

The Blue Morning Quintet (BMQ) Gets Waxed in North Hollywood

By

Randy Ross, Ph.D.

On January 30-31, 2010, John Wms-Kohlmeyer arranged for the Blue Morning Quintet (BMQ) to record tunes for a CD in a studio (Clear Lake Audio) in North Hollywood, California. Several months have passed since that experience and the CD is on the way. So now my head is clear enough to reflect intelligibly, though only partially, on this recording experience. The tunes that will be included on the final CD give structure and inspiration to my reflections.



1Randy Ross (in my favorite vest – I love pockets)

MO' WATTS

I wrote "Mo' Watts" as a vehicle for displaying the awesome talent of BMQ's drummer, Ricardo Mowatts, with the title doing double duty as a reference to his last name and as a charge to fire up the music – add more wattage a la Elvin Jones, Max Roach, Billy Higgins, Art Taylor, and Philly Joe.

The pre-edited version of the tune begins with an introductory drum probe. Soon the bass and piano lay in the basic backdrop of the tune. Next I enter on alto sax with the melody. With the melody laid down, next comes my sax solo. Borrowing Ornette's Coleman's conceptualization of musical improvisation, the tune's melody creates the "territory" that supports the group's exploration/adventure. Thus, as a soloist I have a sense of the mood and tenor of my exploration. But frankly I don't know how things are going to turn out. If I did know, my contribution to the music would not be authentic jazz

improvisation. Improvisation implies uncertainty, risk, and extemporaneous creation. In listening to the recording, however, let me offer a retrospective analysis of my solo.

First, I knock on the door to reveal my presence to the territory. It's a kind of introduction (the drummer Danny Richmond once noted that Charles Mingus told him that you don't rush into a solo; first you say Hello, how are you, and then you go from there). I take in the steady groove provided by the rhythm section. I try to anticipate how the drummer will react to the groove of the bass and piano as well as to my meanderings. I venture an exploration with (roughly) eighth-note patterns that sound potently layered. While executing a long blues phrase that's reminiscent of Stanley Turrentine's "Sugar," I run out of breath. After grabbing a breath I resume the phrase without missing a beat and take it to a logical resolution. Immediately I swing into a new pattern. The layering becomes hypnotic. I love how the bass (Marion) and piano (Greg) regulate the groove. Greg begins to insert exciting syncopated rhythmic coloring. Tension rises. I feel myself trying to push past the tempo set by the drums and bass.

Amidst the rising tension, I reach for something, some sound, perhaps the stratosphere. I hit an altissimo G – tension-loaded overtones pour out of the bell of the horn. The effect grips me. It unleashes bountiful emotion. I want more of this elation. I'm not sure how to get it, but I reach. Higher altissimo notes, I think – A, C, D all fit the A-minor modality I'm playing in (C-minor concert). These higher notes are actually less difficult to create than altissimo G, and because of that, the effect is not as elative. I'm tiring. Gravity pulls me back into the territory. I end my solo back in the groove.

Ricardo takes over with a drum solo. He employs his extensive percussion arsenal to stoke the fire and propel the piece toward higher ground. Eventually he eases back into the groove.

The bass and piano instinctively begin to re-emphasize the "territory." The drums follow suit. The sax re-states the melody. The band begins iterating the last phrase of the melody and gradually fades out. Take 1! That's all we'll need for this leg of the journey.



2 Ricardo Mowatt



3 Greg Broadous and Marion Newton

JACKIE

About a year ago, I enthusiastically read Hampton Hawes' published memoir, "Raise Up Off Me," which I found in the stacks of the humongous, monolithic Central Library in Downtown Los Angeles. While reading the book, I wondered why the lives of so many jazz great musicians blend chaos with excitement.

By chance, circa 1970, I met Hampton Hawes at his home in Los Angeles. I had tagged along with my childhood friend, Rudolph Porter. Rudolph played tenor sax and ran a great music/concert center near 50th and Crenshaw near Leimert Park and Crenshaw High School. Rudolph's was amply chronicled in Steven Isoardi's excellent 2006 book, *The dark tree: Jazz and the community arts in Los Angeles*. (Later Rudolph would make a living playing classical bassoon).

At the time, Mr. Hawes was in his mid-40s. He was quiet and wore an Afro to good effect against the contrast of his beige skin tone. I recall Hamp sitting at an upright piano with a rather somber countenance. For about a half hour, we all managed a pleasantly mundane chat mainly about music.

After reading Hamp's memoir, I began to look for his music. I found one video on YouTube that had Hamp playing in the rhythm section at Memory Lane at a fiery gig that featured Sonny Criss on alto sax, Harry Sweets Edison on trumpet, and Teddy Edwards on tenor sax. I also picked up a few CDs with Hamp playing with Sonny Criss in 1958.

Hamp's presence on vinyl was noteworthy, I hadn't got a glimpse of any music he had composed (perhaps in part because I hadn't looked for his compositions.). Then one day, while scanning a fake book, I discovered a tune written by Hampton Hawes entitled "Jackie." In his memoir, Hawes refers frequently to his wife, Jackie, who seemed to be the most positive force in his rather hectic life. While I had no idea how the tune sounded or if it had ever been recorded, I began playing the sheet music (*sight* reading is one of my strong suits) and I began to take a liking to the tune. I took the tune to a BMQ rehearsal and the guys liked it. I also took it to the World Stage Jazz Workshop and played it. Nobody had heard of the tune. When I told them it was written by Hampton Hawes, they asked, "Who is he?" Most learned that day that Hamp was one of the "baddest" bop pianists to come out of L.A.

Subsequently, I discovered a super bop recording of "Jackie" by Wardell Gray's quintet from 1952 that featured Hamp on piano and Art Farmer on trumpet. So, in homage to the great Hampton Hawes, we recorded "Jackie." The solos on this tune (Randy, Greg, and Marion) are brief and sparkling. Long live bebop.



4 Greg Broadous, John Wms-Kohlmeyer, Marion Newton, and Paul Batson

SWAY and BODY AND SOUL

The BMQ recording session took place over two consecutive days in early 2010 (Saturday, January 30 and Sunday, January 31). The two tunes that feature our vocalist, Allegra de Peralta ("Sway" and "Body and Soul") were recorded on Sunday. To this end, John Wms-Kohlmeyer, the producer of this recording date, employed a two-step process. First, on Sunday afternoon, he recorded the vocal-less band for both tunes. Greg directed us on these two tunes. It was weird not playing background to Allegra's voice, but it went smoothly. Once we were done with the instrumental tracks for these two tunes, John broke down the entire room that had been set up for the instruments (which had

taken him several hours to construct the prior day) and re-set it with a mic for Allegra. That evening when she arrived, she stood alone in the recording room with the instrumental background coming through her headset. She sang beautifully. As the band members and guests sat in the sound room relaxing and listening, Greg would instruct her to redo parts of the tunes until he got them where he wanted them. Then, voila! It was done. These were the last two tunes we recorded during the session (because of the need to breakdown the set). What a great way to end. Sometime before midnight Sunday, we said our goodbyes, and each of us rode off separately into the misty night. I was homebound, thirsting for a cold glass of nonfat Lactaid and some peaceful rest.



5 Allegra de Peralta

BLUE BOSSA

My first gig with Blue Morning took place nearly five years ago at King David, a restaurant located on Pico Blvd., a block east of La Cienega in West Los Angeles. It was just around the corner from one of my favorite eateries, the Cuban restaurant Versailles, which was just across the street from the old office of International Black Writers and Artists, for which I served as president for an eight-year stretch. The musicians in the band that night included Ricardo on drums, Paul on guitar, John Colao on keyboard, John Wms-Kohlmeyer on upright bass (the producer and engineer of this recording session), Derrick on soprano sax, and yours truly on alto sax – we had all met at the World Stage Jazz Workshop coordinated by Latif. That night, we played at the back of the restaurant between the restrooms and the dining room. Because the restaurant's dining room was long and narrow, frequently we had to negotiate patrons walking to and from the restroom.

One of the tunes we played that Sunday night was Kenny Dorham's "Blue Bossa," a jazz standard. While we had played the tune several times in the workshop, it was not until

this night while listening to the group play before my solo that I began to hear the distinctive changes in sound (tonal centers) in this 16-bar blues. So I thought, if I can *hear* the form, then I don't have to *know* the form. All I need do is listen. It was an epiphany. No longer would I have to count the 16 bars of the tune. No longer would I have to cogitate on the sequence of chord changes. All I had to do was listen. If I got lost, listening would get me back to the main road. Suddenly, I felt musically free (at least on "Blue Bossa").

As a result of that experience, my typical daily music practice includes learning to *hear* tunes. My solos are more organic on tunes that I can hear. What an epiphany. Before that moment at King David, I played everything by sight more than by sound. That's because as a kid my formal music instruction focused on sight reading. Now I had a new personal musical goal – learn first by a combination of sight (my strength) and sound (my weakness) and then internalize the sound in order to eliminate the need for sight. Thereby, I would be positioned to discover the true nature of my improvisational spirit.

Hearing was the main benefit I began to get from the World Stage Jazz Workshop. I kept listening and listening to the rhythm section play through the chord-and-rhythm structures of tunes; I kept trying to mark the forms internally. Some tunes I began to hear well. Others I'm still working on.

I know, too, that how well one can hear a tune also depends on the quality of the rhythm section. So listen to BMQ's rhythm section on this performance of "Blue Bossa" and you'll know why I *hear* music when BMQ plays.

BACK AT THE CHICKEN SHACK

An entire weekend had been devoted to recording our music. It was fun, but it was also hard work. Come Sunday afternoon we were about done. We had laid down tracks for 13 tunes, in most instances with multiple takes. It was time to break down our instruments. But how could we resist doing one more for the road? The blues – deep, blue, down-home, funky – is at the heart of our music, be it swing, bop, post-bop, straight-ahead, Latin jazz, avant garde, or free music. The blues is at the core of the people from whom this music sprang. So without thought, following Paul's lead on guitar, we swung into a spontaneous, rousing jam on Jimmy Smith's "Back at the Chicken Shack." There is joy in the performance. It sounds like the end of slavery, the Emancipation Proclamation or Juneteenth in Texas. It sounds like something the folks would have jumped up and danced to at Harpo's juke joint in the Color Purple. It's traveling music – hoboing on a freight train, or Michael Clayton ducking into a yellow cab at the end of a remarkable day and saying "Let me have \$50 worth." We don't always know where we're going, but we know where we've been, and now it's time to ride on!

ALL THE THINGS YOU ARE

I got a chance to sit out and listen to a nice arrangement of the standard, “All the Things You Are,” which features BMQ’s guitarist, Paul Batson. On the intro, Paul does a mellow rubato treatment of the melody backed by Marion on bass. Then there’s a pause and the band swings into the melody straight-ahead. Paul takes a first-rate solo. Greg follows, craftily slipping a sliver of Mocking Bird into his solo. Immediately after Greg’s solo, Paul and Marion return to the seductive rubato and take the tune out. This tune has a complex structure, but Paul, Marion, Greg, and Ricardo make it seem easy.



6 Marion Newton and Paul Batson

CHEESECAKE

Cheesecake, a delectable confection baked by the great tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon, features Paul on guitar. On sax, I play the melody with Paul. After the melody lays the territory, Paul takes a delightful solo. Greg follows him with some titillating work on the ivories. All praises to Dex.

CANADIAN SUNSET

Here’s a bit of a secret. Marion, John Wms-Kohlmeyer (the producer of this recording date), and I ventured a novel two-bass-plus-sax treatment of “Canadian Sunset.” The more I listen to it, the more interesting and enticing it sounds. But it won’t appear on the CD. We want to perfect it before releasing it to the public. Who knows, fifty years from now the original unreleased version of the tune may become a collector’s item.

That said, I close by extending our heartfelt thanks to John Wms-Kohlmeyer for producing BMQ’s upcoming recording; after two long days of music production on all

cylinders, John was “fit to be tired.” BTW, a youthful John played acoustic bass with BMQ before he went off to UCLA a few years back to study music and engineering. Even in his youth, John’s playing was free, facile, strong, and richly grounded in the history of our music. Remember the name John Wms-Kohlmeyer.



7Marion Newton , John Wms-Kohlmeyer, Bobby Williams