



BIOGRAPHY

Ben Williams

As an energetic six year old, Ben Williams was as curious as a cat. Ben's mother worked for Congressman John Conyers (an avid jazz lover) on Capitol Hill, so when she took the youngster into the office on his school break, a watchful eye was in order. One afternoon, while rambling around Conyers' large, leather appointed office, Ben discovered a huge object that instantly captured his imagination. The shiny upright bass was like nothing the kid had ever seen. He tapped on it. He popped a string. He climbed up on it. "What is this thing?" he wondered.

Twenty years later, Ben Williams is still surprised at that chance meeting.

"Its low frequency attracted me," Williams recalls, "the way the instrument felt when I touched it. Then later, just the feeling of playing a groove. When you play a bass the whole instrument vibrates. It almost feels like the spirit of another human being. It's like dancing with somebody and being in full contact with them. And the sound of the instrument appealed to me. It's warm and deep and it resonated with me."

On the eve of his first CD, *State of Art*, Ben Williams is one of the most sought after bassists in the world, his resume a who's who of jazz wisdom: Wynton Marsalis, Herbie Hancock, Pat Metheny, Terence Blanchard, Christian McBride Big Band, Nicholas Payton, Paquito D'Rivera, Cyrus Chestnut, Benny Golson, George Duke, Eric Reed, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Roy Hargrove, and Mulgrew Miller, to name a few.

Ben's warm, woody tone, flowing groove, melodic phrasing, and storytelling approach has found favor among musicians, but also a larger audience. A bandleader, musical educator, composer, and electric *and* acoustic bassist, Ben was the winner of the 2009 Thelonious Monk Institute International Jazz Competition, a prestigious and important award that has propelled many a promising career. Working with New York's finest jazz musicians even before graduating from Juilliard, Williams showcased his band, Sound Effect, at The Jazz Gallery in New York, receiving an enthusiastic *New York Times* review. Writer Nate Chinen stated "Williams took several long solos in his first set at The Jazz Gallery . . . and each one felt more like an entitlement than an indulgence." Williams has recorded and performed regularly as a member of bands led by saxophonist Marcus Strickland, pianist Jacky Terrasson, and vibraphonist Stefon Harris. He's led his own groups at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola, Harlem Stage, Rubin Museum of Art, Tribeca PAC in New York City, and SPAC in Saratoga Springs, NY. *State of Art* signals Williams' emergence as a prominent voice in the greater jazz community.

Growing up in an artistic family of musicians, visual artists, and rappers, young Ben Williams didn't plan on being a bassist and bandleader. He wanted to be a rock star. His heroes were Prince and Michael Jackson, not Duke Ellington and Charles Mingus. Once again, a chance meeting altered his future.

“I’d been playing piano by ear, but I wanted to play guitar,” Williams recalls. “My middle school offered a strings class where figured I could learn guitar. Then I got there and it was all violins and cellos - no guitars. So I choose the coolest instrument I saw, the bass. It just looked right.”

Williams was a natural. He excelled on both bass and piano, and once enrolled at the Duke Ellington High School of the Arts, he became a star student, performing in jazz band, gospel choir, and orchestra, as well as extracurricular gigs. Williams graduated with honors and a Best in Instrumental Music Award. He garnered scholarships from the Fish Middleton Scholarship Competition of the East Coast Jazz Festival, the International Society of Bassist’s Competition, the Steans Music Institute, the Duke Ellington Jazz Society, the International Association for Jazz Education (IAJE) and DC Public Schools City-Wide Annual Piano Competition. Williams received his Bachelor’s in Music Education at Michigan State University in 2007, and his Master’s in Music from the Juilliard School in 2009.

“In high school I dedicated myself to the bass and to jazz,” Williams says. “I knew this could be a profession, and if I could do what I love for a living -- man, what is better than that? You always feel like a student playing jazz, there is so much to learn. There’s never a point where you think you’ve arrived. I am trying to get better every day. Even Roy Haynes, when you see him play you get a sense that he is still trying to find new things.”

Like many self-aware jazz musicians, Ben Williams has myriad influences, from “Wayne Shorter, Stevie Wonder and Duke Ellington” to “hip-hop and gospel, Little Dragon, Billy Joel, Marvin Gaye.” And like his colleagues in the new guard of jazz, Williams is constantly looking ahead, seeking the music’s potential and his place in it.

“I’ve worked with Stefon Harris’ Blackout for the past few years,” Williams cites. “He has definitely been a huge influence in my concept of playing music. We have a similar viewpoint to music and jazz. He’s very much about addressing modern times and not rehashing old material. To really interpret what is happening right now, a lot of jazz musicians are into hip-hop and R&B, but they don’t put that into their music. We keep up with the times and we’re not afraid to put that into our music.”

To other musician’s music Williams brings his great natural skill and determination to explore, to expand boundaries while sustaining tradition. *State of Art* is a mature statement stamped with *his* voice, the next step in Ben Williams’ evolution.

“I wanted to make an album that regular nine-to-five people could enjoy,” Williams says; “and to make a deep artistic statement as well. I like music that grooves, and I make sure that my music feels good.

“I always bring a certain energy to whatever the musical situation is,” the soft-spoken musician adds. “I try to be a team player and be supportive, but also, I try to add my voice to the situation. It’s a fine balance between putting your stamp on things and being supportive. I’ve found that balance pretty well. The diversity of my musical upbringing has allowed me to be comfortable in many different musical situations. I don’t try to sound like anyone else, I just try to be honest musically and bring a youthful spirit.”