

by David C. Gross

Then and Now - Jazz Bass Pioneer Ron Carter

With more than 2,000 albums to his credit, Ron Carter should be in the Guinness Book of Records. He has performed and recorded with a range of artists including Gil Evans, Lena Horne, George Benson, B.B. King, James Brown, Coleman Hawkins, Bill Evans, Carlos Santana, Aretha Franklin, Sonny Rollins, Paul Simon, Janis Ian, Bette Midler, Benny Goodman, Eric Gale, Dexter Gordon, Helen Merrill, and Eric Dolphy just to name a few! He was a member of Miles Davis' fabled quintet from 1963 to 1968, along with Herbie Hancock, Tony Williams and Wayne Shorter. In 1988, Carter won his first Grammy for his instrumental composition "Call Sheet Blues," from Bertrand Tavernier's film 'Round Midnight. He won his second Grammy in 1994 for the jazz record of the year, *A Tribute to Miles*.

In addition to performing, composing and arranging, Ron Carter lectures and teaches; he is currently a Distinguished Professor of Music, heading the Jazz Department at the City College of New York and is on the board of directors of the Harlem Jazz Music Center. Carter earned a bachelor of music degree from the Eastman School of Music and a Master's Degree in double bass from the Manhattan School of Music. He has lectured, conducted, and performed at clinics, instructed jazz ensembles, and has taught the business of music at Wisconsin, Connecticut, Indiana, North Carolina, Rutgers, and Howard universities, among others, as well as the Harlem School for the Arts.

Ron Carter is also the author of Building a Jazz Bass Line, a series of books on playing bass, soon to be re-released; Ron Carter Comprehensive Bass Method for Classical Bass Studies; Ron Carter Bass Lines, and The Music of Ron Carter, which contains 140 of his published and recorded compositions. Ron Carter's solo bass recording of the Bach Cello Suites on compact disc was Certified Gold in 1988. He has won many awards including: The Japan All-Star Jazz Poll, The Swing Journal Readers Poll, Outstanding Bassist of the Decade, Detroit News, Jazz Bassist of the year for Downbeat magazine, Most Valuable Player, Acoustic Bass, National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences.

I met Ron at his apartment in New York the day before he was leaving for a tour in Japan. His newest recording for Blue Note Records *So What?* has just been released. This interview delves into a number of areas from bass playing to jazz history, to education. He is a confident and articulate gentleman who has proven through many years of performing and recording why he is a true legend.

Why did you decide to record "So What" again on your new album?

A lot of people have misunderstood the intent of the tune. For the past 4 or 5 years, guys have been playing it as fast as they could play it. The song is not written to see how fast it can be played. It's about how selective they can be based on the note choices that they have. Besides players not being very equipped to play it very fast and very well, they've completely missed the boat. So my view of doing that song again was to play as close to the original tempo as I could remember it. I just wanted to show guys that there's a lot of material left in this tune if they would just slow it down and take a listen to it.

What is the key to the chemistry between the players on this album?

Well, we have a trio of guys who have played before. The idea was to show up because of the musical camaraderie that's been developed over all this time. I've been playing with Kenny over 35 years, and Louis for over 15 years, in a lot of different musical environments. I've found that with these players, we're making music that's still valid and meaningful, and I have comfort in knowing that whatever we do is going to work.

As an instructor in a situation where you know a song so well, how would you advise students to use note substitutions?

I would generally discourage them from doing that. I think as a bass player who has been doing the song every night for 6 years you can not have run out of the possibility of playing the changes. I don't believe that a guy might have advanced or become so harmonically experienced, no matter how many times he's played this specific song, that he's exhausted the possibilities of playing C7. I don't believe that. I think guys have learned the terminology. They've learned the tri-tone subs, they've learned II-V, they've learned the language of the subs, but they haven't learned the musicality of the subs. Until someone says, "Wait a minute. This chord is a C7!" They keep playing E natural and F#. What does that do to the sound of the chord?! What does that do to the piano voicing? What does that leave the soloist to play? Unless they can answer those questions on the instrument instead of on the blackboard, they don't understand what it does. They may see what it does, but they're not hearing what it does. So, by-in-large, I generally discourage using all that stuff until they've got a real understanding of the consequences of what that does to the song. To play three or four choruses of the tune and take it to the subs is pretty musically unrewarding. It



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means to me that the bass player, whoever he or she is, they don't know their instrument well enough to find out where else on the bass they can play these changes. And what does it sound like if I play the 3rd as the first beat or the 5th as the first beat. They don't understand how to make the 7th resolve. All these other strange notes, they just kind of turn me off. They really just don't have an understanding of what subs can do, or what they should do. Those tri-tone subs have got to resolve somewhere. You have to

understand what that process is, and how much time you have from this sub chord until its resolution. Wherever you resolve it, you've got to know what goes in-between this space. Most of them don't have a clue. One of the reasons I don't give lessons to a guy who just comes into town for a lesson is it's too frustrating to me. There's never enough time to explain something like that in detail.

Would you agree that from a simple

point of view, the audience needs to hear the fundamental structure so that they don't get lost?

I'm not sure how much the audience understands after the melody is finished. Once you've played the melody until they recognize it, I doubt that they have the harmonic and rhythmic listening experience to really pinpoint what's going on. I don't think they can really understand the intricacies of being a bass player. That, in and of itself is okay. I'm not so sure even critics understand what it takes based on their choices of who they think are "the best bass players." I think the bass players responsibility has gotten fogged in over the past four or five years. Bass players seem more content to just lollygag in the background until it's time to play a solo, then they turn up real loud and play real hard and play all these strange notes. They generally tend to ignore the changes. The other thing I've noticed is a lot of bass players are determined not to use an amplifier. They just want to use the microphone from the club. I've yet to hear one of those people, or their band leader, tell me why. You need to be sonically equal. When you go into a club, the balance of sound is never the same. It's never equal when the bass player is determined to play without an amp. Once the band gets past mezzo piano, the drummer begins to play with some sticks, the horn player is playing with his bell right into the microphone, it wipes out everything. The bass player is left in the back doing whatever he is doing.

Do you find it necessary to articulate the chord changes?

Absolutely. Most bass players don't have an understanding of how chords work and they've never studied harmony, so they're not able to really dig into the bass note choices that they have that will affect the sound of the chord. If they play the 3rd note in a C7 chord, what does that do to the sound? What does that make everybody else do? What happens if you don't hear that root on the 1 of every bar? At what point do you play that C7 with an F# as the first note. And if you play that F# as the first note, what's the second note? And what note would you play before that F#? It sounds pretty strange to have that F# sitting there with no resolution. I think while bass players look to be impactful, generally, they need to have enough harmonic understanding as to really know how impactful they could be. Most players have not really studied harmony and theor-

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Their bandleaders are not telling them these things, or they can't hear them, or don't listen to them, or don't have an idea how to solve the problem if they hear it. The bass player is the least developed member of the band because he has the least amount of help.

I wanted to have you create a "private lesson" for the readers so they could have something to practice.

That is going to be difficult. One of the reasons I don't give a single lesson is because there is so much stuff involved playing the instrument. If the guy has no technique, or limited technical ability, there is nothing I can show him in an hour to make him play better. Lessons are supposed to lead towards that. If he has one lesson with me and then goes back to his teacher who sees him trying to do all these things that he hasn't taught him, that becomes another teacher/student conflict that I would not like to be responsible for. I had a student sit in where I teach, who had limited technical skills, had been playing 5 or 6 years, had maybe 2 or 3 lessons and wanted to play some jazz in a jazz band. It takes me a year just to have him playing his exercises. To do a lesson for your article is a nice idea but it wouldn't be productive.

Actually I think what you have said is a lesson in-itself.

With better sound isn't it true that the bassist has more visibility?

Now that you have amplifiers and they do record the bass with more presence and there are bandleaders who listen to the bass player a little more accurately, there is no longer a place to hide behind the bass drum or behind a club that has no sound system. Now with the increased hearing possibilities through new equipment and recording skill, bass players have even fewer places to hide. Most of them are not preparing themselves for this level of audio listenability. In other words, now that you can be heard, what are you going to do with this space? You are going to have to say something. Most of them are not preparing themselves to do that. No one is telling them, "Man, you sound terrible, why don't you go home and try this?" People are telling them that they sound good.

The teaching of jazz has become the teaching of an historical document. With the advent of CD's you can actually go back and trace the lineage of jazz from the beginning inclusive of Blues, Dixieland, Swing, etc. When the student gets out of school it seems

that they have less going on now with more possibilities than they did 30 years ago when the bandstand was the proving ground. You find these "Young Lions" coming out with all this technical dexterity yet they don't really know the songs. I am not sure they have technical dexterity. I always thought that meant you could play any music that someone gave you because that is what you do. I am not sure those guys with this manual dexterity you speak of, and I have seen them as well, could go and play in the bass section for a film score where you have 5 basses and play in a section. I am not sure any of those guys with the manual dexterity could play in a chamber group, or play "The Barber of Seville" with that necessary skill level. The skill that they have is only good for what they do unless they get out of their musical area, as small as it is. They are missing a couple of things: they are missing someone making sure they understand how to play a bass line; they are not getting with the kind of bands that demand the bass line. A lot of them are being put in the position of bandleaders. Aside from that, even if they are the bandleader, the guys in the band have a responsibility to the music.

Your CD includes 4 standards and 4 originals. What are your thoughts on the CD format versus the LP?

The CD now holds twice as much music as the LP did. Now that the CD has 37 more minutes to fill, the record company, as well as the bandleader or writers insist that the space be filled. Because of this, the quality of the music has taken a big nose-dive. The bands library is full of originals and there is no more space for a Benny Golson tune, a Thelonious Monk song, a Horace Silver song, or a Duke Ellington song, or a Sonny Clark song, or a Hank Mobley line, or a Chet Baker line. The library is starting to fall from the way that the guys are insisting on writing their own music so they make more money. In the meantime, none of them are studying composition so they don't know how to compose. There is a whole process that people spend a lifetime studying. One of the things I always admired about Tony Williams is he studied composition from the time I knew him until his passing, which was over 30 years. He studied piano, composition, orchestration. These guys think they have enough skill to fill up a CD of 67 minutes but the quality is dreadful. The jazz library as we generally understand it is going in the way of the dinosaur. People are not maintaining its existence because they're determined to show that they're a composer



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so they can fill up an extra 37 minutes on the CD. That's 4 more tunes! I'm not sure they understand how difficult that is to do if you haven't studied how to do it and haven't studied how to make the corrections necessary to make a better composition.

It's interesting when you mention Benny Golson. You have covered his material before on record. What did he mean to you in terms of his composing?

Benny is one of the best quintet writers I've ever heard. You can set aside the rhythm, you can set aside the song and just the voicing of the two horns and piano. It was different than Horace Silver's writing, but they both get that optimum sound out of two horns. It's just amazing to me. I've known Benny for a long time, and he has always been the kind of person that I could go to and say, "Man, I'm working on this writing project and these three measures just aren't working out," and he would tell me what was wrong with them and steer me in the direction in which I could find some way of fixing it. He would take his time out and show me why it doesn't work and show me the way to find some choices. He won't give me the choices, but the way to find those choices. There aren't many people left who will do that. That kind of camaraderie and sharing of information without fear of someone stealing your ideas is almost nonexistent nowadays.

With the lack of clubs, have you found that musicians can't go on a bandstand for 6 months at a time like Thelonious or Mingus where they could constantly hone their trade?

I think the problem is musicians aren't interested in doing that. The current musicians are interested in playing four nights a week, four concerts for an hour, and then going home. They're not interested in the mentality that says, "The way to get better is by doing it more often." To do it more often means to do it more nights, more sets, consecutively. You can't even warm up in 40 minutes, much less get better. When I was younger, there were three sets, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and four sets on Friday and Saturday. Understandably, society

has changed. People are not going to go out at 11:30 at night to go see a jazz band when they've got the big home entertainment center with a 35" TV. In the old days, the late set would start at 2:00 A.M. in the morning and might go on 'till 3:00 or 4:00 A.M. in the morning. It would be difficult for me to go on some of these guys' bandstand at jam because I don't know their tunes, and they don't know enough standards. So that another problem of these guys only knowing their own tunes.

"They have to find an area in their own spirit that's an honest area. This honest area should tell them that if they didn't do very good tonight, they've got to go back and do this better."

How do you inspire people to go back and do it the way it was done in the past?

They have to do that themselves. They have to find an area in their own spirit that's an honest area. This honest area should tell them that if they didn't do very good tonight they've got to go back and do this better. They have to be able to honestly analyze what they do. I think part of the non-schooled problem is the inability to analyze.

It seems to me that the aural tradition is gone.

It's here. It's just not been made as available as it was 30 years ago. There's not really any more true musicians' hangouts anymore. There used to be a place called The Brass Rail on Broadway in the fifties where guys would be exchanging numbers, gig information, jokes, lead sheets or whatever. That physical kind of place is gone.

Can you talk about quoting during solos?

I think that the more groups that you play with, the more varied your library will be. A lot of the notes we'll play will come from somewhere else, but you just play

them in different spots. Jazz has always had a lot of humor. You can put a quote in a certain place just to put an exclamation mark at the end of a phrase. We'll play a gig and sometimes toss a few quotes around for the whole night and they will come in such odd places in the music during a persons solo that it just makes that chorus go up another 25 wats on the humor level. Quotes are a way of looking at the same notes but just putting them in a different order. It shows your musical group experience, and it also shows how wide your musical vocabulary is. It allows you to not have to have every note be an original. Every note is not going to be a new note. Superimpose a simple 4-bar standard phrase into a place where it is not supposed to fit, that's genius!

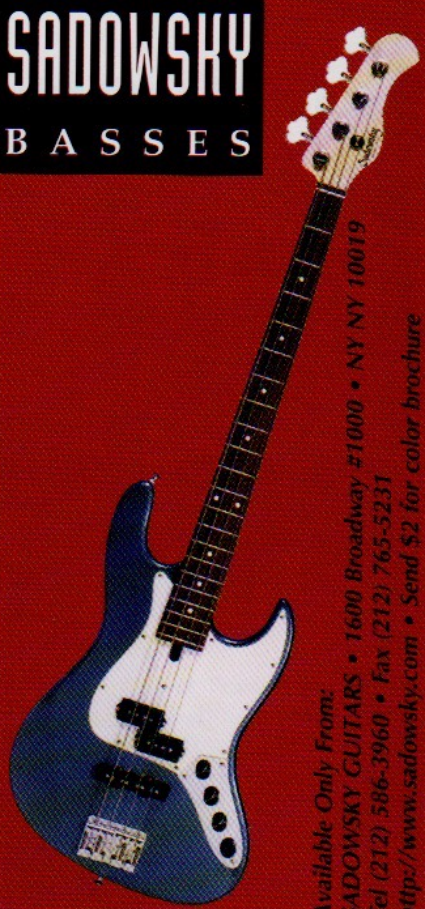
The Jaki Byard record "Giant Steps" (Prestige Records)—I liked that one a lot!

Jaki is one of my favorite players and he just never got the kind of massive viewing that his playing and talent deserve. Jaki's a wonderful teacher. He's a wonderful teacher because he not only knows the styles, he can play them and incorporate them into whatever he is doing at that moment. The library of knowledge that he could pull up just amazed me and made me so pissed off that I couldn't do it.

Where do you see yourself in the future? What are your plans?

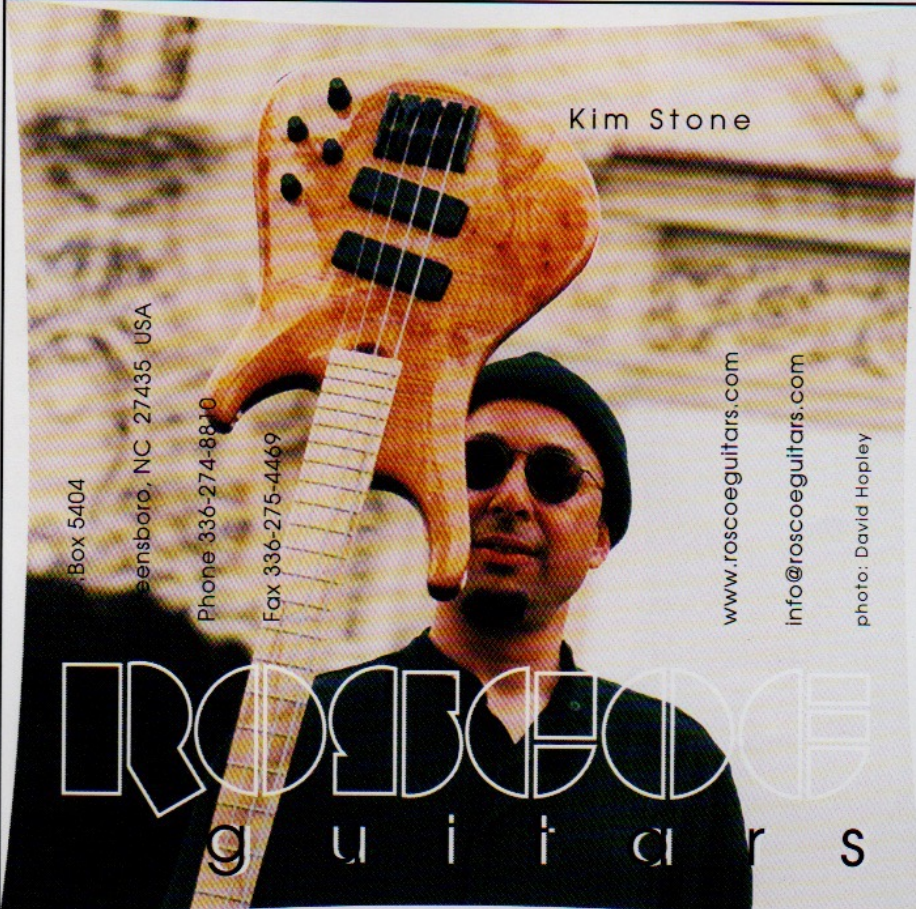
I have always been interested in writing for large groups. The more you play with small groups and real great players, the more you realize the possibilities with 6 players, or even 7 players. I bought a computer with a music program and I bought some scores. I am teaching myself how to use the computer and I am taking 8 measures of a score and putting them in the computer which allows me to play one line at a time, and slow it down to a speed that I can really see what's going on. I am studying orchestration on my own with the help of Benny Golson. I want to write for film. I have done some small projects and I keep thinking that this is the one that everyone will finally believe that it is time for me to get a diploma from night-clubs and the bass because I write good film music too. It is hard to get that across to people.

My long term goal is to continue to meet the people who I haven't seen for along time and make it a point to call them up and say "Hello, how are you doing? I miss talking to you." My immediate goal is to continue to find the best notes I can find on the bass.



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