



### **The Traveler**

Kenny Barron | Sunnyside Records



August 2008

It would be quite a feat to have traveled in Kenny Barron's shoes. A venerable pianist whose career has spanned more than fifty years of performances with a host of greats--Lee Morgan, Dizzy Gillespie, Freddie Hubbard, Yusef Lateef, Charlie Rouse and many others. His music has traveled across the paths of blues, bop, modern, and other terrains. Whether working with vocalists such as jazz diva, Abbey Lincoln or taking Brazilian music excursions in *Canta Brasil* (Sunnyside Records, 2002), Barron has covered a lot of ground and done so impressively.

*The Traveler* finds Barron once again on the move--a colorful palette of ten tracks with excellent sounds--featuring a new rhythm section (Japanese bassist Kiyoshi Kitagawa and Cuban drummer Francisco Mela) and some very special guests. From the start of the title track, Barron's still got the touch--panache, grace, fire, and empathy. The result is a perfect portrait of his repertoire and depth.

The smooth soprano sax of Steve Wilson is present on three selections delineated by quick and supple angularities. On "Speed Trap" he joins Barron's core group on a bopping swing-time caper, held tautly by Kitagawa's impeccable quick tempo bass-walk.

Guitarist Lionel Loueké, who is becoming increasingly visible these days, appears on three selections starting with "Duet," a twisting improvisation duo-piece. His acoustic strings chase and interweave with Barron's exploring keys.

Barron's empathetic touch also glows warmly with fine singers--Ann Hampton Callaway ("Clouds") and Grady Tate ("Um Beijo")--delivering polished yet earthy lyrics imbued with passionate prose. "Phantoms" is another mesmerizing opening with Mela's chants and percussion, Loueké's unique guitarisms, and dark sensual singing by rising vocalist Gretchen Parlato, as Barron comps and delivers a superb free solo.

Added to the mix is the jubilant "Calypso" and an introspective and telling solo piano rendition of Eubie Blake's "Memories of You" to close this fine recording by one of jazz's most respected pianists.



***Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel***

December 2, 2007

**Pianist Barron could slow down a little bit**

Hours after flying here, just ahead of Saturday's storm, pianist Kenny Barron thanked several hundred hardy souls in Alverno College's Pitman Theatre for showing up. Gently, he observed: "I think you're crazy. I'd be home in front of the TV with a cognac." The only thing missing from that cozy picture was the roaring fire. For the next 140 minutes, Barron's trio supplied that.

No pianist in jazz plays faster or more facilely with less apparent effort. Barron spent most of two long sets tossing off complex runs at racehorse tempos on the Pitman's Steinway grand. That, alas, didn't allow enough room for lyricism, another Barron strength.

For his first Milwaukee visit in years, Barron alternated his own compositions with standards, two by another bop-oriented keyboard giant, the late Thelonious Monk. Among other things, the evening proved that Barron is, by a mile, a better pianist than Monk. Also, that Monk is, by far, the superior composer.

The night's best nonstandard was "The First Year," a lovely ballad from one of Barron's students. To read it just right, the master pulled on glasses. Surprisingly, Barron also felt compelled to don spectacles to read his own, rather repetitive, minor key blues "The Traveler."

Barron was joined here by an international rhythm section. A strong bass accompanist, Japanese import Kiyoshi Kitagawa, didn't make very interesting use of his extended solo time. He and energetic drummer Francisco Mela, a Cuba native, were both overamplified. But nothing could overpower Barron, whose right hand may be jazz's most reliable since Oscar Peterson's prime.

Opening with Irving Berlin's familiar "How Deep is the Ocean," Barron exhibited the theme variations that make jazz accessible to marginal listeners. But that -it turned out - was only a tease. He also soloed winningly on "Ask Me Now," Barron replacing Monk's jagged angularity with sumptuous harmonies. Pumping up the tempo on Monk's "Well, You Needn't," the pianist offered some of the evening's strongest playing, especially in an unaccompanied opening chorus.

Barron's "Lullaby" offered a movie theme's rather vacant decorations. A piano-bass unison statement of the encore's catchy "Calypso" offered some rare close rapport. But no melodic narrative was discernible in an untitled romp that the leader suggested could be called "Fast Forward."

If jazz master Kenny Barron ever decides, in the marketing manner of jazz and pop acts, to title an entire tour, "Fast Forward" will do just fine. For them all.

## Kenny Barron, Ronnie Scott's, London

**By Sholto Byrnes**

Wednesday, 8 March 2006

Fame has taken a long time to attach itself to Kenny Barron. It's only in the past decade or so that this 62-year-old American has been recognised as the impeccable pianist that he is, and it's been 15 years since he last played at Ronnie Scott's. But during his apprenticeships as a sideman to the likes of Dizzy Gillespie and Stan Getz, Barron was honing a style that makes him one of the foremost exponents of the modern mainstream.

He was supported at Ronnie's by a group led by trumpeter Gerard Presencer, who runs the Royal Academy's jazz course. I hope Presencer's students came, for Barron gave a masterclass in how to tackle standards such as "Surrey With the Fringe On Top" and "The Very Thought of You". Any jazz musician can play these tunes; they're the alphabet. Making "A B C D E F G" sound interesting is the trick.

Barron's way was often to start with a solo rubato passage, then bring the bass player and drummer in on a light, but extremely tight, arrangement of the head. This would often involve the bass keeping a two feel, while the four-time that the band would later swing into during the solos was suggested by Barron's longtime bandmate Ben Riley on the drums. Barron himself sometimes alters the chords a little with mannerisms, which smarten up a standard as cufflinks do a shirt. And when Barron uses them, it's as though he wrote the textbook on how to dress properly.

Through most of his set his playing was supremely understated: a little riff here, a stream of notes in the right hand there. But the content of his phrases was always intelligent - a conversation with the audience that flattered their knowledge.

He brought the dynamics down to pianissimo, and the spell he cast kept Ronnie's, whose customers cannot always be relied on to be quiet, absolutely silent. From that awesome hush, he occasionally raised the volume just a notch, and showed how a trio can swing like billy-o while still playing very softly.

Barron ended the first set with one of his own numbers, which he wrote for his granddaughter. The touch of melancholy so often to be found in his compositions was present but there's nothing sentimental in Barron's playing, as there is in the attempts of thousands of cocktail pianists who try to copy the form of which he is the master. But that's style for you; and when it comes to dressing up a standard, Barron is Savile Row all the way.

Published November 30, 2006

## The Barron of jazz

**The pianist has shared the stage with big-name headliners, but tonight at Drake the spotlight shines on him alone.**

By MICHAEL MORAIN  
REGISTE STAFF WRITER

Kenny Barron is the jazz world's Kevin Bacon.

The top-notch pianist has shared the stage with many of the biggest names in jazz, which counts for a lot in an art form so defined by personal style.

In fact, he has performed with so many headliners that "fame has taken a long time to attach itself" to Barron himself, according to a jazz critic for the Independent in London.

But when he performs a solo concert Saturday at Drake University's Sheslow Auditorium, the spotlight will be his alone.

What the audience will likely hear sophisticated phrasing, understated playfulness - is a mix of the influences that have shaped his 50-year career.

To get a sense for the pianist's background, here's a jazz-inspired variation on a theme, the Six Degrees of Kenny Barron:

**1. Legendary jazz pianist Thelonius Monk** played a seven-month stint in 1957 at the Five Spot, a swanky nightclub in New York City's East Village.

There, Monk helped pioneer bebop, a style characterized by speedy tempos and improvisation based on chord structure rather than melody.

A few years later, Barron, 19, moved from his native Philadelphia to New York and landed his own gig at the club. His knack for bebop soon caught the attention of ...

**2. James Moody, saxophonist.** After performing several concerts together, Moody was so impressed with Barron's talent that he recommended the young pianist to ...

**3. Dizzy Gillespie, band leader and trumpet virtuoso.** Moody's endorsement was so persuasive, in fact, that Gillespie hired Barron to join his band even though he had never heard him perform.

During his five years with Gillespie, Barron toured all over the world and developed a talent for Latin- and Caribbean-inspired rhythms. His work eventually led him to collaborate with ...

**4. Yusef Lateef, saxophonist.** Between tours with Lateef in the 1970s, Barron earned a degree from Empire State College and became a professor at Rutgers University, where he taught until 2000. In 1974, Barron recorded "Sunset to Dawn," his first of more than 40 albums as a leader.

ZOOM



**Kenny Barron**

**WHEN:** 8 p.m. Saturday

**WHERE:** Drake University's Sheslow Auditorium, 2507 University Ave., Des Moines

**TICKETS:** \$28.50 for adults, \$12.50 for students; [www.civicmusic.org](http://www.civicmusic.org).

Many of his most famous recordings, however, were collaborations with icons like Ella Fitzgerald, Chet Baker and, perhaps most important ...

**5. Stan Getz, saxophonist.** When pianist Chick Corea left Getz' quartet, Barron stepped in. The group's success prompted him to start his own quartet, Sphere, which focused on the music of, who else ...

**6. Thelonius Monk.**

Now, Barron leads several influential groups, including the Kenny Barron Trio and Canta Brasil, in addition to Sphere. Now, finally, Barron's is the name that jazz fans recognize.

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JAZZ NOTES

The Boston Globe

## He shares understated elegance with students and audiences alike

### Pianist's quintet allows him to mentor younger musicians while performing

By Bill Beuttler, Globe Correspondent | January 7, 2005

The adjectives that Kenny Barron uses to describe two of his favorite pianists -- Hank Jones and the late Tommy Flanagan -- apply equally well to himself.

"Understated," Barron, 61, says of those two elders, from his home in Brooklyn. "A very elegant style. Very clear and logical and pristine."

Barron's elegant clarity will be on display next Friday and Saturday (the shows had been scheduled for next Thursday and Friday), when the pianist brings a young quintet featuring vibraphonist Stefon Harris to the Regattabar -- the ensemble is rounded out by Anne Drummond on flute, Kiyoshi Kitagawa on bass, and Kim Thompson on drums. The unusual front line of vibes and flute gives the music a shimmering, airy lushness, nicely documented on the group's 2004 CD, "Images."

Barron contributed six of the disc's 10 compositions, which were augmented by one cover apiece of Bud Powell ("Hallucinations") and Wayne Shorter ("Footprints") and two pieces by Harris, one of jazz's best young composers.

The quintet also gives Barron a chance to mentor musicians in a non-classroom setting. He teaches at Manhattan School of Music and Juilliard, though he didn't pursue a degree until Yusef Lateef nudged him toward doing so in the early '70s. By then, Barron had logged stints with James Moody, Dizzy Gillespie, Freddie Hubbard, Lateef, and others, and he would follow those with a lengthy 1980s run with Stan Getz.

So Barron knows the value of academic training, and the educational value of performing beside established artists. He also knows about the energy that young bandmates can bring to a bandleader. Drummond and Thompson, both recent Manhattan School graduates, are examples of that.

"He just really believes in my talent, which is motivating," says Drummond. "The music is always pushing my boundaries."

Also important, she says, is that they have a lot of fun. "And I can speak for the entire band," she says.

Unlike Drummond, Thompson wasn't a student of Barron's. In fact, until he hired her for a gig, Barron had never heard Thompson play. About a week before a trip to Cuba, Ben Riley, a drummer and longtime associate of Barron's, became sick and couldn't go. So Barron asked Thompson, whom he had met in St. Louis and whom Riley had taken under his wing.

"I saw her in the hallway, and I said, 'Listen, do you have a passport?' She said, 'Yeah.' 'OK, you want to go to Cuba?' "

The first time he heard her was during a sound check in Havana. "Blew me away," he says.

As instrumentalists, Drummond and Thompson are helping buck a trend. Until recently, women in jazz had been relegated largely to work as vocalists. Unfortunately, some of the larger jazz labels are turning up their noses these days at instrumentalists of either sex. Barron, for example, recorded "Images" for Verve France. But Sunnyside released the disc in the United States because Verve's US arm wasn't interested in distributing it. Verve US, after all, had new CDs from Diana Krall and Jamie Cullum to promote.

"Everybody's trying to find the formula," says Barron. "I understand: It's business. You want to make money.

"But I look at some of the original owners of some of those labels -- like Verve, with Norman Granz. You know Norman Granz loved the music. With Blue Note, Alfred Lion and Frank Wolff -- they loved the music. They really

loved the music. And that's the difference. Most of the guys [now], they're just businessmen."

These businessmen, says Barron, are convinced that only singers sell.

"I can't say they're wrong," he says, laughing. "Look at the number of records that Norah Jones has sold and that Diana Krall sells.

"At the same time," he adds, "you will see a full-page ad in The New York Times for a concert that Diana Krall is doing. You won't see that for a concert that Ron Carter is doing, or Sonny Rollins. So there are a lot of things that need to happen in terms of publicity."

Instrumentalists somehow manage to keep New York's jazz clubs thriving. Barron says he was out most nights between Christmas and New Year's catching music in places like the Village Vanguard, Sweet Rhythm, and Zinc Bar, and that those rooms were invariably packed.

"There's an audience for the music," he says. "I really believe that."

**Kenny Barron Quintet featuring Stefon Harris will perform next Friday and Saturday at Regattabar, two sets nightly at 7:30 and 10 p.m. \$25. Call 617-395-7757.**

**McPartland doctorate:** Marian McPartland will receive an honorary doctorate of music degree and deliver a keynote address Tuesday at Berklee College of Music's annual two-day faculty conference. McPartland, 86, has released more than 100 albums in her 65-year career as a pianist and composer, and she was among the 2000 crop of National Endowment for the Arts American Jazz Masters.

But her best-known accomplishment is her 25-year-old National Public Radio show "Piano Jazz," on which she has chatted and played piano duets with everyone from Ray Charles to Norah Jones, and virtually any jazz pianist one might care to name. "Piano Jazz" was voted best syndicated radio show of 2004 by JazzTimes readers, and it can be heard on Worcester's WICN-FM (90.5) Wednesdays at 2 p.m. and Sundays at 4 p.m. ■



Review Courtesy [AllAboutJazz.com](http://AllAboutJazz.com)

## The Perfect Set: Live at Bradley's II

Kenny Barron Trio | Sunnyside Records

By [Thomas H. Greenland](#)

In the Middle East, "tarab," a state of musical and spiritual ecstasy, is produced and maintained when a creative feedback loop is established between performers and listeners. The transformation is dependent not only on the skilled artisans, but on the environment created by the musically initiated audience. In jazz, people and place are equally important: Bradley's, in the Village, was one such place, where after-hours aficionados came to hear the best piano trio jazz that New York had to offer. *The Perfect Set: Live at Bradley's II* captures three masterful musicians and one enthusiastic audience in mutual jazz worship.

Pianist Kenny Barron, a conduit for many jazz spirits, most notably Thelonious Monk, Ahmad Jamal, and Art Tatum, preserves his own unique identity in spite of these influences; an effortless virtuoso, he combines featherlight grace with prodigious technical prowess. Drummer Ben Riley and bassist Ray Drummond match Barron's artistry, creating a trio sound that is well-oiled yet unspoiled, each member continually daring the others to peek around the next musical corner, while the ambiance of Bradley's and the attunement of the crowd heighten and enhance this atmosphere of expectation and exploration.

Highlights of the set include Barron's beautiful unaccompanied intros to "You Don't Know What Love Is" and "Twilight," the extended bass-drum exchanges on "You Don't Know," the piano-drum interplay on "The Only One" and "Well You Needn't," and Riley's swinging solo on "The Only One." Barron is an improvisational encyclopedia of tremolos, chord clusters, cascading runs, rhythmic/melodic motifs, and empathetic interplay with his partners in groove.

And, behind it all: the ears, the crowd, the witnesses. Bradley Cunningham, listener extraordinaire, is gone. Bradley's, shrine of the late-night jazz tarab, is gone. But the musicians and their audience survive, listening, improvising, and worshipping.



**Track Listing:** House Introductions; You Don't Know What Love Is; The Only One; Twilight Song; Shuffle Boil; Well You Needn't.

**Personnel:** Kenny Barron: piano; Ray Drummond: bass; Ben Riley: drums.

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