



(top left) Weldon Irvine. (bottom left) Marcus Miller and Don Blackman.



White: This new girl was in my sixth-grade class, and we had a little puppy love. I heard her father was a musician, and I was aspiring to be a musician, so I said, “What instrument does he play?” And she says, “Saxophone.” I said, “What’s his name?” She said, “John Coltrane.” He lived right across the street from my elementary school.

Bernard Wright: People’s parents had money for instruments and lessons. It was very healthy, culturally. The young musicians were aware of the history of jazz.

White: Every Sunday, my family and a circle of friends would play records and talk about things, like Sonny Stitt was better than Bird. I grew up with a constant debate about jazz music. My mother and father encouraged me to pursue music because they were music lovers. When I was underage, my father would take me into Harlem to play. As time went on, there was a bunch of clubs that had opportunities for kids in the neighborhood to play.

Marcus Miller: Live music was just killing at the time. You couldn’t have a party without it. In that environment, [becoming a] musician was the obvious way to make a name for yourself as a teenager. I started out playing clarinet, but I picked up the bass because I wanted to be part of that scene right around my neighborhood, with the dance bands and talent shows. When my consciousness was developing, you could lead a band with a bass as well as a guitar. It didn’t last. By the time we came out, bass was back to a support instrument. But it was too late for me.

Barry Johnson: There were so many bands out here. Before gangs and DJs, every area had a band. I grew up playing at barbecues, weddings, and outside affairs. I had to be kind of like a showman, a comedian, a bass player, and a singer.

THE KATS AND KITTENS

Blackman: There was this club called the Village Door—it’s a restaurant called the Door now—and Monday was jam night for all the young musicians.

Miller: We used to terrorize the Village Door, ‘cause the owner didn’t mind us. We’d go from club to club, and if they weren’t open, we’d go to somebody’s house. They’d have a trio booked, and fifteen of us would show up. The club owners just wanted some quiet dinner music, but we’d pull up in our cars like a gang. Eventually, people started saying you never know who’s gonna show up.

Tom Browne: You could go to the Village Door and [trumpeter] Richard Williams [of Charles Mingus fame] or Freddie Hubbard might be in there. To be in that environment with someone of that magnitude on a laid-back level, it made a

player out of you.

Blackman: I discovered Tom Browne. I was driving in St. Albans one day, and I happened to hear this cat play trumpet. I parked my car outside his house for an hour, just listening to him play. And then I had the balls to just knock on his door and introduce myself. “How’s it going, bro?”

Browne: I went to the High School of Music and Art in Manhattan. If you’ve seen *Fame*, that movie was a little more Hollywood, but that was basically our school. I won a scholarship to take lessons with Murray Karpilovsky, the principal trumpet player under [Arturo] Toscanini, and got schooled in classical. Yusef Lateef was teaching there at one point. The first thing you did when you walked into school was go into a jam session. I can’t tell you how many classes I cut just going straight to the auditorium and learning to blow on certain songs.

Miller: If you were in any of the five boroughs and you were talented musically, you wanted to go to Music and Art. That’s where I met Omar Hakim when I was fourteen. Even in high school, he was so far ahead of everyone. Through Omar, I started meeting guys like Donald Blackman, Denzil Miller, Winky Flythe. It was exciting to find all these cats who took music as seriously as I did, because I felt like I was on my own in how serious I took it. Then Omar introduced me to these cats right nearby who absolutely took it as serious.

Blackman: The Jamaica Kats and Kittens was a concept I came up with. It was just an inside thing happening amongst the musicians. The Kittens were Desirè White and Sheri Snyder from my album, and these girls Michelle Mosley and Cheryl Page. The Kats was all of us—Marcus, Omar, Winky, [and] his brother Mike Flythe. We all hung out. They used to call me “the Godfather of the Kats.”

Wright: We all had titles. Winky is the acknowledged president of the Kats. We call Marcus “the Ambassador.” Donald was “the Godfather.” I was “the Infant” or “the Kitten,” because I was so young.

THE WELDON SCHOOL

After discovering Lenny White through saxophonist Jackie McLean (with whom White sometimes performed at weddings), Miles Davis gave the then nineteen-year-old drummer his first session work on no less of a landmark than 1970’s *Bitches Brew*. “The word was out,” White says. “Come to Jamaica, Queens—there’s some great, young musicians there.” Cementing his status as a fusion icon on Freddie Hubbard’s seminal *Red Clay* in 1970, White then joined Pete and Coke Escovedo’s *Azteca* project for a spell and replaced Steve Gadd in Return to Forever. But he kept one foot in the Queens