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Ginger Baker

by Anders Griffen

Ginger Baker is a drummer from South London, England who became famous for his work with two short-lived but hugely successful groups of the mid to late '60s, Cream and Blind Faith, each featuring guitarist Eric Clapton. Before that, in the '50s and early '60s, he had been strictly a jazz musician until playing blues with Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated and R&B with the Graham Bond Organization. In the early '70s, already well acquainted personally with Afrobeat sensation Fela Kuti, Baker traveled to Africa, adventuring across the Sahara and absorbing more of that continent's music in Ghana and Nigeria, eventually setting up a recording studio in Lagos. From 1970 onward, Baker released dozens of albums and has had numerous musical projects with the likes of Kuti, Paul McCartney, Steve Winwood, Jack Bruce, Adrian Gurvitz, Johnny Rotten, Jah Wobble, Sonny Sharrock, Peter Brötzmann, Nicky Skopelitis, Bill Laswell, Bernie Worell, Foday Musa Suso, Nana Vasconcelos and many others. In the '90s he did some of his best jazz work with the Ginger Baker Trio, with Charlie Haden and Bill Frisell, and the DJQ20 with Ron Miles, Artie Moore and others.

There are a lot of wild stories about Ginger Baker out there. He was once called the least likely person to survive the '60s and is regularly described as quite surly and likely to express himself with his fists. He is the subject of a recent documentary film, *Beware of Mr. Baker*, which preserves these notions. Maybe this public image serves his career. Then again maybe it's all true. However, when we spoke he was quiet and reserved. Music seems to be what he really cares about. He speaks and he performs with purpose. At first his responses were little more than one word, but he opened up a bit and was quite good-humored and affable.

The New York City Jazz Record: I've read that you don't play the drum set except at gigs and that you didn't even practice much over the years when you were very busy. There must have been a time, or times, when you practiced quite a lot.

Ginger Baker: No. Only in the '50s and very early '60s. I don't really practice anymore at all. Once you can play what you want to play, what's the point of practicing?

TNYCJR: Did [British jazz drummer] Phil Seamen [1926-1972] have a direct influence on practice?

GB: He had a very big influence, yeah - not on practicing, on time in general.

TNYCJR: So you'd already practiced quite a bit and you guys were just about music?

GB: Yeah.

TNYCJR: It sounds like you were kindred spirits.

GB: Yeah, he was my drum Dad. He told people I was the son he never had.

TNYCJR: I've heard that he was the greatest of the jazz drummers over in Britain in his day.

GB: Without a doubt.

TNYCJR: I even heard that Johnny Griffin said he sounded like Philly Joe Jones.

GB: Well, he never sounded like Philly Joe Jones, he sounded like Phil Seamen.

TNYCJR: You've been prolific for decades now. Did you have to motivate yourself to keep going or was it quite natural, with always something more to do?

GB: I just played.

TNYCJR: Wayne Shorter recently turned 80 years old and I saw him in an interview where he said, "to me, the word "jazz" means: "I dare you." Is that a sentiment that resonates with you?

GB: I dare you? I don't know.

TNYCJR: Many years ago you sought out some of the great jazz drummers and performed side by side with the likes of Art Blakey and Elvin Jones.

GB: I didn't search them out, it just happened. The Munich Jazz Festival had Blakey and I on the same stage on the same night and we just did a drum thing together. It started off as a drum duel and ended up as a drum duet. It was really cool.

TNYCJR: And there was another time with Elvin Jones, correct?

GB: Yeah, Elvin became a very close friend of mine. He was a really great guy, you know.

TNYCJR: Who are some of the other drummers you played with?

GB: Max [Roach].

TNYCJR: You've been performing with Ginger Baker's Jazz Confusion for a couple years now. Is there special significance to the name Confusion?

GB: No. No significance whatsoever.

TNYCJR: You've just completed several dates and you'll have some more before traveling to the States. How has it been going?

GB: Everything's been going extremely well. All of them.

TNYCJR: It's great for the fans that you're out on the

road. May I ask how your back is fairing?

GB: The spine's all right. It's before and after.

TNYCJR: Is there a Jazz Confusion recording available or forthcoming?

GB: No, we haven't done a record at all.

TNYCJR: Is that in your plans?

GB: Well, it depends on record companies, I guess.

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Sat, Oct 5	JASON RIGBY QUARTET 9PM & 10:30PM Russ Lossing, Cameron Brown, Tom Rainey
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Wed, Oct 16	JULIAN WATERFALL POLLACK TRIO +1 8:30PM Nir Felder, Noah Garabedian, Evan Hughes
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Sun, Oct 20	NEW BRAZILIAN PERSPECTIVES: THE NOVOSEL-BOUKAS DUO 8:30PM Filip Novosel, Richard Boukas NEW BRAZILIAN PERSPECTIVES: GABRIEL GROSSI QUARTET 10PM Vitor Goncalves, Eduardo Belo
Tue, Oct 22	10TH ANNIVERSARY JAZZ DRAMA PROGRAM BENEFIT CONCERT 6PM Bob Stewart, John Kamitsuka, Sara Caswell, Tom Dempsey, Eli Yamin, Shantaysha Peprah, hosted by WQXR's Terrance McKnight ELI YAMIN BLUES BAND 8:30PM Charenee Wade, Bob Stewart, LaFrae Sci
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Thu, Oct 24	BOBBY AVEY QUARTET 8:30PM Dan Weiss, Thomson Kneeland, Special Guest Hom
Sat, Oct 26	PETROS KLAMPANIS' CONTEXTUAL 9PM & 10:30PM Gilad Hekselman, Jean-Michel Pilc, John Hadfield
Sat, Oct 26	LARK 9PM & 10:30PM Kris Davis, Ralph Alessi, Ingrid Laubrock, Tom Rainey
Mon, Oct 28	ORAN ETKIN QUARTET 8:30PM Lionel Loueke, Chris Lightcap, Tyshawn Sorey
Tue, Oct 29	VOXIFY: SOFIA RIBEIRO 8:30PM Juan Andrés Ospina, Petros Klampanis, Marcelo Woloski, Magda Giannikou VOXIFY: MAGOS HERRERA 10PM Mike Moreno, Hans Glawishnig, Alex Kautz, Nicky Schrire, host
Wed, Oct 30	MUSETTE EXPLOSION 8:30PM Will Holshouser, Matt Munisteri, Marcus Rojas

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TNYCJR: Is making another great record, or maybe even your best yet, a driving force?

GB: No. I haven't been asked to do a record with this band but someone should record it live because it's fantastic.

TNYCJR: You've got an engagement at Iridium coming up. Will that be your first time at that club?

GB: No. I was there in 1997 with my Denver jazz group. It was very successful and led to our making the record *Coward of the County*. It was a very good gig.

TNYCJR: So, this time around your group includes Pee Wee Ellis, Alec Dankworth and, pardon me, I'm not sure how to pronounce Abass Dodoo.

GB: "Ah-bass Dough-doo". Abass and I have been working together for over five years now. We just get on, you know? We just play off each other all the time. I did the same thing with Abass' uncle, JC Commodore. I worked with him in the '80s, another Ghana master drummer. I get on with all those guys really well.

TNYCJR: So you've known Abass since he was a young man?

GB: No, I never knew him until I met him. It was on the Zildjian Awards gig and then he tells me his uncle was JC Commodore and I was very impressed. And he plays like JC. There's a whole family in Ghana, the Tettey Addy family, they're all drummers and they're all amazing drummers.

Alec is a really incredible bass player too and he works with us naturally. It all clicks together really well. Pee Wee's got an incredible sense of humor, musically, and we all do, in fact! We're always making each other laugh by what we play.

We've been getting an incredible reception, everywhere, which is very rewarding. It makes it worthwhile, it's really nice.

TNYCJR: I know you're doing tunes by Monk and Wayne Shorter. How much of the music is original?

GB: Most of it. Most of the stuff is written by me, Pee Wee. We do some of the Ron Miles stuff, but mostly originals. But we don't play "Footprints" like anybody, or "St. Thomas". It's our own thing. The lineup is unusual. It's all a lot of fun.

TNYCJR: Freedom is the best place to be when you're performing.

GB: Obviously. We never play the same thing the same way. Everything changes every night. It's different every night. Even the arrangements come out different every night. Let's just hope the United States government will let me come.

TNYCJR: I understand you've met with the Embassy to secure a visa for your scheduled trip to the States. Is everything squared away?

GB: Well, I still don't know. It looks promising at the moment, but you never know.

TNYCJR: Is it the same reason you had trouble when you left Colorado?

GB: I always have problems with the Immigration Department because I got busted in 1970 and 1971 [for drugs] and it doesn't go away in the States. I have no record in the UK at all because it was so long ago. I mean, we're talking about how long ago?

TNYCJR: 42 years.

GB: Yeah. So I have to have a special waiver, if ever I go to the States. So when I arrive, they press all the buttons and I usually get carted off for an interview before they'll let me in. That's the way it is, I'm afraid. ❖

For more information, visit gingerbaker.com. Baker is at Iridium Oct. 9th-13th. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Graham Bond Organization - *Wade in the Water: Classics, Origins & Oddities* (Repertoire, 1963-66)
- Cream - *Those Were The Days* (Polydor-Polygram, 1966-68)
- Fela Kuti - *Live! (with Ginger Baker & Africa '70)* (Signpost-Atlantic, 1971)
- Ginger Baker/Sonny Sharrock/Nicky Skopelitis/Peter Brötzmann/Jan Kazda - *No Material* (*Ginger Baker Live Munich, Germany 1987*) (ITM/Voiceprint, 1987)
- Ginger Baker Trio - *Going Back Home* (Atlantic, 1994)
- Ginger Baker and the DJQ20 (with James Carter) - *Coward of the County* (Atlantic, 1998)

(LABEL CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

One of the at-the-time critically and commercially unsuccessful projects of the label and perhaps the only one where producers ruled over artists, was a multi-disc recording of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, featuring Tormé and Frances Faye in the titular roles and an allstar musical cast including Duke Ellington's Orchestra. It is slated to be reissued early next year by Verse. Faye, along with Simone and Connor (who both debuted as leaders on the label), were among a number of important singers featured on Bethlehem, including Johnny Hartman, Troup, Bobby Scott, Bob Dorough, Peggy Connelly and the now obscure but well-worth-remembering Helen Carr.

Dan Morgenstern, the now retired long-time director of the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers, fondly remembered some of the other albums from Bethlehem, including "[alto saxophonist] Pete Brown's last good one, with lovely [trumpeter] Joe Wilder partnering him; a couple of Oscar Pettiford's, one also with Joe, [trumpeter] Clark Terry and [clarinetist/saxophonist] Jimmy Hamilton, the other with [trumpeter] Donald Byrd and [alto saxophonist] Gigi Gryce. There was one of my favorite [trumpeter] Jonah Jones; that unique Mingus with Bill Evans: *East Coasting* and [pianist] Herbie Nichols' *Love, Gloom, Cash, Love*."

A schedule of rereleases is posted already through July of next year, including 16 albums from such diverse artists as Mal Waldron, Booker Little, Roland Kirk, John Coltrane, an Art Blakey Big Band as well as that forgotten Helen Carr gem, *Down in the Depths of the 90th Floor*, and the aforementioned *Porgy and Bess*.

According to Stark, the plan is to release the albums as they originally appeared, remastered but not remixed, without extra tracks or the combining of LPs on one CD: "We like the idea of releasing them exactly how they were originally. There are over 200 in the catalogue and some of the original tapes are unfortunately not in good condition. I would optimistically say that 75 percent of them will see the light of day though."

So fans of '50s jazz, as well as those who remember those sturdy, laminated Bethlehem LPs with the vivid cover art, have a lot to look forward to in the next couple of years. ❖

For more information, visit bethlehemrecords.com. Artists performing this month include George Wein at Allen Room Oct. 3rd-4th.