

Philly-born Kenny Barron comes 'home' to Detroit



Mark Stryker, Detroit Free Press Staff Writer 1:43 p.m. EST February 10, 2016



(Photo: KennyBarron.com)

One of the finest and most widely recorded pianists in jazz, Kenny Barron was born and raised in Philadelphia, but Detroit played an important role in his development, too.

Barron was a teenager in the late '50s when he heard the Miles Davis recording of "In Your Own Sweet Way" that opens with an introduction by Detroit pianist Tommy Flanagan, whose chords sound as if they were sent from heaven. Flanagan's lyrical touch at the keyboard made an immediate impact on Barron, lodging itself deep within his creative DNA. You can hear it in the refined elan of Barron's own touch, the evenness of his tone and his fundamental marriage of grace and guts — the latter a defining trait of all the great pianists from Detroit, including Flanagan, Hank Jones, Roland Hanna and even the more percussive Barry Harris.

So think of Barron's return to Detroit on Sunday as a homecoming once removed. The 72-year-old pianist, who was named an NEA Jazz Master in 2010, performs with student octets from Michigan State University's terrific jazz program at the Carr Center. The appearance caps a week of statewide touring as part of MSU's jazz residency program underwritten by the MSU Federal Credit Union.

Barron has long been a standard bearer for the jazz mainstream. His solos are models of swing, melodic imagination and harmonic sophistication, and the blues are never far from the surface. He's also strikingly versatile, fitting seamlessly into any setting, from the standard songbook to form-stretching post-bop, Latin material and beyond. His A-list resume, which dates back to joining Dizzy Gillespie when he was just 18, also includes key associations with Freddie Hubbard, Yusef Lateef, Ron Carter, Stan Getz and the cooperative band Sphere. Seeing his name on a recording as a sideman is always a good sign, and he brings a similar consistency to his own bands.

The last two times Barron was in Detroit, he was working in duet settings — once with bassist Dave Holland (on the heels of their exceptional 2014 record "The Art of Conversation") and, most recently, with the Detroit-born violinist Regina Carter, with whom he's shared a 15-year musical partnership.

Barron has, in fact, forged special bonds with a number of Detroiters — not just Regina Carter but also bassist Ron Carter and the late Lateef, a heavyweight tenor saxophonist, flutist and oboist. Barron was just 17 when Lateef asked him to sub on a gig in Philadelphia. Shortly thereafter Lateef hired him for a week at the Minor Key in Detroit. And it was in Detroit that Lateef asked Barron to contribute an original composition, as well as an additional arrangement, to an upcoming recording. That LP, "The Centaur and the Phoenix," recorded in October 1960, became Barron's introduction to the wider jazz world, though he doesn't even appear on it as a pianist.

A decade later, Barron would spend roughly four years with Lateef's quartet in the 1970s. Lateef's ceaseless curiosity and discipline left a large imprint on the pianist musically and personally. Lateef's prodding even influenced Barron to go to school during those years and earn a degree. So, yeah, Kenny Barron and Detroit — there's some history there.

7 p.m. Sunday, Carr Center, 311 E. Grand River, Detroit. 313-965-8430. www.thecarrcenter.org. \$25.

Barron will also appear with MSU Jazz Octets at 7 and 9:30 p.m. Friday, Cook Recital Hall, Music Building, 333 W. Circle Dr., MSU campus, East Lansing. 517-353-5340. \$10 adult, \$8 senior, free for students or those under 18. Other performance stops include Oxford, Hastings and more: Details at www.music.msu.edu/.

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