

JOHAN BROBERG



# KENNY WASHINGTON

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

*Kenny Washington is a representative of the legacy of bebop and hardbop. Appearing on over 250 albums, he is one of the greatest straightahead drummers of the last 40 years. Washington has accompanied many of the masters, including Lee Konitz, Johnny Griffin, Dizzy Gillespie, Clark Terry, Benny Carter and too many other greats to name. He is especially well known for supporting trios led by pianists such as Hank Jones, Tommy Flanagan, Mike LeDonne, George Cables, Ahmad Jamal, Bill Charlap and many more. A native New Yorker, Washington studied with Rudy Collins and attended the LaGuardia High School for Music and Art. He is also an avid listener and historian, bringing his knowledge to a new generation as a private instructor and educator at Juilliard and SUNY-Purchase College.*

**The New York City Jazz Record:** Are you still a regular at The Institute of Jazz Studies (IJS) at Rutgers-Newark?

**Kenny Washington:** Yes. I haven't been there in a minute, but funny you should mention that because I was thinking about taking a trip up there. There were a few old records that I found out about and I wanted to see if the Institute had them.

**TNYCJR:** Are you a record collector?

**KW:** You could say that, but I don't care if the record has the original Blue Note label, the original Prestige label and all that kind of stuff. And that's why these things are going for so much. [Collectors] don't want the reissue; they want the original. And in some cases, the reissue might sound better. I'm in it for the music. I don't collect records like stamps.

**TNYCJR:** I met you in the stacks at IJS and you had been checking out a lot of different stuff and some things I never heard of.

**KW:** The Institute is fascinating to me anyway, because I can be trying to find one thing and find something else that I knew nothing about by accident. It almost always happens. Or, you're up there and one of those guys up there that know a whole lot—Vincent Pelote, Dan Morgenstern or Ed Berger—you ask them one thing or they might pop into my listening room and say, "Hey, Wash, what are you listening to?" and I tell them and then they start, "Well, you know, man, do you know about such and such record? Da da da da played with such and such and you can get better sound from this issue."

These guys know so much. From there, I go and find what they're talking about and I run into something else I didn't know about. So, I go in there looking to get one or two records and I come out with ten. The people they have working there are really, really knowledgeable. I get there in the morning and I'm there for the day, man. That's the greatest archive in the world.

**TNYCJR:** You continue to be a student, right?

**KW:** Absolutely. I am a student of this music, there's no doubt, and there's always something more to learn. And the older you get and the more you mature, the more you start to understand and hear things you didn't hear on records you might have been listening to for 30 or 40 years. This music is amazing.

**TNYCJR:** You mention being surprised when making this or that discovery, but what do you intend to accomplish with your study otherwise?

**KW:** Just to be a better musician. I just want to know. There's always more music and I just want to know as much about it as possible. The more you know about the music, the better you will play it. That's one of the things I try to tell my students up at Juilliard and at Purchase: the more you listen, the better you will be as a musician. It's important and it's one of the things the younger musicians lack. They don't listen as much as they should.

**TNYCJR:** How long have you been at Purchase?

**KW:** Maybe five or six years. I love Purchase. That's like jazz boot camp. All the people—Todd Coolman, Jon Faddis, Ralph Lalama—they take this music very seriously. It's a very good school. Sadly, it's a well-kept secret. There are more kids that should be going to that school. You can get as much bang for your buck, or more, than some of these other schools. Nobody in that school is messing around. The problem is, the kids want to be in the city. Juilliard is a good school, but it's a small jazz department and, let's face it, not everybody is going to get in. There are some other alternatives, which I won't mention. I say, "Don't go there", because you're not going to learn what you're supposed to learn. I try to recruit people to come to Purchase all the time. And the first thing I hear out of a student's mouth is, "That's out in the boonies", because they want to hang out at Dizzy's and play at Smalls and other clubs. They think being seen is how you're going to get hired, and that is true, but you have to know how to play first. But they want everything now. Instead of going for the right kind of training, they just want to go out here and they still don't have their shit together. So, I tell them about Purchase, where they can really get their shit together.

**TNYCJR:** One of the big changes that has come since you were coming up is that the number of college-level jazz programs has grown exponentially, but some of the elders lament that there are just not enough qualified teachers.

**KW:** Sure. Because some of these schools these kids are flocking to, and I'm not going to mention them, they're not getting what they're supposed to. Let's face it.

These kids are funny, because they say they want to be jazz musicians, but a lot of them are not serious. They'll get these degrees and everything but they still can't play. It's amazing what they don't know. And I'm not even just talking about jazz history. I'm just talking about playing their instrument. And a lot of that has to do with what they had in elementary school, junior high and high school and it's not necessarily the teacher's fault, it's budget cuts. When I was coming up in New York City in the '60s, we had all these programs, because mayors like John Lindsay and people like that, their whole thing was: keep kids off the streets. So, when school ended at 3 o'clock, you had an option to

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(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

go to after school programs. They would have gymnastics, dramatics or acting, art and music. And those music teachers I had were very good. They taught you the basics and they taught you what you needed to know. Some of them were very stern and strict and it's good that they were. After a while, when the budget cuts started taking over, there were fewer programs and less exposure to music and art in general.

**TNYCJR:** Teaching a history course as well as private students, how do you try to impart the significance of these different individual artists?

**KW:** Teaching privately, what these guys don't know. They know some names; they know a few records. Them guys come to my lessons and they want to get their cymbal beat, their "spangalang" together, and I say, "Well, do you have Miles Davis' record *Walkin'*?" And they say, "Yeah, the one with Tony Williams" and I say, "Hell no! The one with Kenny Clarke and Percy Heath, man." And they're looking at me like a deer caught in headlights. They don't even know about that record. I'm not saying that the later versions are not good; please don't misunderstand me. The Miles Davis '60s group and what they did with "Walkin'" is fantastic, but if you ask Sir Ron Carter about the original "Walkin'" with Percy Heath, he'll talk your ear off about that record. Every one of those guys—Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock—they were well aware of the original version with Lucky Thompson; that's where they come from. These kids don't know any of that stuff, man.

My whole thing about jazz history is, I could get any goofball off the street to read a couple books and memorize facts. The thing is the sound. Can you hear the difference between soloists and bands? So, on my midterm and final I have what I call "drop the needle". We analyze these artists so they get the chance to see what makes who who. Their assignment week in and week out is to listen. If it's Jimmie Lunceford or a Duke Ellington or Count Basie record, the arrangements sound a little bit different from one another. Then you have to know the soloists. You might say, "I know that lead alto saxophone sound, that's Willie Smith." When [he] gets up and takes a solo I know that's Jimmie Lunceford's band. So, we analyze and talk about all of these different things. For tests, the most important part to me is the "drop the needle". And you can't cram to learn the differences in these soloists and bands.

**TNYCJR:** Do you continue to practice regularly?

**KW:** I was practicing on the pad when you called. I practice every day, at least I try to, which is something I learned from the great pianist Hank Jones. A few years back, Hank hired bassist George Mraz and myself to do this gig with him. He said, "Seeing as the gig is the next afternoon, why don't you and George come up to my house the night before? I got plenty of room for you all, you can stay at my house." So, George and I agreed. Hank had a big house way, way upstate. Hank's wife cooked dinner for us and we were sitting around watching TV and talking and then went off to bed. The next morning I woke up early and the first thing I hear is the piano. Hank is practicing scales, slow, real slow. I'm listening to this master practice. It's about 7 in the morning. So I come down to where Hank is practicing and say, "Good morning, Mr. Jones." "Ahh, Mr. Washington, how are you?" "I'm doing fine, how are you feeling?" "I'm doing fine." So I asked him, "Do you practice like this everyday?" And he stopped and just looked me dead in the eyes and he said, "Wash, it's a must."

Right then and there it hit me and I thought, if you start practicing like this, then maybe, if you make it to

his age, you'll still be able to play well. He gave away his secret right there when he said, "It's a must". The reason that he always sounded good is because he's practicing every day. That left a big impact on me because I always wake up early anyway. So, since that time, I try to do the same thing. Every morning I'm up, crack of dawn, practicing slow, practicing my rudiments. Because sometimes older musicians don't practice as much and sometimes they can get rusty. Not everybody is like that; guys like Dick Hyman, they're practicing all the time, that's why he always sounds good. That's what I want to try to do.

**TNYCJR:** So that's the goal, always to sound good.

**KW:** Always sound good. Hank was always sharp. I played with him the last year or two of his life. Man, this cat was still playing his ass off. From seeing Hank do that, that's what made me start getting in the shed every morning like that. So that's what I try to do, every morning, two or three hours. And then sometimes during the day I come back to it. If I'm not playing and I don't have anything to do, I try to at least put two hours in. Two hours on the practice pad and then later on I'll go upstairs and fool around with the drums. I'm up between 5 and 6, usually, every morning. That's the best time for me. Daybreak.

**TNYCJR:** I always have so much room to improve and practice is putting in that work, but the idea of always sounding good is beautifully simple.

**KW:** Yeah, well, that and practicing slow. That's important too.

**TNYCJR:** Practicing slow may come with age a little bit. I know for me I have more patience and I understand better that I'm teaching my brain to teach my body how to do this.

**KW:** That's true. I never really thought about it like that. That's the only way to really grasp, as a drummer, what one hand is doing and what the other one is doing is to practice it slow so you can get the feeling of things. If you can't play it slow, you will not play it fast. I have students, they're just hacking away at pieces. I'll actually have to stop and say, "Okay, put the sticks down. Now, take a deep breath. Inhale and exhale. Relax. Now, pick up the drumsticks. Let's play this again. Slow." They'll play it perfect. I say, "There you go." Otherwise they'll just run through the stuff, but you're not learning anything like that.

**TNYCJR:** So what's coming up? What are you working on? What are you gonna sound good on next?

**KW:** I just got through producing a record with Lee Konitz for Impulse Records. It's me, [pianist] Kenny Barron, [bassist] Peter Washington and, of course, Lee. I would think it will be out some time in the summer or fall, I don't really know. So, I'm doing that and still playing with Bill Charlap. There's a two-drum thing coming up with me and Joe Farnsworth at Smoke in February. We did it once before and had a great time so we'll do it again. Peter Washington is playing bass, Harold Mabern is going to play piano, but I'm not sure who the frontline is going to be [trumpeter Brian Lynch and alto saxophonist Vincent Herring]. I'm sure it's going to be good though.

**TNYCJR:** I found a discography of you online listing 251 albums from 1977 to 2010. That's going to be six years ago already, so I know there's a bunch more and maybe more yet to be released.

**KW:** I've made other records since then, I suppose. Tony Bennett's record just came out, the one I did with Charlap. Charlap has another record coming out too.

I think it comes out in March or April on Verve. It's going to be called *Notes From New York*. This is the first record we've made in a few years. The record business has gone to pieces, so I'm not, I guess none of us are recording as much as we did.

**TNYCJR:** So many artists are reliant on the Internet and social media to promote their work, but you don't even have a website?

**KW:** No. I'm old school. Really old school. If they like what I do, they can always find out about it. ❖

*Washington is at Smoke Feb. 19th as part of The New Drum Battle. See Calendar.*

**Recommended Listening:**

- Lee Konitz—*Nonet* (Chiaroscuro, 1977)
- Betty Carter—*The Audience with Betty Carter* (Bet-Car—Verve, 1979)
- Charlie Rouse—*Social Call* (Uptown, 1984)
- Tommy Flanagan—*Jazz Poet* (Alfa-Timeless, 1989)
- Johnny Griffin +3—*Dance of Passion* (Antilles, 1992)
- Bill Charlap Trio—*Live at the Village Vanguard* (Blue Note, 2003)

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records with four different groups. The latest is Kasper Tom 5's second release *I do admire things that are only what they are.* Members are also free to record for other labels. Tom, for example, has done CDs for WhyPlayJazz and ForTune Records. "In Barefoot you have to do everything yourself, from planning the recording to finding the funds to release it," he reports. "For the other labels I just have to maybe find a place to record and they take care of the rest."

But besides the extra work, Barefoot provides other advantages, he asserts. "Being part of a well-organized and, might I add, very cool label, helps me get exposure through distribution, through Barefoot's other members and through the events we organize." Adds Zeeberg: "I haven't recorded my own music for other labels. I was and, still am, quite young when I joined. But being a member has made a lot of things easy for me, especially regarding releasing music. It has made me perhaps also more visible to the public. As an experimental composer/musician you need all the exposure you can get."

As part of its democratic process, each Barefoot member decides on which medium his or her release will appear, with sessions so far on CD, LP, digital download, cassette tape and even postcards. Zeeberg and Rune Lohse's *Music Made in One Day* featured download codes printed on ordinary postcards. "Some future releases are planned on 3D-printed sculptures," reveals Berre. Most physical sales are at concerts or for domestic distribution, whereas international sales are largely digital. "These two go nicely hand in hand," he affirms.

Besides the 10th anniversary party, new discs are planned for 2016. They include Flamingo and Jitter, two trios featuring Pultz Melbye; a Dąbrowski solo set; a duo with Tom and bass clarinetist Rudi Mahall; a Pedersen quintet date; and Berre collaborating with non-members trumpeter Susana Santos Silva, pianist Christine Wodrascka and bassist Christian Meaas Svendsen.

Barefoot may not be a major imprint, but the cooperative ethos and group identity is working perfectly for its members. As Berre notes: "With the attention paid to Barefoot everyone benefits and benefits much more than having seven artists releasing discs by themselves." ❖

*For more information, visit [barefoot-records.com](http://barefoot-records.com)*