

Pop Talk: Barron's goal is to 'paint pictures when I'm playing'

by George Varga

Kenny Barron is held in such high esteem by some of the legends of jazz that it's surprising this veteran pianist, composer, bandleader and sideman is not yet a legend himself.

"He's at the top of our profession," said Pulitzer Prize-winning trumpeter Wynton Marsalis. "His name means excellence."

Saxophone great James Moody was equally effusive.

KENNY BARRON - Veteran pianist Kenny Barron is held in high esteem by some of the top jazz players in America, such as Wynton Marsalis and James Moody. Barron has played with such heavyweights as Freddie Hubbard, Buddy Rich, Milt Jackson, Stan Getz and more. CNS Photo courtesy of John Sann. After hiring Barron - then still a teenager - to be in his band in 1962, Moody recommended him to replace Lalo Schifrin in Dizzy Gillespie's group, where Barron became a key player for several years. His resume soon expanded to include collaborations with such heavyweights as Freddie Hubbard, Buddy Rich, Milt Jackson, Stan Getz and more.

"I've worked with Kenny a lot and I've never heard him make a mistake," Moody said. "He's fantastic! And all of his solos sound like portraits."

The pianist, who is as notable for his self-effacing demeanor as for his sublime artistic skills, sounded both flattered and a bit embarrassed when apprised of Moody's accolades.

"That's a high compliment, so I'd be silly not to agree," Barron said. "I don't know if I could live up to that, but one of the things I try and reach for is to try and paint pictures when I'm playing, if possible. I try to be lyrical; I want to be as lyrical as possible.

"Most of the people who influenced me - like Tommy Flanagan and Hank Jones - played that way. They really created pictures when they played. I still strive for that."

Of late, Barron has been striving to paint his musical portraits at solo concerts, as well as with his band. The prospect of performing sans accompanists is one that both excites him and gives him cause for pause.

"It's a little scary because you have nobody (else) to lean on, although the scare only lasts for a tune or two," Barron said from his New York home.

"The other variable, which affects pianists more than anyone else, is that you never know the condition of the instrument you'll be playing. A bass player or saxophonist travels with their instrument. I get to play the piano du jour, and you don't always have time to acquaint yourself with that instrument. It might be a great piano, but it's not your piano."

Lyricism and clarity are hallmarks of Barron's playing. So is his supple touch, refined harmonic sense and ability to sound fully in control even as he constantly pushes himself to explore new terrain within the jazz tradition.

He has more than 40 albums as a leader to his credit, and many more with other artists. His voluminous discography includes recordings with everyone from Benny Carter and George Benson to Ella Fitzgerald, Elvin Jones and bass great Charlie Haden.

Barron is also notable as a jazz educator and as a skilled bandleader who is constantly nurturing young talents. The quintet he led from 2004 to 2006, to cite a recent example, featured vibraphonist Stefon Harris, Japanese bassist Kiyoshi Kitagawa, flutist Ann Drummond and drum dynamo Kim Thompson, who is now in Beyonce's new, all-female band.

"I like the energy of younger players," said Barron, 63. "Sometimes when you play with people your own age, you play safe and do what's comfortable, rather than challenging yourself. Playing with younger people allows you to challenge yourself."

He laughed.

"If I knew what I know now when I was starting out, I would still play music, without question. But I would probably practice a lot more so that I'd be a lot better."

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