

## ENCORE



PHOTO COURTESY OF ARTIST

# CHARLIE BURNHAM

WATCH OUT FOR THE WAH-WAH

BY TRISTAN GEARY

In the City of New York, culturally vast and varied, you can find just about any kind of gig to quench your musical thirst on any given night. It's a bonus of city life stretching way back in time, with a lively scene constantly changing and evolving over the years. With such plenty, it may be difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff, to figure out what's "good" or not. Longevity and experience *can* bring clarity in such subjective matters.

Such is the case with veteran violinist, improviser and composer, Charlie Burnham, who has kept up with the scene, participating in every corner of its music. Now 73, his decades of experience have afforded him fluency in many musical languages. "I didn't come up strictly as a jazz player. I didn't come up strictly as a country player... things were kind of introduced to me bit by bit, and I kind of learned as I went," says Burnham. This happenstance, not to be constrained to one specific style, has led him to work with diverse ensembles and musicians, from Steven Bernstein's Millennial Territory Orchestra (MTO) to the proto-punk ensemble The Kropotkins to James "Blood" Ulmer to Cassandra Wilson, Norah Jones and many more.

Burnham has also spent significant time outside the five boroughs. "When I left high school, it was the late '60s, the middle of a hippie revolution," he recalls. "It seemed an opportune time to go out to California. So I did that, and I took my violin with me." A fruitful collaboration with drummer Doug Hammond was one of Burnham's first professional forays into jazz improvisation. Moving further west still, Burnham continued to develop his jazz repertoire with pianist David Paquette in Hawaii. By this time, the violinist was carving out his own sound, marked by playing

steeped in the blues with an exploratory approach to improvisation and an interest in singing and playing his chosen instrument with a playful use of the wah-wah pedal, a technique he's become closely associated with. But it's the blues. Whether in sound, feeling or ungraspable atmosphere, that's Burnham's mother tongue. Although he's schooled in bebop, chamber, country, soul and free jazz styles of playing, he considers himself a blues man first and foremost. "My natural language is blues," he says. "I feel like I can speak fluently and freely."

All of the many skills that Burnham mastered were what guitarist and bandleader James "Blood" Ulmer was searching for when he gave Hammond a call, asking if he knew any fiddle players that fit the bill. Serendipitously, Burnham happened to be at Hammond's apartment at that exact moment. Subsequently joining Ulmer's band impelled the violinist's return to New York. But circumstances surrounding the move rendered Burnham pedal-less. He was able to pawn the soprano saxophone he owned to replace his wah-wah, which was central to Ulmer's group sound. With the guitarist, Burnham recorded many albums, including *Odyssey* (Columbia, 1983) on which he can be heard in a multifaceted role, offering soaring solos, otherworldly melodies and textural pads of sound. Bass-less, between Ulmer's open-tuned guitar, Burnham's violin and drummer Warren Benbow, the sound gets filled out plentifully.

"After playing with Blood, that opened a few more doors and [I] began to enjoy some of the benefits of being a New York musician," he explained. Being able to cast a wide net granted him chairs in many ensuing ensembles of varying styles and scope. One such eclectic group was the String Trio of New York, founded by guitarist James Emery, bassist John Lindberg and violinist Billy Bang (whom Burnham replaced in 1986). This chamber jazz group, adept in rip-roaring string renditions of American Songbook repertoire and thoughtful original compositions, displayed Burnham's abilities in a purely acoustic setting, *sans* wah-wah pedal, with heavenly melodies and dexterous improvisation. Burnham also contributed compositionally to this ensemble, with pieces such as the title track to *Time Never Lies* (Stash, 1991), a particularly virtuosic album from the trio. His

playing is intimate and vulnerable, and the raw friction from where rosin meets string is both gravelly and satisfying.

Other ensembles that Burnham has written for include the Pitch, Rhythm and Consciousness Quartet, where he at times transcends the violin itself, offering vocals on original selections such as "Hurt Nobody". His singing is at once arresting and heartfelt, and the composition, open for riotous improvisation, is mellow and catchy. Steven Bernstein, founder of the MTO, of which Burnham has been a member for 23+ years says, "Whenever Charlie starts his magic, the music moves to a new level. He's very connected sonically, rhythmically and vibrationally. His singing is another part of his magic... And when he starts the wah-wah pedal—watch out!"

Interspersed within blues/gospel/soul/folk vocalist Martha Redbone's tour, this month there are numerous NYC appearances at which audiences can witness Charlie Burnham's deep understanding of the blues, mind- and sound-expanding improvisations and distinctive approach to the violin, including his wah-wah magic.

*Burnham is at Owl Music Parlor with Brandon Ross and Pheeroan akLaff Feb. 2, Theater for the New City (part of Arts for Art's Out Music Festival) in duo with gabby fluke-mogul Feb. 3, Downtown Music Gallery with patrick brennan's String Party Feb. 6, and Sunny's Bar with Smokey's Roundup Feb. 7, 14 and 28. See Calendar.*

### Recommended Listening:

- James "Blood" Ulmer—*Odyssey* (CBS/Columbia, 1983)
- String Trio of New York—*Time Never Lies* (Stash, 1991)
- Susie Ibarra—*Radiance* (Hopscotch, 1999)
- Mario Pavone Sextet—*Deez To Blues* (Playscape, 2005)
- Pitch, Rhythm and Consciousness Quartet (Tony Jones, Charlie Burnham, Marika Hughes, Kenny Wollesen)—*Pitch, Rhythm and Consciousness Quartet* (Reva, 2013)
- Universal Language Quartet (Kirk Knuffke/Thommy Andersen/Charlie Burnham/Martin Andersen)—*Always Into It* (Mingus, 2022)

## LEST WE FORGET



PROVIDED BY THE HISTORIC NEW ORLEANS COLLECTION

# JELLY ROLL MORTON

JELLY'S JAM

BY FRANCESCO MARTINELLI

Probably the first great arranger of jazz, Jelly Roll Morton, born Ferdinand Joseph Lamothe to a New Orleans Creole family circa 1890 (no birth certificate was recorded), from an early age played different instruments, sang on the street in a boys quartet and regularly attended the French Opera. At first, he rejected the piano as a girls' instrument, but soon realized piano players had success with the ladies. The raunchy, dirty lyrics and the bluesy, clashing notes attracted him, so he began to play piano in the "houses" (the New Orleans brothels) of Storyville, known as the red-light district. His family, which found this unacceptable, threw him out, and thus followed a nomadic life, playing in: Biloxi, MS; Pensacola, FL; Memphis, TN; Houston, TX; Mobile, AL; Kansas City, KS; Oklahoma City, OK. On the road he began composing, including one of his earliest and most well-known tunes, "King Porter Stomp".

More travel followed, including a tour through

the Midwest as a vaudevillian in blackface (pointedly because of his light complexion), before he established his base in Chicago, publishing "New Orleans Blues" (aka "N.O. Blues") in 1914. His first success was transforming the bawdy "Tricks Ain't Walkin' No More" into the romantic "Someday Sweetheart", a hit for blues singer Alberta Hunter. Morton was given second billing on his own tune, "The Wolverines", later renamed and republished as "Wolverine Blues" and recorded by the New Orleans Rhythm Kings. And in 1923, Morton followed with a string of hit-making recording sessions.

"One day Jelly Roll Morton came in," pianist Lil Hardin told Studs Terkel in a long interview (*And They All Sang: Adventures of an Eclectic Disc Jockey*). "Oh, boy, he sat down at the piano and his long skinny fingers were hitting those keys and he was beating out a double rhythm and the people were just going wild. I was going wild, too! Jelly Roll is the first pianist that influenced my playing." (*New Orleans Magazine*, October 2018).

In 1926 with his Red Hot Peppers, Morton waxed "Black Bottom Stomp", "The Chant", "Sidewalk Blues" and the orchestral "Grandpa's Spells". Prophetically, 1927's "Jungle Blues", based on a single chord, full of dissonances and, lacking harmonic progression, hinted at modal jazz to come. But around this time, Morton's star began to fall: his move to New York was unsuccessful; RCA dropped him and Louis Armstrong

and Duke Ellington took his place in the public eye, while his "King Porter Stomp" became a huge Swing era staple and success for Fletcher Henderson and Benny Goodman, Morton receiving no royalties at all.

Dismayed, Morton moved to Washington and soon emerged in writing protest letters (to the White House and in *DownBeat*), as well as going on record about being deprived of his rights financially. In Washington, Morton recorded his recollections of New Orleans at the Library of Congress for folklorist Alan Lomax—the first oral history of jazz in sound. While his previous excessive touches (e.g. the golden tooth, the bank roll) might be considered part of the building of Jelly Roll's persona, his boasting in Washington, including infamously presenting himself in an obviously exaggerated manner as the inventor of jazz and blues, must be viewed in a context where he was deprived of his rights, his profit and the fact that Benny Goodman was crowned in the press as "the King of Swing", riding on his own success of "King Porter Stomp".

Knifed by a customer in a Washington dive, he moved back to New York, where in 1940, in poor health, he recorded his last, superb, piano solos. Another relocation, to California, followed before his health further worsened and, in 1941, he died almost penniless. According to Howard Reich and William Gaines' excellent biography, *Jelly's Blues: The Life, Music, and Redemption of Jelly Roll Morton*,

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