

JANUARY 2022—ISSUE 237

YOUR FREE GUIDE TO THE NYC JAZZ SCENE

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**BOB  
JAMES**  
*FEEL LIKE  
MAKING LIVE*

**BEST OF  
2021**

**WOLFGANG  
MUTHSPIEL**

**ANGEL BAT  
DAWID**

**STIX  
HOOPER**

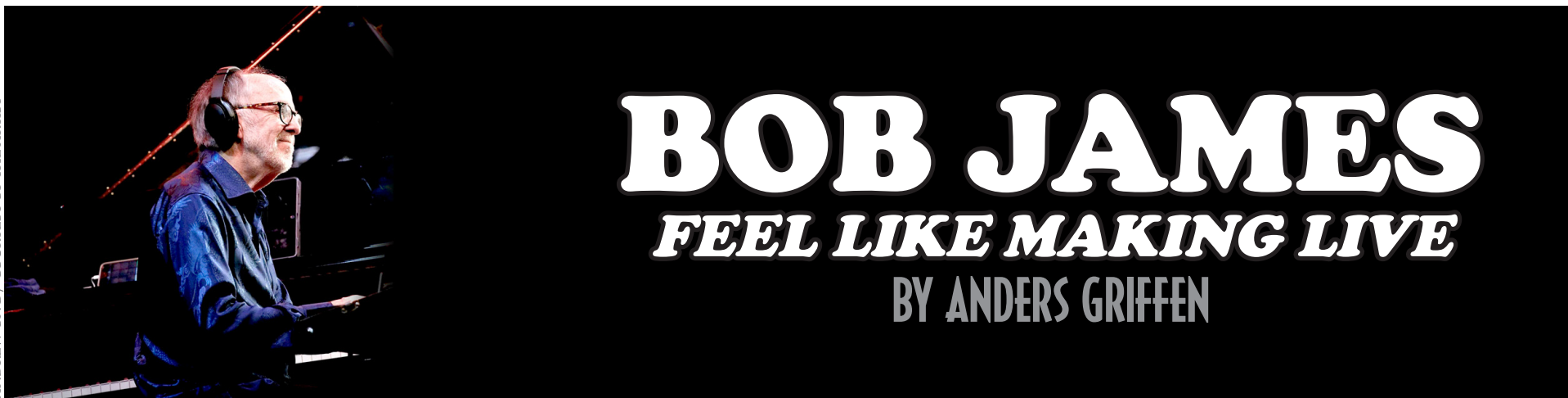
**FRANK  
WESS**

# BOB JAMES

## FEEL LIKE MAKING LIVE

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

ANDREW ONG / COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Bob James, prolific composer and keyboard artist, is well known for his theme song to the hit TV series *Taxi* and has been routinely sampled in hip-hop. He has won two Grammys among several nominations and has hundreds of album credits with a range of jazz and pop artists including Sarah Vaughan, Quincy Jones, George Benson, Hubert Laws, Chet Baker, Freddie Hubbard, Ron Carter, Idris Muhammad, Paul Simon and Aretha Franklin. He has enjoyed a successful career in music for over 60 years: "I have no shortage of fun, surprising, interesting things to be working on creatively."

James grew up in a small farm town called Marshall, Missouri where his mother started him on piano lessons at four and he practiced throughout his childhood. His parents weren't particularly jazz fans, though they had a couple of records, but somehow James discovered the music. "It got into my brain somewhere and by the time I got into high school I was rebelling against classical practice and I liked the rebellious aspect of improvising." He started finding performance opportunities while in high school before attending the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. "Michigan had a really good composition department, [but] they didn't have anything much in the way of a jazz department." Frustrated, he transferred to Berklee during his freshman year. "I didn't last very long at Berklee. I decided I wanted to go back to Michigan because it was a bigger school, more opportunities and, little by little, I found enough jazz musicians at Michigan to stimulate my interests."

Influenced by the experimentation and free spirit in jazz and contemporary composition, he was also learning the mainstream and wanted to hold his own as a straightahead player. A local venue called The Falcon afforded him regular performance opportunities. "I was doing some of my most experimental stuff in that club, with [drummer] Bob Pozar and [bassist] Ron Brooks. We would try literally everything. For example, Pozar would go down in the basement and play triple fortissimo and scream and make various sounds where nobody knew where he was." The Once Festival was also influential as they were asked to perform classical composers' avant garde works, largely because they were willing to do things that classical players were not. "It was the time of John Cage and Stockhausen and some of the cutting-edge people were composing and performing at that festival and we got acquainted with that music and were having a great time."

In 1962, James received a small budget from the Once Festival to compose a piece and he used the money to invite Eric Dolphy out to perform with his trio. The results were released many years later, mistitled and miscredited on the Dolphy CD *Other Aspects*. "When that album came out, I wasn't made aware of it at all and was not credited properly for the composition called 'Jim Crow', which I actually composed called 'A Personal Statement'. I was a huge fan of Eric Dolphy and I got brave and asked him to come out and play my piece with my trio. He agreed and actually stayed in Ann Arbor for a few days... It is a major memory for me because he was just such a

great artist and a wonderful human being too. We gave him a copy of the tape from that performance and he took it back to New York with him. After he passed away, 10 or 20 years later, there was a producer documenting all of Eric Dolphy's work and he came across this tape, [which] wasn't marked hardly at all and just assumed that it was one of Eric's compositions."

That same trio also won an award at the Notre Dame Collegiate Jazz Festival in Ann Arbor and Quincy Jones was among the judges. Intrigued by the fact that they were veering away from straightahead bebop and playing further out, Jones signed James to record his first album, *Bold Conceptions* (Mercury, 1962), and gave him numerous opportunities in the coming years.

"Every time I think of the pivotal points in my career, Quincy's name immediately comes up. There was a magic about him and his producer aura. There was something that everybody felt just by Quincy being in the room. His mystique made everybody play better. It was that badge of having been chosen by him that definitely helped get me in doors." One of these was an introduction to Vaughan. James worked with her for four years, along with his roommate, drummer Omar Clay, who had also moved from Ann Arbor. James was still learning what he considers some rudimentary things. "I was too young to even understand what the impact was going to be and I only realized years later how big an influence she was over me forming my whole approach. She was a jazz artist in the true sense of the word as far as the atmosphere that she brought to her music."

Working on Jones' album *Walking in Space* was his introduction to Creed Taylor and that ended up being an incredibly fruitful relationship as James' career took off while they made some 60 albums together. James worked as a composer and arranger just as often as an instrumentalist. While he had made a couple of his own recordings in the '60s, leading his own recordings became regular in the '70s. The producers for *Taxi* were listening to *BJ4* while considering the type of mood and style they wanted for the show and they eventually called James to ask if he'd like to prepare some music. While James submitted "Touchdown" to be the theme, they chose his song "Angela" instead and it has become his signature tune. Rather than try to create 15- or 20-second music cues, "I asked them if they would be willing to approach it in a different way and let me treat it more like it was just a record date for an album with long cuts, five- to six-minute tunes. I just took my people in and we cut some fast tunes, some slow tunes, happy, sad, whatever, and then they picked."

In 1979 James won his first Grammy award for his album with Earl Klugh, *One on One* (Tappan Zee Records), an honor he would receive again in 1986 for his album with David Sanborn, *Double Vision* (Warner Bros.). By that time the studio and record business were beginning to fade. In the '70s, musicians like James were not encouraged to tour; there was enough work locally that they didn't need it. "Then, maybe in the '90s, I started hearing about musicians needing to go on tour to sell their product and [cultivate] a loyal

audience in person. Even more important for me was [realizing] how much I loved it. I love live performance, I love the danger, the immediacy of it. It is a completely different passion from recording."

When the band Fourplay was formed with Lee Ritenour (guitars), Nathan East (bass) and Harvey Mason, they were perceived as a one-off, allstar project. "In order to prove that wrong, we had to tour, we had to be a band and so we did set out to establish that kind of an identity." The Modern Jazz Quartet inspired them as a model for longevity. While their personnel changed over the years and they are now on indefinite hiatus, they were active for over 25 years and enjoyed great success with several gold number one records among their 15 albums.

In recent years, James has been working in a trio with bassist Michael Palazzolo and drummer Billy Kilson. They released *Espresso* in 2018 (EvoSound) and have just put out its followup, *Feel Like Making LIVE*, recorded live with a video crew and available on CD and DVD. He has a new album project underway with the working name of Young Guns, which features emerging talent. He is still working with Palazzolo and "I have a young drummer who I haven't recorded with yet, James Adkins from Florida. Very fiery, very inspiring for me because he understands this new world [combining] hip-hop music and jazz and all kinds of other influences that I learn from and hopefully I'm teaching him some things too. So that's been a lot of fun." The group will be at Blue Note this month.

Meanwhile, James has been collaborating long-distance throughout the pandemic and sending tracks to others' home studios. He has been working with saxophonists Dave Koz and Andrey Chmutu among others and expects a new release in the spring. "I've had some interesting collaborations. On their first record, DJ Jazzy Jeff and The Fresh Prince sampled my song, 'Westchester Lady', without licensing it, so I got off to a rather complicated start with them, but recently I've recorded a couple of tracks with DJ Jazzy Jeff that I think are going to be included in my new project that's coming out next spring. At the same time, I have a new collaboration with CeeLo Green, who kind of recomposed my song 'Angela', put a lyric to it and released it as a single a couple years ago under the name of 'Sign of the Times'. We collaborated on four new tunes. I've been doing an awful lot of that recently and hopefully there'll be some good end results from it." ❖

For more information, visit [bobjames.com](http://bobjames.com). James is at Blue Note Jan. 25th-30th. See Calendar.

#### Recommended Listening:

- Bob James — *Once Upon A Time: The Lost 1965 New York Studio Sessions* (Resonance, 1965)
- Bob James — *One* (CTI, 1974)
- Bob James — *The Genie: Themes & Variations From the TV Series "Taxi"* (Tappan Zee-Columbia, 1983)
- Bob James Trio — *Straight Up* (Warner Bros., 1995)
- Bob James — *Alone* (Tappan Zee-Red River, 2012)
- Bob James Trio — *Feel Like Making LIVE* (EvoSound, 2018)