

A Tribe Called Jazz

How Wendell Harrison
and Phil Ranelin's
homemade Detroit
operation became
a jazz legend

By VERONICA JOHNSON





Saxophonist Wendell Harrison, 80, and trombonist Phil Ranelin, 83, longtime friends and cofounders of the renowned jazz collective Tribe, still have the drive and work ethic of jazz musicians more than half their age. On a cold Monday evening in January, Harrison was preparing for a live show at the Detroit Institute of Arts, a commissioned work for the nonprofit organization Fighting for the Children featuring a rhythm section, horn sections, and a string orchestra of young musicians. Harrison spent most of that day performing and promoting the concert at local radio station WDET. The rest of his week consisted of rehearsals for the show and publicizing the concert on social media. “I’m tired as hell,” Harrison says, half-jokingly.

Ranelin, based in Indianapolis, is bouncing back from a stroke, but he hasn’t let that hinder him from putting the finishing touches on live recordings he’s working to release this spring. The albums comprise music he performed with his quartet after moving to L.A. in the late ’70s. “I’m hoping getting these records out will inspire me to get back on the horn,” says Ranelin.

Harrison and Ranelin have a

long-running history of and passion for preserving their music and feeding it to the public. Their do-it-yourself philosophy developed in the 1960s and was the impetus for the formation of Tribe: a music collective, publication, and record label they built in 1971. They released several records on the label with fellow Detroiters trumpeter Marcus Belgrave and pianist Harold McKinney and published a magazine that had an impressive national following. In recent years, Tribe has experienced a resurgence; the albums, and many issues of the magazine, have been reissued in Europe and Japan.

“It’s really prolific,” says Harrison. “This is like a life jacket for me because it’s my Social Security — it’s survival money. To have this kind of rebound at 80 years old is a blessing.”

BUILDING THE TRIBE

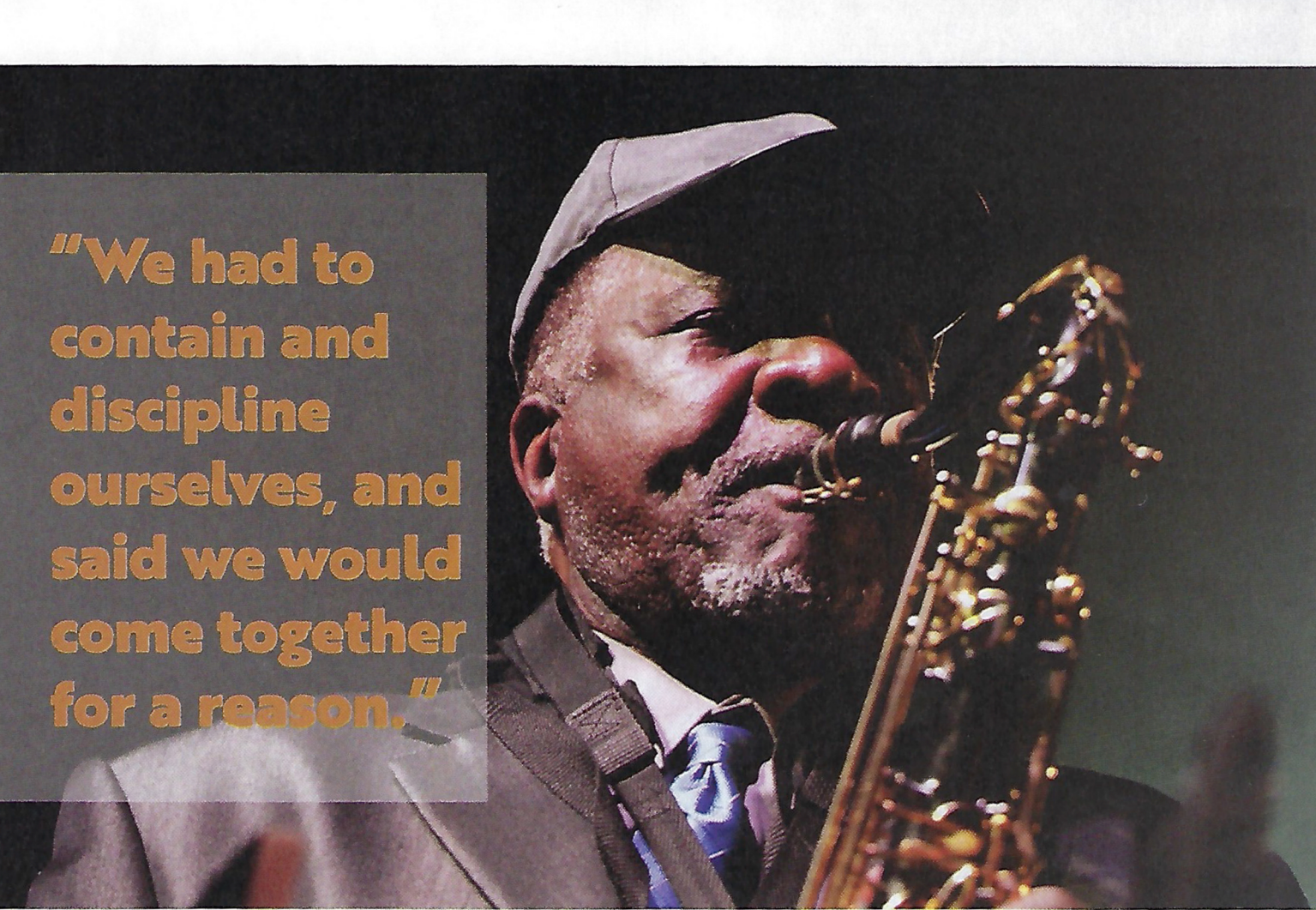
Long before Tribe became a Detroit powerhouse, Harrison and Ranelin had built sound reputations. Harrison studied for years with pianist and Detroiter Barry Harris, then moved to New York in the 1960s, where he worked with the legendary guitarist Grant Green, vocalist Eddie

Jefferson, and pianist-bandleader Sun Ra. Harrison also spent time in California and toured with saxophonist Hank Crawford. While on the road, he crossed paths with Ranelin at a club in Indianapolis.

Ranelin worked with such fellow Indy players as trumpeter Freddie Hubbard and guitarist Wes Montgomery. In the ‘60s, he moved to Detroit to work as a session player with Motown Records. He reunited with Harrison when they both got jobs working as music educators for Metro Arts, a multidisciplinary arts complex for youth that McKinney was heading at the time.

“When Wendell and I were working at Metro Arts, we were talking one day, and we realized we had a lot of the same dreams, like recording our own music, forming a band, and things like that. And that’s how we hooked up and started Tribe,” said Ranelin.

Harrison was planning to go back to New York but decided instead to stay in Detroit for a while and worked with Ranelin to start producing and promoting concerts at Detroit Institute of Arts. He learned how to promote concerts from a friend of his mother’s, who was promoting gospel groups. As part of his and Ranelin’s



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efforts, they assembled concert program booklets featuring advertisements from local businesses. These program booklets later evolved into *Tribe* magazine.

The magazine was edited by writer Herb Boyd and featured articles from his students at Wayne State University, who wrote about abortion, politics, transportation, and other issues of importance to the Black community. The magazine landed national distribution and corporate ads from big automotive companies such as Ford Motor Company and Chrysler.

The success of the magazine allowed *Tribe* to fund not only the concerts and promotional materials but also recording sessions. The group was thus able to create such classic recordings as Harrison and Ranelin's *A Message from the Tribe* (1972, with extended editions released in 1973 and 1974), Harrison's *An Evening with the Devil* (1973), Belgrave's *Gemini II*, Ranelin's *The Time Is Now!*, and McKinney's *Voices and Rhythms Of The Creative Profile* (all from 1974).

"Everybody was recording on each other's album, which gave us a sound and gave the label an identity, which was Afrocentric funk on the bottom, and jazz on the top,"

says Harrison. The same kind of politically conscience topics that were addressed in the magazine are what *Tribe* focused on in its music: police brutality, racism, and civil rights. *An Evening with the Devil*, for instance, has a track called "Mary Had An Abortion," alluding to the issue of women's reproductive rights in the 1970s.

TRIBAL SUCCESSES AND DIFFICULTIES

Challenges surfaced as *Tribe* grew, and the musicians used the label to push their independent projects. Every member of *Tribe* was also a bandleader in their own right, so it was a sacrifice for the group to play together when they wanted to play their own music and lead their own bands.

"All of us had our own records out and were trying to get our own gigs. But we had to contain and discipline ourselves, and said we would come together for a reason," says Harrison. "When we came together, we got more money as *Tribe* members because we had all these names playing together."

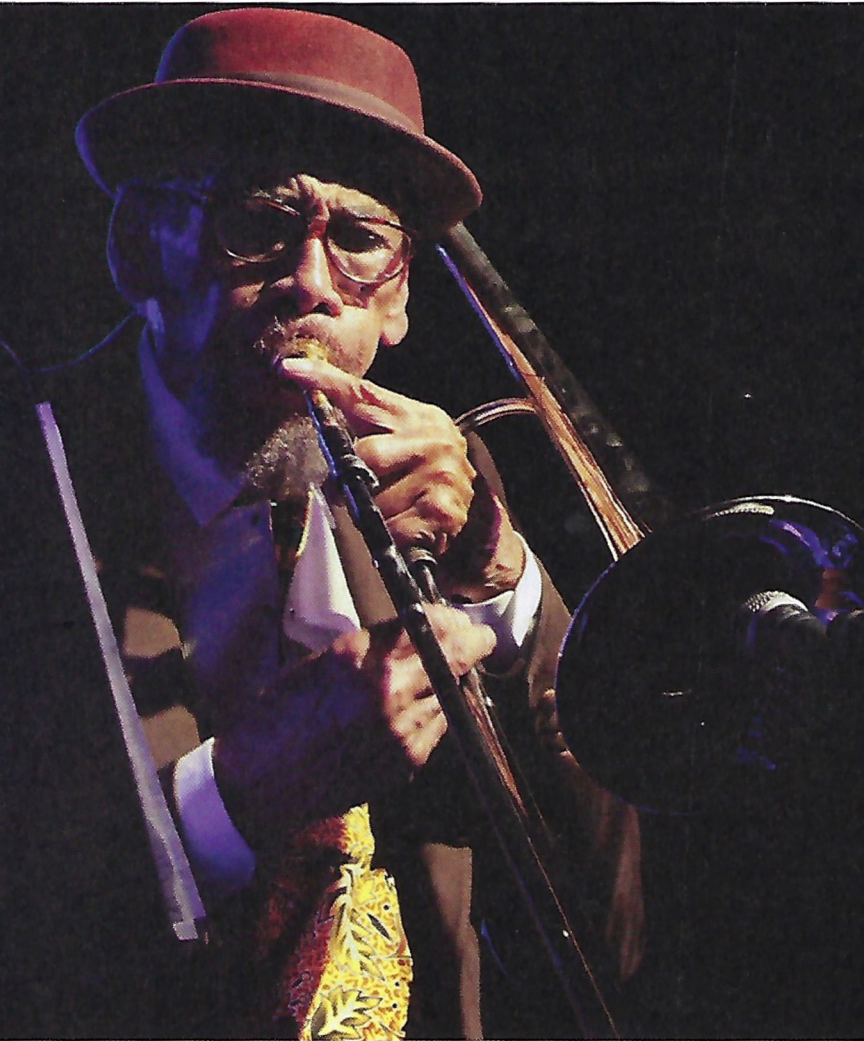
The promotional strategies and business acumen that *Tribe* accumulated through its multiple ventures was a learning experience for the group and helped them to understand the ins and outs of how a

record label worked. "We were recording for these major labels, but we didn't really know anything about the overall business. We knew how to play music, we knew how to produce, but we really didn't know anything about marketing and secondary markets," Harrison says.

He and Ranelin worked with 15 distributors around the United States to get *Tribe*'s music to the masses. The label fit the mold for the small, independent distributors who didn't want to work for corporate labels. *Tribe* itself also served as a distribution outlet, issuing records by bassist Ron Brooks and drummer Doug Hammond that allowed the musicians to retain control of their music from a marketing and creative standpoint.

Tribe magazine folded in 1977 due to a number of factors. In particular, Harrison was increasingly disinterested in publishing, preferring to focus on creating music instead of pushing the magazine forward. That same year, Ranelin also left for L.A. after receiving an offer to tour with Hubbard. The members of *Tribe* would continue to perform as a group off and on until the deaths of McKinney (2001) and Belgrave (2015). The label also slowed down business

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quite a bit after the magazine folded in the late '70s, but Harrison continues to issue records on the Tribe label from time to time; his latest, 2021's *Get Up Off Your Knees*, bore the Tribe imprint.

KEEPING THE TRIBE ALIVE

What has truly kept the Tribe collective relevant and alive into the 21st century, however, are the reissues by record labels overseas, which began in 1990 and continue to this day. The most recent such package is from the Japanese label P-Vine. Titled *A Message from the Tribe Box Set*, it features all three editions of their inaugural record release and all 17 of the issues of *Tribe* magazine that were published during the 1970s.

Harrison and Ranelin also have a recent recording available on the *Jazz is Dead* label (*Jazz is Dead 016*). They performed a live concert and recorded the album in L.A. with musicians and JID cofounders Adrian Younge and Ali Shaheed Muhammad in early 2020. The *Jazz is Dead* records focus on bringing a different legend from the past to the forefront and highlighting their deep contributions to jazz and popular music. The label wanted to record Tribe as

a way of celebrating the group's continued dedication to remaining independent and producing jazz music. Muhammad and Younge crafted new material that celebrates the lasting impact of the group.

"When Phil was playing these bass lines on his trombone and was really devoted to that funk timing, on the one, all I could think was that this is the epitome of what we're doing with *Jazz Is Dead*. We're digging into the past, in the moment of the present, for the future," said Muhammad in a press release. "Their spirits were as free as I can only imagine they were when they were 19, 25, just making music. It's fun to be in the room with people like that because it proves that there are no barriers when you really allow your knowledge and the energy that you're getting from other people to shine and make something really special."

The work that Tribe started 50 years ago has continued on not only through Harrison and Ranelin but also through the Detroit jazz musicians they have mentored throughout the years.

In 1978, Harrison and McKinney founded Rebirth Inc., a recording label,

production company, and nonprofit organization whose mission is to educate the youth and the greater community about jazz through workshops and concert presentations throughout the Midwest and beyond. For years, Harrison and his wife, pianist Pamela Wise, have been going into schools throughout metro Detroit and teaching students about music as well as putting on performances in the schools.

Detroit's Marion Hayden, an internationally renowned jazz bassist and cofounder of the female ensemble *Straight Ahead*, credits members of Tribe with inspiring her to become a musician. Hayden, like many now-successful Detroit-based musicians, was a part of *Metro Arts* when Harrison, Belgrave, McKinney, and Ranelin were teachers there. She recalls them teaching her the basics of musicianship and challenging all their students to increase their skills and rise to the occasion of the music they were presenting. Hayden has performed often with the members of Tribe.

"Wendell and Marcus in particular were really very willing to put younger folks like me on the stand that gave us opportunities



to actually perform professionally,” Hayden says. “My first professional gig was actually with Wendell when I was probably about 14 or 15 years old.”

She regards many lessons from Tribe as the foundation for how current Detroit artists conduct themselves when it comes to business. One of them is the idea that music can be decentralized. “They were able to do these things outside of places where we think of as the main centers for music, like New York and L.A., but everything does not have to go on in those particular centers, and there are some really great ways that one can be expressive. You can bring a lot of great ideas to fruition in places other than the coasts.”

Another lesson learned that Hayden has used in her own career is having an independent mindset when it comes to producing your own work. She says that Tribe really set a blueprint for how independent artists function in Detroit, which continues to play out within the community even now.

“If they had a project they wanted to do, they would try to get a grant for it, but that was not going to be what stood between

them and doing that project,” she says. “The project was going to get done regardless because it was a project that held some intellectual and creative curiosity for them. And as far as I’m concerned, those are lessons that young people can learn right now.”

Trunino Lowe is another of Harrison’s protégés and an extension of the Tribe legacy. He first met Harrison as a middle school student and then reconnected with him in high school. He has since gone on to lead his own band, performs regularly at Detroit jazz clubs, and was on Harrison’s *Get Up Off Your Knees*.

“Wendell saved my life musically,” Lowe says. “One day he called me to do this gig, and we started playing tunes, and I wasn’t understanding. He stopped the whole band just to chew me out. I don’t know how to describe the way. It wasn’t harsh, but it wasn’t pleasant either. The thing about Wendell that I always appreciated was he would tell you what’s not working, and he won’t lead you astray. He’ll work with you and try to help you figure it out because he cares.”

The influence that Tribe has brought to bear on the younger generation also hasn’t

gone unnoticed by Harrison and Ranelin. “I’m very proud of the impact we have had,” said Ranelin. “Young people come up to me and say how much I have inspired them, and not only musicians but the fans. It really warms my heart that people of all races and ages were affected by our music.”

Wendell affirms that a lot of the Detroit musicians were influenced and/or educated by Tribe. “We always taught jazz. That is our legacy. We are educators, we have to pass it on.”

In terms of what’s next for the musicians, they don’t plan to slow down any time soon. They are continuing to reissue their music to labels overseas and also have plans to set up a tour in Europe and Japan to further promote all the albums that have been reissued in those countries. Harrison also wants to get more involved in producing films through his Rebirth company.

“Time is running out; I’m not going to live forever,” he says with good humor. “You have to keep discovering stuff. If you are going to be on this earth, I learned that you have to struggle. If you are passive, you are not going to last that long.” **JT**