

GEORGE DUKE

Profile

The scope of keyboardist-composer-producer George Duke's imprint on jazz and pop music over the past forty years is almost impossible to calculate. He has collaborated with some of the most prominent figures in the industry. A producer since the 1980s, he has crafted scores of fine recordings – many of them GRAMMY® winners – for artists representing almost every corner of the contemporary American music landscape.

Duke was born in San Rafael, California, in January 1946. When he was four, his mother took him to a performance by that other Duke of jazz, Duke Ellington. He admits that he doesn't remember much of the performance, but his mother told him years later that he spent the next several days demanding a piano.

Duke began his formal training on the instrument at age seven, his earliest influence being the culturally and historically rich black music of his local Baptist church. By his teen years, his universe of musical influences had expanded to include the more secular sounds of young jazz mavericks like Miles Davis, Les McCann and Cal Tjader – all of whom inspired him to play in numerous high school jazz groups. After high school, he attended the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and received a bachelors degree in 1967.

But perhaps the most important lessons came after college, when Duke joined Al Jarreau in forming the house band at the Half Note, the popular San Francisco club, in the late '60s. He also played with Sonny Rollins and Dexter Gordon in other San Francisco clubs around the same time.

For the next several years, Duke experimented with jazz and fusion by collaborating and performing with artists as diverse as Jean Luc-Ponty, Frank Zappa, Cannonball Adderley, Nancy Wilson, Dizzy Gillespie, Billy Cobham and Stanley Clarke. He launched his solo recording career at age 20, and shortly thereafter began cutting LPs for the MPS label in the '70s. As the decade progressed, he veered more toward fusion, R&B and funk with albums like *From Me To You* (1976) and *Reach For It* (1978).

During this period he recorded what is possibly his best known album, *Brazilian Love Affair*. Released in 1980, the album included vocals by Flora Purim and Milton Nascimento, and percussion by Airto Moreira. *Love Affair* stood in marked contrast to the other jazz/funk styled albums he was cutting at the time.

Duke's reputation as a skilled producer was also gathering steam. By the end of the '80s, he had made his mark as a versatile producer by helping to craft recordings by a broad cross section of jazz, R&B and pop artists: Raoul de Souza, Dee Dee Bridgewater, A Taste of Honey, Jeffrey Osborne, Deniece Williams, Melissa Manchester, Al Jarreau, Barry Manilow, Smokey Robinson, The Pointer Sisters, Take 6, Gladys Knight, Anita Baker and many others. Several of these projects scored GRAMMY® Awards.

During this time, Duke was just as busy outside the studio as inside. He worked as musical director for numerous large-scale events, including the Nelson Mandela tribute concert at Wembley Stadium in London in 1988. The following year, along with Marcus Miller, he served as musical director of NBC's acclaimed late-night music performance program, *Sunday Night*.

The '90s were no less hectic. He toured Europe and Japan with Dianne Reeves and Najee in 1991, and joined the Warner Brothers label the following year with the release of *Snapshot*, an album that stayed at the top of the jazz charts for five weeks and generated the top 10 R&B single, "No Rhyme, No Reason."

Other noteworthy albums in the '90s included the orchestral tour de force *Muir Woods Suite* (1993) and the eclectic *Illusions* (1995), in addition to the numerous records Duke produced for a variety of other artists: Najee, George Howard, the Winans, and Natalie Cole (Duke produced 1/3 of the material on Cole's GRAMMY®-winning 1996 release, *Stardust*).

In 2000, Duke severed his ties with Warner Records and launched his own record label, BPM (Big Piano Music). "I spent thirty years at other labels as a recording artist," he says. "I felt it was time for me to step up to the next level of challenge and form a company that would give me and other artists the opportunity to create quality music and push back the musical restraints that dominate most record labels these days."

But even with the new responsibilities and challenges associated with running a record label, Duke has continued to juggle the multiple career tracks of recording solo albums, international touring and producing records for other artists. In addition to his own *Face the Music* (2002), he also produced recent records for Wayman Tisdale, Dianne Reeves, Kelly Price, Regina Belle and Marilyn Scott.

For the better part of 25 years, Duke has also composed and recorded numerous scores for film and television. In addition to nine years as the musical director for the *Soul Train* Music Awards, he also wrote music – either individual songs or entire soundtracks – for a number of films, including *The Five Heartbeats*, *Karate Kid III*, *Leap of Faith*, *Never Die Alone* and *Meteor Man*.

With more than thirty solo recordings in his canon and a resume that spans more than 40 years, Duke joins forces with the Heads Up label with the August 26, 2008, release of *Dukey Treats*, a return to the old-school funk sensibilities of icons like James Brown, Sly and the Family Stone and Parliament/Funkadelic. A careful balance of rhythmic energy and simmering balladry, *Dukey Treats* recalls the golden age of funk and soul, while at the same time maintaining a fresh sound and addressing issues that are relevant to the global culture of the 21st century.

"I feel a responsibility to carry positive messages in my music," says Duke. "I think music is meant to lift people up. I don't think you can push things under the rug and not address them. Those who have the ability and the opportunity to let people know what's going on musically and socially should not be afraid to say it and do it and play about it and sing about it."

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