet from the age of eight to ten. Then I also wanted to play drums, but I had a very strict band director who only allowed one instrument. He took the trumpet away and gave me a rubber drum pad, but he wouldn't let me play the drums. I then lost interest in playing. It wasn't until my senior year of high school that I got back into music. This time it was the flute. I liked the soul/funk group Mandrill, and they had a guy who played the flute [Carlos Wilson]. I just loved the flute. My mom got me classical flute lessons. It was the flute that made me want to be a musician.

NYCJR: And the saxophone?

BLUE: I went to NYU and stayed on the Bronx campus in the dormitory. My roommate, David Anthony, was a jazz fanatic. He loved John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy, had all of their records, and played alto and tenor saxophones. David explained that the fingering for the flute is almost identical to that of the saxophone. He let me borrow his horn, and I would experiment playing it. He would turn me onto Coltrane. My first saxophone was a soprano. I was studying with Jimmy Heath at Jazzmobile. He asked me who I was listening to besides Coltrane, and I didn't know what to answer. So, he said, "You've got to check out people that came before him." He told me to check out Charlie Parker. Jimmy was very wise. This year is Coltrane's centennial, so I think about Jimmy all the time.

NYCJR: Jimmy Heath was a mentor for you. Tell us more about the roles of mentors in your life and music career.

BLUE: In the '70s, there were a lot of organizations in NYC where you could study jazz for free. I was a student at Jazzmobile. You paid a five-dollar registration fee and took lessons every Saturday. You got a chance to play in a band. I studied with people like Jimmy Heath, as well as Frank Foster, Ernie Wilkins, Chris Woods,

Benny Powell, Freddie Waits, Jimmy Owens, Sonny Red. Paul West started a music program at Henry Street Settlement. I studied there with him and also with Billy Mitchell. I studied with Jazz Interactions, run by Joe Newman and his wife. I studied with Rahsaan Roland Kirk and also Yusef Lateef. At Muse in Brooklyn, Kenny and his brother Bill Barron taught and I studied there with Reggie Workman. I was really lucky to be around all of these masters for free.

NYCJR: Do these opportunities for younger people still exist?

BLUE: You have some young musicians who seek out the elders, but many don't. They do their own thing. I can dig it. But I always have to check with the elders for that wisdom and guidance. I didn't have a father growing up, so for me, having an elder male figure, a positive role model, was very important and very helpful.

NYCJR: On stage, you often speak about the elders and the ancestors with great appreciation and gratitude.

BLUE: They paved the way; they made the sacrifice. Look at Dr. Randy Weston. He came up in the era of extreme discrimination. Born in 1926, he had to ride in the back of the bus, couldn't go to certain restaurants and was told he was inferior. He was on a mission throughout his life to learn about African culture. I don't see what's inferior about African culture. They had great empires, built the great pyramids, brought civilization to Spain; all of these facts made me want to find out more about Africa.

NYCJR: Your nearly four-decade partnership with Weston is extraordinary. What did being in his musical world teach you about rhythm, composition and purpose, and how did it shape your sense of jazz as a global language?

BLUE: The first time I heard him play I was blown away. He was almost playing the piano like a drum, rhythmically, and then I heard his influences. Randy was a perfect synthesis of Monk and Duke. He combined those two styles, and he still had his own style, his own voice. I got to know him as an individual who had great integrity, great principles. He would not compromise for financial gain. I was privileged to witness his integrity, his perseverance, his cultural awareness. His house was like a library. He had books on all aspects of African culture. He made me more aware of the African aesthetic and more aware of my role as a musician. He said that being a musician was a privilege (and) not to be taken lightly. It's not about making money but about telling a story, about uplifting people, giving of yourself, opening your heart, sharing everything you have, making people feel better than before they came. He referred to us musicians as griots or historians. I was blessed to be with Randy for 38 years, 28 of them as his musical director.

NYCJR: When you perform tribute concerts today to him, especially given that this year is Randy Weston's centennial, what message do you want to convey most, especially to audiences who never got the opportunity to see and hear him live?

BLUE: To project African beauty, African culture, African aesthetics. This month, the ARAQ (African Rhythms Alumni Quintet) plays tribute to Weston in Harlem at Marcus Garvey Park; we will also honor him as part of the Los Angeles Jazz Festival in early-August, and then next month at the Detroit Jazz Festival and DC Jazz

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BAR BAYEUX
1066 Nostrand Ave.
Brooklyn, NY 11225
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AUGUST 2026
JAZZ CALENDAR

TUESDAYS 8 - 11 PM
Weekly Jam Session
House Band:
Diego Voglino with guests

WEDNESDAYS 8 & 9:30 PM
Yvonne Rogers Trio (8/5),
Gilad Hekselman Trio (8/12),
Ralph Alessi and Escalation (8/19),
Tyrone Allen II Quartet (8/26)

THURSDAYS 8 & 9:30 PM
Jeff Williams with Chet Dexas (8/6),
David Berkman Quartet (8/13),
TBA (8/20), TBA (8/27)

FRIDAYS 8 & 9:30 PM
VEN Trio
with Vinicius Gomes, Noah Garabedian, Ele Howell (8/7),
Carmen Quill with Jacob Sacks, Billy Hart (8/14),
Kaz Takemura (8/21), Tal Yahalom Mirror Image (8/28)

**SATURDAYS 6 - 7:30 PM DUET SET(s),
followed by 8 & 9:30 PM sets:**
Alec Goldfarb (8/1), Jon Cowherd Quartet (8/8),
George Schuller (8/15), Martin Nevin (8/22), Tim Norton (8/29)

NO COVER
ONE DRINK
MINIMUM

THE VILLAGE VANGUARD
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AUGUST 4TH - AUGUST 9TH
ANDREW CYRILLE QUARTET
BILL FRISELL - DAVID VIRELLES - BEN STREET

AUGUST 11TH - AUGUST 16TH
BILL FRISELL TRIO
THOMAS MORGAN - RUDY ROYSTON

AUGUST 18TH - AUGUST 23RD
BILL FRISELL FOUR
GREG TARDY - GERALD CLAYTON
JOHNATHAN BLAKE

AUGUST 25TH - AUGUST 30TH
JOE LOVANO
PARAMOUNT QUARTET
JULIAN LAGE - ASANTE SANTI DEBRIANO
WILL CALHOUN

COMING IN SEPTEMBER
JOHN PATITUCCI
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MONDAY NIGHTS ARE RESERVED FOR
THE VANGUARD JAZZ ORCHESTRA

SHOWS AT 8 PM & 10 PM NIGHTLY
178 7TH AVE. SOUTH AT 11TH STREET

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Festival. I've actually been recently traveling in African countries for months, and have found a lot of beauty, a lot of giving, a lot of generosity, a lot of altruism. The Africa we see in the news is mostly portrayed in a very negative way. However, there is hope, as Dr. Weston ebulliently proclaimed in his composition "African Sunrise": we have a shared ancestry and humanity. We must unite in our common goal as custodians for Mother Earth. Africa, through its arts and culture, is a unifying paradigm by which all of us will benefit.

NYCJR: You have worked with many musicians. Who has stood out to you besides Randy Weston?

BLUE: Sam Rivers. I toured with his Winds of Manhattan. He did a whole tour with eleven saxophones, no rhythm section. He taught me to write in a way that made things interesting. Also, Chico Hamilton had a way of connecting with the audience, telling jokes, little stories. Then there was my first European tour, which was with Abdullah Ibrahim in 1977. One of the highlights performing with him was with Miriam Makeba in Berlin. I was blown away by her artistry, her integrity, and what she stood for as a person. I also toured with Chris McGregor from South Africa and Archie Shepp was a special guest.

NYCJR: You spent significant time in Paris as well as across Africa. How did those environments reshape your sound? Were there particular rhythms or tonalities from West Africa that became lasting elements in your musical language?

BLUE: They definitely shaped my sound. Also, my heritage: Trinidad, Jamaica, listening to the music I grew up with of R&B and funk. In Africa in the '70s, I heard rhythms that sounded like funk, like James Brown. Musicians I heard in Mozambique reminded me of the second line of New Orleans funeral tradition music. As far as reaching people, bringing people together, rhythm is your heartbeat, rhythm is at the forefront. Rhythm in Africa is infectious: it is the heartbeat that brings people together and it's integral to all musical genres one finds in the Motherland.

NYCJR: You play alto and soprano saxophones, flute and kalimba. Do you experience these instruments as different voices telling the same story, or do certain emotions call for a specific instrument?

BLUE: Different songs call for a different emotional voice. Some of my songs I play on more than one instrument; sometimes I feel the vibe on flute, at other times on soprano. I can tell when I'm writing a piece which instrument will fit well.

NYCJR: Let's talk about your latest recording *Planet Bluu* (JAJA). You assembled a talented group of younger musicians plus veteran trombonist Steve Turre. You describe the album as a sonic sanctuary, free from war, racism and intolerance. Given the turbulent state of the world right now, how did creating this album feel different from your past recordings?

BLUE: *Planet Bluu* is the dream of a place where we don't have fighting, we don't have wars, we don't have privilege for one people, we don't have passports, and we don't have ICE arresting people. Everybody's free, everybody lives in harmony. Musicians are held in high regard because they are *guerisseurs*, healers. A lot of the music was composed from the kalimba, then I went to the piano and added the harmonic chords, a bridge.

I'm going to Morocco to play with Gnawa musicians. We're going to honor Randy Weston. At the core of their music is healing. They hold spiritual ceremonies in which they heal people through music. My core belief is

that music is a healing force, and that's the story behind *Planet Bluu*.

NYCJR: Your music has a very spiritual component.

BLUE: I appreciate that. Spirituality and music are synonymous for me. Randy used to say, "I'm an instrument being played by the Creator." When I play, I (too) am a vehicle for the Creator. Jazz was born out of adversity. It's a music of survival. Art Blakey had a beautiful saying: "Jazz washes the dust off of everyday life." We're going to have trials and tribulations, but music just helps us get through.

NYCJR: Critics often point to the restraint and economical phrasing in your recent work, favoring depth and space over speed. Was there a turning point where you consciously embraced this approach?

BLUE: That was not always the case. I think as you mature, you start to embrace Monk's concept of "the note you don't play is just as important as the note you do play." When you're young, you have all this energy and dexterity, you want to say a million things, you play solos, you play fast. As you get older, you find out that you can make the same statement with fewer notes. Before he died, I got a call from Frank Wess. He was a father figure to me. He said, "When you practice fast, whatever you practice fast goes out fast. It leaves you. But if you practice slowly, it stays with you."

NYCJR: If someone listens to your music 50 years from now, what do you hope they hear beyond the notes?

BLUE: Someone who has love and forgiveness in his heart. That's what I want them to hear through the music. That it's music for all of us to come together as one family. And tap our feet—and have a good time.

For more info visit tkblue.com. Blue and ARAQ (African Rhythms Alumni Quintet) plays tribute to Randy Weston and Melba Liston at Marcus Garvey Park Aug. 14 (part of Jazzmobile Summerfest). Blue's Planet Bluu is at The Django Aug. 15 and Englewood Public Library (Englewood, NJ) Aug. 20. See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.

Recommended Listening:

- Dollar Brand [Abdullah Ibrahim] Quartet—*Africa-Tears and Laughter* (Enja, 1979)
- Talib Kibwe—*Egyptian Oasis* (Cryonic, Inc.-Anaïs, 1986)
- Randy Weston—*The Spirits of Our Ancestors* (Verve, 1991)
- T.K. Blue—*Eyes of the Elders* (Arkadia Jazz, 2000)
- Randy Weston and his African Rhythms Sextet—*The Storyteller* (Motéma Music, 2009)
- T.K. Blue—*Planet Bluu* (JAJA, 2023-24)

(VISION FESTIVAL CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

strumming stopped so abruptly the audience gasped in one body. With Parker and pianist Matthew Shipp—relationships going back to the late '70s and early '80s, respectively—Morris returned to his clean tone, clusters and snaking scales against Shipp's octave splashes, the trio cycling in and out of rhythmic consonance without ever letting the pulse settle. For his quintet the honoree switched to bass and began playing before realizing nothing was coming out. "He's so humble he doesn't even plug in his bass!" cornetist Taylor Ho Bynum yelled from the audience. The night ended with an octet of his students, Morris conducting by hand signals, the ensemble deliberately never resolving, swelling on his "bring it" gesture to a grand finish. Afterward, the sidewalk filled with alumni, and as he wheeled his bass up Grand Street, people shouted his name after him: "Joe Morris!"

The circle closed two nights prior to Vision's final day, when **DoYeon Kim**—the gayageum player who had watched Morris from inside that octet, waiting for his direction on opening night, then was featured as part of saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock's Grammy Season—returned, this time leading her own group, Wellspring. Her band—Laura Cocks (flute), Henry Fraser (bass), Tom Rainey (drums)—sizzled under the resonance of an instrument Kim is reinventing in service of something with no obvious precedent. "Let's get on fire!" she yelled, then launched a piece that felt like a manic march. Between the bookends, the reinventions kept arriving.

Bassist **Luke Stewart's** Silt Trio, augmented by Chris Williams (trumpet) and Angelica Sanchez (piano), premiered a Wadada Leo Smith composition, while Smith witnessed from the front row the spaciousness and simmering fire, its James Baldwin narration detonating into free energy. (The venue's strict ten o'clock curfew bumped Kaoru Watanabe's set entirely, a casualty of Arts For Art's chronic surplus of programming and long search for a home that suits its loose relationship to clock-based time.) In duo, pianist **Craig Taborn** and cellist **Tomeka Reid** (her register entirely shifted from the Morris strings set) built an instant composition by accretion. The former placed noisemakers on piano strings, while the latter bowed so vigorously she produced only the ghost of a sound. Electronicist **Val Jeanty** and Nicholson Parker (dance and spoken word) made the week's most singular hybrid: face paint, a red branch sprouting from Nicholson's head, drum pads that sounded like the ancient instruments they sampled before fracturing into dublike dissipation, folkloric ritual threaded through technological gossamer. **James Brandon Lewis** with **Alexis Marcelo** (piano) closed out night three with tenor blasts and gospel animism, braids of saxophone climbing into the stratosphere. "I needed that," more than one person said on the way out.

"Are you ready for a cosmic future?" Nicholson Parker asked, introducing a band led by 102-year-old **Marshall Allen**, with Burrell (piano), Parker (bass), Andrew Cyrille (drums) and Darius Jones (alto). Allen came out front with a blare, his synthesizer wobbling the music into orbit. At one point the whole band locked onto a single held note—a halcyon moment of beatitude. The nominal leader stood periodically to play, projecting a power that argued with his birth certificate. Immediately following was drummer **Trae Crudup's** Milford Graves tribute, setting a small statue on the stage before erupting into a drum solo. Shara Lunon joined, her voice fractured through live electronics, narrating the South Carolina Negro Act of 1740—the law that banned enslaved people from drums—until the set (with saxophonist Alfredo Colon and bassist Gervis Miles) became a séance: a history that outlawed drumming, answered by drumming.

The festival's finale belonged to **Daniel Carter**. It began with him alone on alto—that instantly recognizable instrumental voice, a meditation of fragile beauty. Parker and Shipp joined to form their drumless trio, Seraphic Light, hovering in delicate space. Then the stage filled, becoming Black Octopus, with **Hamid Drake** (who had performed two nights prior with Parker as the Black Cherry duo) among a crowd of the younger players Carter has spent decades seeking out, thriving on the new, shunning anything reified. A large improvising orchestra honoring the least front-and-center figure in the music made the point: the freedom Carter embodies isn't a solo property, it's a condition you create for other people.

In one of the films at AFA the night before the festival officially began, Charles Gayle had said it: "Music is sharing. Sharing your life." Joe Morris codified it; Daniel Carter lives it; the festival, now at 30, keeps building rooms where both can happen. Tell them what they missed.

For more info visit artsforart.org