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Kenny Barron Biography

“One of the foremost exponents of the modern mainstream.”—*The Independent*

“One of the top jazz pianists in the world”—*Los Angeles Times*

“The most lyrical piano player of our time.”—*Jazz Weekly*

When Kenny Barron first heard that the National Endowment for the Arts inducted him into its prestigious Jazz Masters class of 2010, he felt honored to be among the greats of the music who have also received the U.S.’s top honor in jazz. “I was excited at the acknowledgment of my service,” says the 66-year pianist whose solo career has also garnered him numerous awards in jazz critics and readers polls. “I’ve been playing music for a long time, and this award reflects that I’ve made a significant contribution.”

One of the most renowned, most lyrical—and busiest—pianists in jazz today, Barron is a multiple-Grammy nominee, was honored with induction into the American Jazz Hall of Fame (2005), and received the MAC Lifetime Achievement Award (2005) and the Mid Atlantic Arts Living Legacy Award (2009). Also in 2009, Barron was inducted as a Fellow in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, an esteemed honorary society and center for independent policy research.

While relishing the accolades, Barron reflects on his career as a top-drawer artist as a work in progress. “I don’t think of myself necessarily as an innovator,” he says. “But what I have contributed to jazz is keeping a commitment to the honesty of the music. I never do anything that’s too slick, and I play what I feel. I believe in having fun, which took a long time to discover—to not take myself so seriously.”

As a composer, arranger and bandleader, Barron has spent five decades at the forefront of the jazz piano aristocracy. An in-demand sideman in his early days on the jazz scene, the Philadelphia native launched his solo career in 1973 with *Sunset to Dawn*, released by Muse Records. He has recorded more than forty albums as a leader, including his latest, *The Traveler*, in 2008, on Universal France/Sunnyside.

Undergirded by Barron's hard-swinging rhythm section of bassist Kiyoshi Kitagawa and drummer Francisco Mela, *The Traveler* featured the pianist's music with lyrics that a friend had written. "At one point there was talk about putting a songbook together, but then I decided to make a recording," he says. "I'm pretty happy with that album." A varied cast of singers including Grady Tate, Gretchen Parlato and Ann Hampton Callaway gave voice to Barron's tunes. Additional instrumental support came from saxophonist Steve Wilson and guitarist Lionel Loueke.

Barron has led several iterations of his own bands over the years, serving as a lyrical mainstream maestro oftentimes to young musicians getting their starts in the jazz world. A professor of music at Rutgers University from 1973-2000, he has not only become a mentor to many of his students, but he's also found himself learning from them. "I've been around the jazz scene for a long time, and I've had all these great experiences," he says. "But what's important to me is to be open and continue to learn—especially from musicians in the younger generation."

Case in point: Barron's 2004 CD *Images*, which was partly based on a composition commissioned by the Wharton Center at Michigan State University. His quintet for the album comprised an impressive cast of youthful musicians, including vibraphonist Stefon Harris (the young vet of the team with several albums as a leader to his credit), flutist Anne Drummond (who made her debut recording in 2009), bassist Kitagawa and drummer Kim Thompson (who today in addition to her own jazz group serves as a member of pop star Beyoncé's all-female touring band).

Over the years as a leader, Barron has not shied away from seeking out new experiences. In the early '80s, along with saxophonist Charlie Rouse, bassist Buster Williams and drummer Ben Riley, he co-founded the highly acclaimed collective Sphere, which celebrated the music of Thelonious Monk with its own spin on his songs, augmented by originals written by the band members. "This was definitely one of the highlights of my career, not only for the music but also for the great personnel," Barron says. "We wanted to form a collective like the Modern Jazz Quartet. The idea for the band name came from a discussion Buster and I had. At first, we thought of Circle, then decided on Sphere. At the time, I didn't know that was Thelonious' middle name."

Sphere signed with Elektra Records, and the first album, *Four for All*, was recorded in Rudy Van Gelder's studio. Barron recalls, "Right after we recorded the session, Buster and I were driving home and we heard the news that Thelonious had just passed away."

When Rouse, Monk's saxophonist, died in 1988, Sphere went on hiatus. The band returned to action ten years later with the addition of alto saxophonist Gary Bartz and released the critically heralded eponymous album on Verve in 1998, followed by a sold-out tour.

Other diverse musical quests Barron has embarked on include potent duo improvisations with violinist Regina Carter (2001's *Freefall*, nominated for a Grammy in Best Jazz Instrumental Solo category), bassist Charlie Haden (1998's *Night & the City*, nominated for two Grammys: Best Jazz Album and Best Solo Instrumental), and percussionist Mino Cinelu (1996's *Swamp Sally*). The latter, Barron says, was a "growth spurt" date that stretched him as a performer. "I learned a lot from that recording, which we did in Mino's living room," he recalls. "It was so much fun. I played keyboards and even acoustic bass. I played bass in high school, so at least I can walk a bass line."

He cites another memorable challenge: *Scratch*, a 1985 trio recording for Enja Records that he made with bassist Dave Holland and drummer Daniel Humair. "I had never met either of them before we recorded," Barron says. "I loved Dave's work but had never played with him. The session was a great experience for me."

In recent years, Barron penchant to seek adventure led him to fully embrace Brazilian music, featured on his 2003 *Canta Brasil* CD, which co-starred Trio da Paz and Drummond. "My fascination with Brazilian music started when I was playing with Dizzy Gillespie," he explains. "I also remember spending time with Yusef Lateef, who influenced me in my improvisational skills, and he was listening to Sergio Mendes' *Brasil '65*. That blew me away. So I started to become familiar with the samba school. But meeting Trio da Paz opened the door to all kinds of different Brazilian rhythms and music from the various regions of the country."

While Barron turned heads and opened ears early on as a member of Gillespie's quintet from 1962–66 and has appeared as an invaluable sideman since (with, among many others, Chet Baker, Ron Carter, Stan Getz, Joe Henderson, Freddie Hubbard and Bobby Hutcherson), it's his maturation as a leader that has brought him well-deserved recognition as a true jazz master.

In 2004, he made his Carnegie Hall debut as a leader, and the next year New York's Jazz at Lincoln Center hosted a three-week Kenny Barron Festival. Also in 2005, Universal France/Sunnyside released *The Perfect Set: Live at Bradley's, Part Two*, which documented the second set he and trio members Ben Riley and

Ray Drummond recorded on April 6, 1996 at the now-defunct Greenwich Village club, Bradley's. The first set had been released in 2002 as *Live at Bradley's* on Universal France.

Not one to rest on his laurels, Barron continues to tour widely—and learning more as he goes. “I feel like I’m still evolving, trying to grow,” he says. “As I get older, I find that I’m more willing to leave my comfort zone and take chances as an improviser.”