



Bobby Watson's new album, *Made In America*, celebrates unheralded African American heroes.

By Geoffrey Himes | Photos by Mark Sheldon

# BOBBY WATSON

## Saluting Forgotten Pioneers

WHEN A COMPOSER WRITES A PIECE OF INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC AND GIVES IT A TITLE, IS THERE ANYTHING INHERENT IN THE CHARACTER OF THE MUSIC THAT DEMANDS SUCH A TITLE? OR WOULD ANOTHER TITLE WORK JUST AS WELL? IF, FOR EXAMPLE, ONE CHURNING, DISSONANT, UPTEMPO NUMBER IS NAMED AFTER AN EX-SPOUSE AND ANOTHER IS NAMED AFTER A CORRUPT POLITICIAN, CAN WE HEAR ANYTHING IN THE MUSIC THAT LETS US KNOW WHICH IS WHICH?

**A**s Bobby Watson worked on an album about underappreciated heroes of African American history, he wanted to tell those stories without lyrics but with music that would justify the dedications. If a singer-songwriter wanted to pay tribute to, say, Wendell O. Pruitt, he or she could craft lyrics that describe how this black pilot overcame discrimination to not only serve in the U.S. Air Force in World War II but to also win a Flying Cross for his daring bombing raids. But for a composer of instrumental music, such as Watson, the challenge of saluting a specific individual is more complex.

For his new album, *Made In America* (Smoke Sessions), Watson came up with an ingenious solution.

At the very beginning of the opening track, the 63-year-old alto saxophonist quotes “The U.S. Air Force Song,” better known as “Off We Go Into The Wild Blue Yonder.” That quote, however, is given the distinct warble of a Pharoah Sanders phrase, with Lewis Nash’s rumbling drums and an ostinato line from pianist Stephen Scott and bassist Curtis Lundy reinforcing the connection to the iconic avant-garde tenor saxophonist.

Watson quickly introduces a second melodic theme, a phrase that, thanks to the initial theme’s “wild blue yonder” suggestion, does sound like a plane taking off and cruising. And when Watson plays a solo, his melodic loops, twists and turns evoke a daredevil pilot’s tricks. As a result, the tune’s title, “The Aviator,” makes unarguable sense.

“I was trying to put something in there so people would know I was talking about a pilot,” Watson explained during a recent phone call from his home in Kansas City, Missouri.

“When you’re soloing, you’re often asking yourself, ‘What can I quote over the chord changes?’ I decided to turn the quote into a head. My main theme is like, we take off, we come down, but that Pharoah Sanders part is like when you’re in the air in a dogfight and you don’t know if you’re going to survive.”

Something similar happens in Watson’s tribute to Major Taylor, the African American bicyclist who became the 1899 world champion in the sprint event at a competition in Montreal. Watson found another tune to quote: “Popity Pop (Goes The Motorcycle),” first recorded in 1945 by singer-guitarist Slim Gaillard backed by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie.

Nash’s intro for Watson’s “The Cyclist” features a stop-and-go rhythm that suggests a human-powered cycle rather than a motor-powered one. That figure is then picked up by Scott, then by Lundy and finally by Watson, who adds a new melody of his own over the same pause-and-race rhythm.

“It sounds like he’s on the pedals: He surges and takes a breath, surges and takes a breath,” Watson said. “Major Taylor couldn’t ride in the pack, because people would throw water on him or stick something in his spokes to make him crash. So he’d hang back and then fly to the front. That’s what we do in the song.”

“I based that rhythm on the rhythm and shape of the melody Bobby played and how he talked about it being a bicycle,” Nash recalled. “I tried to find the part that might sound like a bicycle. When I found it, he said, ‘Yeah, that’s it.’”

For this project, Watson chose not to salute such frequently lauded icons as Martin Luther King Jr. or Frederick Douglass. Instead, he decided to focus on folks who’d been overlooked. So the album includes nods to actress Butterfly McQueen, jazz guitarist Grant Green, business pioneer Madam C.J. Walker, computer scientist Mark Dean, horse jockey Isaac Murphy and U.S. Deputy Marshal Bass Reeves. The track listing on *Made In America* includes the name of each honoree as part of its song title.

“The famous people have gotten theirs,” Watson said. “They’ve become part of the lexicon and the fabric of the country. But there are other people who haven’t been recognized. And if I can help that, I’ll be glad.”

“When I was growing up,” Lundy explained, “Black History Month was a big thing, but now it doesn’t seem to amount to much. Bobby and I had this discussion about how people forget that this music came from black folks right here in America. So I suggested the title *Made In America*. But how do you translate that into music? Well, music in its truest form is when you take something from the imagination and you make it a concrete reality. Bobby has always been good at that.”

The album includes a composition titled “The G.O.A.T.,” which stands for “The Greatest of All



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Time.” The tune was written for Sammy Davis Jr., who is probably the best known of the honorees on *Made In America*, but Watson still believes that his childhood idol remains underappreciated.

“Sammy was the original Michael Jackson,” Watson said. “He was a child star who could sing and dance up a storm. [Later,] he influenced Frank Sinatra and the whole Rat Pack. He could play the vibes and the drums; he could act; he could do it all. When I started thinking about Sammy Davis, I asked myself, ‘How do you represent that in an instrumental?’ The answer was his tap dancing, and I cast the drums in that role.”

“I’m old enough to remember when you didn’t see that many African Americans on TV,” Nash said. “Davis was arguably the greatest all-round entertainer, so I wanted to make sure I was doing him justice.”

*Made In America* closes with “I’ve Got To Be Me,” which was a pop hit for Davis in 1969 (under the title “I’ve Gotta Be Me”). Watson’s instrumental arrangement has become the saxophonist’s theme song. He hopes that his horn’s singing articulation of the melody will be enough to remind listeners of the lyrics: “I’ve gotta be me/ What else can I be but what I am?”

Robert Michael Watson Jr. was born and grew up in Lawrence, Kansas. As a youngster, his church was so small that there was no distinction between the choir and the congre-

gation, so he learned how to find his note by singing along. He spent a great deal of time outdoors, barefoot.

“We’d spend the whole day playing in the woods, picking apples, climbing over fences and discovering a creek,” Watson recalled. “We’d be out till nighttime. It makes you unpretentious. It makes your music deceptively simple, even if it’s complex underneath. Musicians hear my tunes and say, ‘That’s nice—can I jump in there?’ But when they do, they soon discover there’s more going on than they thought. Pretty soon they’re saying, ‘Hey, can I get a lead sheet on that?’”

Watson met Curtis Lundy at the University of Miami in 1973. The two were part of the first group of African Americans to enroll in the music program there, a group that also included guitarist Hiram Bullock and Curtis’ older sister, jazz singer Carmen Lundy. By then, Watson was already a promising composer (he majored in composition), but Curtis had more experience as a bandleader, so they shared their knowledge and became lifelong friends.

Watson arrived in New York on Aug. 24, 1976. Trombonist Curtis Fuller took the 23-year-old saxophonist under wing and introduced him to Fuller’s bandmates in Count Basie’s band. On Oct. 11, Art Blakey’s 57th birthday, Watson was sitting in at Storyville when the drummer-bandleader, renowned as a nurturer of young talent, came into the club.



“He met me after the set,” Watson said, “and asked me if I wanted to join the Jazz Messengers. It took me about a micro-second to decide. Art was the real deal; he was the sound of jazz, a major part of the history. I knew it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, so I hung out with Art as much as I could. I was up in his armpit for four years.”

This was the Golden Age of jazz apprenticeship. Bandleaders such as Blakey, Betty Carter, Horace Silver, Sonny Rollins and Johnny Griffin all hired promising young musicians and put them through a rigorous graduate school of onstage and offstage development that would enable them to become leaders themselves. All four musicians on *Made In America* shared that experience. Watson was Blakey’s music director when Wynton Marsalis joined the Jazz Messengers; Watson, Nash, Lundy and Scott all played with Betty Carter; Scott and Nash played with Rollins; Lundy with Griffin.

“The generation of Bobby, me and our peers is the missing link,” Lundy said, “because we were the last ones to play with the masters. Those experiences give you authenticity—the real thing.”

In the decades since Watson emerged as a bandleader in the 1980s, he has hired and served as a mentor to younger musicians who went on to become leaders, such as trumpeter Terrell Stafford, pianist Orrin Evans and vibraphonist Warren Wolf. “Bobby and Curtis mentored us in music,” Wolf said, “but they also mentored us in the musician’s life.”

Watson spent 25 years in New York, playing with a who’s who of top jazz musicians, famously leading his own quintet Horizon, which included Stafford as well as drummer Victor Lewis. Among the landmark recordings Watson recorded with Horizon are the Blue Note album *Post-Motown Bop* (1990), and the Columbia release *Midwest Shuffle* (1993). The restlessly creative Watson led the nine-piece High Court of Swing, as well as the 16-piece Tailor Made Big Band, and he co-founded the 29th Street Saxophone Quartet.

Some of his other noteworthy leader albums include *Love Remains* (1986), *This Little Light Of Mine* (1991), *Horizon Reassembled* (2004) and *Check Cashing Day* (2013).

During Watson’s stint in New York, he taught at William Paterson University (1985–’86) and Manhattan School of Music (1996–’99). This work led to a significant shift in 2000. As the

recipient of the first endowed chair at the University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory of Music and Dance, he became UMKC’s director of jazz studies—a position he still holds.

In 2011, his ambitious, seven-part album *The Gates BBQ Suite* merged his roles as composer and educator, as the critically acclaimed disc featured UMKC student musicians.

As his stature rose to tremendous heights in jazz education, his relocation to Kansas City—away from the glare of the New York spotlight—resulted in less media attention for his work as a composer and bandleader.

“There have been pluses and minuses in moving back to Kansas,” he explained. “The pluses have included getting a regular paycheck and health benefits and having a big band at my disposal three times a week for the past 17 years. Another plus has been living close to my parents; I’ve been able to help my mother after my father passed last October. And I’ve been able to slow down in my playing and get into the swing thing that’s big out here.”

On the minus side is the reduced visibility of not routinely performing on New York stages. Stephen Scott experienced the same thing when he moved to Florida a few years ago.

“Sometimes a change in geography is good for the soul,” said Lundy. “Guys like Stephen and Bobby have been missed [in New York] because they’re part of a lineage that plays at a very high standard.”

*Made In America* is a clear illustration of that high standard. “This album started when I discovered Major Taylor,” Watson said. “He was a fascinating guy but I had never heard of him. Pretty soon I had a long list of folks, including Katherine Johnson, the woman [portrayed] in [the film] *Hidden Figures*. In history, as in music, a few people get the credit, but a lot of people made it happen—and they shouldn’t be overlooked.”

Although Watson hasn’t received the critical acclaim of, say, Henry Threadgill, he has crafted an oeuvre that has secured his place in jazz history: More than 100 of his compositions have been recorded, and his discography includes more than 100 titles.

*Made In America* demonstrates that his artistic ambition still burns brightly. In addition, Watson has solved the problem of creating instrumental music as descriptive as its titles. Any composer attempting to do the same could learn a lot from Watson’s sterling example. **DB**



Saxophonist Bobby Watson (center) performs in Jacksonville, Florida, with Thelonious Monk Institute Peer-to-Peer Sextet saxophonist Robert Gilliam and trumpeter Brett Karner.

## ‘HEAR WITH YOUR EYES’

**Former Jazz Messenger Bobby Watson has picked up where his mentor, Art Blakey (1919–’90), left off. Since 2006, Watson has served as artistic director for the Thelonious Monk Institute’s National Peer-to-Peer Jazz Education Program, in which he annually takes six of the country’s most talented teenage jazz musicians on the road. Like Blakey before him, Watson mentors tomorrow’s jazz stars about the music, connecting with the audience and being a professional.**

“Formal jazz education is great and I advocate it wholeheartedly, but there are certain things you can only learn through apprenticeship—like I did with Art,” Watson said. “Art showed us the ropes, and that’s what I want to pass on to these kids.”

The students learn such intangibles as being present in the moment and staying keenly aware of what’s happening on the bandstand at all times. “I insist they always be completely engaged, and have eye contact with me and each other,” Watson explained. “Art would always say, ‘You hear with your eyes and see with your ears.’”

Watson and the young prodigies generally meet and rehearse for the first time on a Sunday. The next day they begin a weeklong tour of presenting “peer-to-peer jazz informances” in high schools across the United States in an effort to develop jazz audiences for the future.

The young performers exemplify the deeply held American values that jazz represents: teamwork, democracy, collective unity with ethnic diversity, the correlation of hard work and goal accomplishment, and the importance of closely listening to one another. Ultimately, the peer-to-peer message is to find a passion for something early in life, believe in yourself, be persistent, and go for it.

“When students hear this message from kids their same age—who look like them and talk like them and are already performing at such a high level—they listen,” Watson said. “There’s an immediate trust that they have with those of their own generation, as well as a feeling of, ‘If they can do it, then so can I.’”

The program has been presented in numerous cities throughout the country. Each tour culminates with a performance at a jazz club in the host city, such as Dimitriou’s Jazz Alley (Seattle), Yoshi’s (Oakland, California), the Blue Room (Kansas City, Missouri), the Dakota (Minneapolis), the Jazz Kitchen (Indianapolis), Baker’s Keyboard Lounge (Detroit), Scullers (Boston) and Blues Alley (Washington, D.C.).  
—JB Dyas, PhD