

There was this “disco sucks,” “jazz is too deep” war going on. Growing up, I was molded by both of those worlds. Not looking at jazz as superior to funk, but taking the jazz grooves and the funk grooves as equally important. That’s what “Jamaica Funk” is.

—Bernard Wright

Tom Browne’s “Funkin’ for Jamaica” is often mistakenly interpreted as a tribute to the land of Bob Marley. But the 1980 disco-jazz classic, with its regal trumpeting and slang-heavy spoken-word interludes, paid homage to another JA: the one in the far southeastern corner of New York City. “Funkin’ for Jamaica”—or “Jamaica Funk,” as most prefer calling it—showcased the sound emerging at the time from Jamaica, Queens, and also the neighboring communities of St. Albans and Hollis. Browne and “Funkin’” collaborators like keyboardist Bernard Wright, bassist Marcus Miller, drummer Omar Hakim, and sax player Alvin “Winky” Flythe had developed their chops under the watch of mentors like the late Weldon Irvine and legendary fusion drummer Lenny White. Collectively, they (as well as other young local musicians like pianist/singer Don Blackman, bassist/vocalist Barry Johnson, and guitarist Ronnie Miller) called themselves the Jamaica Kats. And “Jamaica Funk” was their coming-out party.

Our story really begins, though, nearly a half century earlier, when jazz greats Fats Waller, Count Basie, and Ella Fitzgerald settled in Addisleigh Park, an enclave of stately homes in St. Albans. Other members of the city’s Black elite, including Jackie Robinson and Lena Horne, soon moved to the Jamaica area, about ten miles east of midtown Manhattan. By the 1960s, upwardly mobile Black professionals—doctors and lawyers, but also city workers and union members—were making their homes here as well. At a time when real estate agents typically steered minority home buyers to crumbling areas like the South Bronx, Jamaica, with its tidy rows of single-family homes, was a beacon of middle-class pride.

Arriving from Hampton, Virginia, Weldon Irvine settled in the area around this period. After becoming the musical director for Nina Simone in the late ’60s, the iconoclastic composer and pianist grew increasingly disenfranchised with the music industry. Turning his attention to young neighbors, he dispensed sage life and business advice while easing them into solo careers with valuable on-the-job training at his gigs and sessions.

After “Jamaica Funk,” the Kats’ careers would take very different paths. Marcus Miller and Omar Hakim emerged as two of New York’s most sought-after session players in the early ’80s. Bernard Wright became a teen R&B idol for a brief moment with 1985’s “Who Do You Love.” Never quite able to follow up the success he had with “Funkin’” on subsequent releases, Tom Browne became a commercial pilot. But key members of the Kats would reconvene on at least two more landmark releases in Wright’s 1981 album, *Nard*, and Don Blackman’s self-titled 1982 album. While having less im-

pact than “Funkin’ for Jamaica,” Wright’s “Haboglabotribin” (which was written and sung by Blackman, and later sampled by Dr. Dre for Snoop Dogg’s “Gz and Hustlas”) and Blackman’s “Holding You, Loving You” (sampled by Jay-Z and Slum Village, among others) perfectly encapsulate the Kats’ unique brand of funk/jazz/R&B fusion. Beyond their own releases, Jamaica Kats would play prominent roles on key recordings by everyone from Luther Vandross and Taana Gardner to David Bowie and Run-DMC.

But it’s the story *before* the story that’s really worth telling.

MIDDLE-CLASS PARADISE

Lenny White: We were the first Black people on our street in St. Albans. You got stares, and there were places you couldn’t go, but, gradually, there was a migration where everybody who could afford to move out of Manhattan, and out of apartments, came to Queens. You could get away from the hustle and bustle of New York City every night, and there’d be trees and lawns. And you had a basement. We could rehearse and play all the time, which you couldn’t if you lived in an apartment. All these Black actors and musicians moved out and lived in these nice houses. It was great, because some of your heroes, people you aspired to play with, they might have lived in a better part of the neighborhood, but they lived in *your* neighborhood.

Donald (Don) Blackman: James Brown lived not far from me, on [175th Place] and Linden Boulevard. When James would play the Apollo, people would go by his house, ‘cause they knew what time he was leaving. Just to get a glimpse of him. I’d ride my bike beside his Rolls-Royce. McCoy Tyner lived on 177th Street or something like that. My cousin Alphonso knew McCoy, so anything that came up with John Coltrane, I’d hear it first.



(previous spread and above) Don Blackman in full effect. Photos courtesy of Don Blackman.