



COURTESY OF ARTIST

# VISHNU WOOD

INTO THE MYSTIC

BY DANIEL A. BROWN

Vishnu Wood is a born seeker who has lived a life of musical, intellectual and spiritual discovery. A creative and educational polymath, over the course of more than seven decades, Wood has toured the globe, performing on the bass, the Middle-Eastern oud and Indian bowed dilruba, while also pursuing his calling as a music educator-activist. A mercurial talent and sideman, over the course of a truly storied career, he has performed with a stunningly diverse roster of jazz artists, including Dorothy Ashby, Alice Coltrane, Kenny Dorham, Barry Harris, Roy Haynes, Joe Henderson, Yusef Lateef, Thelonious Monk, Sam Rivers, Max Roach, Archie Shepp, Alberta Hunter and Nina Simone. Wood's most famous association, however, is his 15-year tenure as bassist for pianist-composer Randy Weston, with notable recording sessions including *Randy!* (1964, re-released as *African Cookbook*), *Berkshire Blues* (1965), *Blues* (1964-65), *Monterey '66* (1966), *Blue Moses* (1972) and the Weston-Wood duo, *Perspective* (1976).

This month at the National Jazz Museum in Harlem, Wood joins the African Rhythms Alumni Quintet, featuring fellow Weston alumni, including nominal leader/musical director T.K. (Talib Kibwe) Blue (flute, alto and soprano saxophones), Ku-umba Frank Lacy (trombone), Sharp Radway (piano), Alex Blake (bass) and Chief Baba Neil Clarke (percussion). The celebration and concert will include an interview, Q&A and performance with Wood. "I talked to Talib last week, and he wanted to interview me about my residency in Morocco with Randy," says Wood from his New York home. That residency was part of a 1967 tour, in conjunction with the US State Department, which found Wood, Weston, Ray Copeland, Clifford Jordan, Chief Bey and drummer Ed Blackwell performing in fourteen countries in West Africa. "We toured throughout Morocco and Tunisia. Then we worked for the Moroccans with a government contract-plan in their hotels throughout Morocco. We played from the Rif Mountains all the way down south to the mighty Atlas Mountains and into the desert," he remembers.

Blue, who considers Wood to be his "big brother," is excited about the forthcoming event and appearance.

"I am quite fortunate having performed with Vishnu and his band, so we will be able to speak in depth about the influence of the musical rhythms from Africa and its influence throughout the African Diaspora," says Blue, who plans to highlight Wood's association with the Gnawa musical culture of Morocco and his musical connection with Randy and the pianist's son, percussionist Azzedin.

"Randy had a solid foundation, so whether we played duet, trio, or quintet or sextet, I was the right-hand person because I had the bottom," says Wood of his unique dynamic with Weston. "And I was the mediator in the rhythm section. I kept the guys together," he laughs. "You know, sometimes they didn't want to play together—so I'd make them play together!"

Bill "Vishnu" Wood, who turns 89 this month, was born on Nov. 7, 1937, in Wilkesboro, NC, into a troubled life. "I grew up with a lot of disfunction and domestic violence," explains Wood. At age 10, he moved with family to Detroit, then a thriving metropolis with an equally potent musical community. Initially he played trumpet, due to his older brother's example, but Wood then quickly shifted to the bass. While still in his teens, by day Wood studied formally at the Detroit Institute of Musical Arts; at night he gigged at a "bucket of blood joints" with rock-house groups. "You have to rock the house because you have to make the cash register ring so people drink, and then the joint makes money—that's why they call it rock house." Detroit was a fertile jazz scene, with Wood citing lesser-heralded players including pianist Terry Pollard as some of the best. "Terry played with trombonist Curtis Fuller and she could play any man down. She played just as well as Alice Coltrane."

Before the genre of spiritual jazz was codified, Wood was injecting the jazz life with the ineffable realm of the Spirit. "I am someone who needed religion," says Wood, explaining that his restless nature and depression-prone personality have found solace in the spiritual path. While still in Detroit, he began a daily yoga discipline. After a childhood spent growing up in the sanctified church, he explored Eastern religions, Science of Mind and martial arts. He has been practicing Buddhism for 40 years (prior to being interviewed, he meditated for two hours). "When I was in New York in the '60s and '70s, I was telling dudes to be vegetarian and not drink or shoot dope and they thought I was insane," says Wood.

He would spend a decade as a devotee of guru Swami Satchidananda, who gave Wood the title of Vishnu. "Swami named me 'Vishnu' because he really thought I would sit beside him and take over his seat after he

passed, but that didn't happen [laughs]." It was Wood who introduced Alice Coltrane to Satchidananda, which in turn led to her deepening her practice of Vedanta and also her iconic release, *Journey in Satchidananda* (Impulse!, 1971). That album's closing live track, "Isis and Osiris," includes Wood performing on oud.

Concurrent with his musical career, Wood has been an ardent educator and music activist. In 1973, he formed the nonprofit organization Safari East Cultural Presentations, which brought multimedia musical awareness programs and education to public schools, colleges, community groups and concert stages for 35 years. Safari East offered such programs and events in NYC, Massachusetts, Chicago, London and Brazil. "We were in the toughest schools in The Bronx and those kids loved it." Through Wood's tutelage, savvy and spirit of service, Safari East blossomed. Wood helped foster programs that highlighted African music and culture, from the motherland to the Atlantic slave trade, from New Orleans to the New Music.

"The programs flourished because I had great musicians, and I knew how to interact with the kids. I did special education for 35 years in New York. When I started out, my first budget through Safari East was \$250 in Staten Island. When I ended up years later, my budget was \$200,000, sponsored by the City of New York United Way." In recent years, Wood has spent his winters living and performing in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. By his own estimation, he has enough material for "several books" and has a library of unreleased live recordings. He also maintains his own website, which includes his most recent release, *Vishnu Wood in Concert*.

Wood's philosophy and takeaway of a seeker's life is succinct and on point: "I've worked my ass off my whole life. And I have lived, and still live, an amazing life."

For more info visit [vishnuwood-safari-east.com](http://vishnuwood-safari-east.com). Wood is at National Jazz Museum in Harlem Nov. 19. See Calendar.

## Recommended Listening:

- Randy Weston Sextet—*Randy!/African Cookbook* (Bakton/Atlantic, 1964)
- Bob James—*Once Upon A Time: The Lost 1965 New York Studio Sessions* (Resonance, 1965)
- Randy Weston Sextet—*Monterey '66* (Verve, 1966)
- Randy Weston/Vishnu Wood—*Perspective* (Denon Jazz, 1976)
- The Detroit Four (Barry Harris, Charles Greenlee, Vishnu Wood, Roy Brooks)—*Cadillac and Mack* (Eastworld, 1977)
- Vishnu Wood—*Vishnu Wood in Concert* (Safari East, c. 1990s)

## LEST WE FORGET



VINCIANE VERGUEHEN

# PAULINE OLIVEROS

DEEP LISTENING RENEWED

BY KURT GOTTSCHALK

In the ten years since her death, composer and philosopher Pauline Oliveros has become a cultural touchstone. Just as John Cage came to represent silence, Oliveros' name and koans (e.g. "Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears") are nearly synonymous with the act of listening. Her term "deep listening" is now used far beyond reference to her musical practice. As with Cage, that thumbnail philosophy fails to reflect much of her lifetime of work. And again like Cage, she might have been happy to

be remembered with such a simple and meaningful epithet.

Flutist-composer and International Contemporary Ensemble founder Claire Chase has herself made a lifetime of deep listening. Her mother, with Claire in utero, participated in extended vocal workshops led by Oliveros at the University of California San Diego (UCSD). "Pauline always joked with me that I was one of the original deep listening babies," says Chase, who grew up aware of Oliveros' work but only immersed herself in it as a student at Oberlin. "I asked her if she would write a piece for my little undergraduate trio. I can't believe I had the audacity to do this. And she said 'yes' to this group of kids. She wrote this piece called 'Elemental Gallop'. That piece, and the experience of putting it together, was the real catalyst for putting together the International Contemporary Ensemble. It was a good opportunity to put forward what 21st-century music could be."

For Chase, Pauline Oliveros is all around us today.

She speaks excitedly and quickly about the lasting influence and impact of the woman she calls a mentor. "One of her most beautiful teachings, one of the huge gifts that she gave us, is to give attention to how we listen," Chase says. "This society, this geopolitical moment for healing, for the restoration of peace in our world and the experiences of life that her teachings have opened up, that grandiosity—it's time, it's grounded, it's real. She felt a hands-on urgency about taking real steps no matter how small toward that goal, that listening is transformational."

Oliveros was born May 30, 1932, in Houston, TX, and passed away November 24, 2016, in Kingston, NY. She was a founding member of the San Francisco Tape Center in the '60s and advanced her thoughts on attentive listening through several books, as well as university positions. She released more than 60 albums and appeared on many more, and she was

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