



(top) Weldon Irvine. (below) Larry Smith. Photos courtesy of Don Blackman.



scene thanks to his relationship with Weldon Irvine. Branching out on his own in 1975, White tapped into the pool of young musicians his good friend had been mentoring: Despite their youth, Don Blackman, Denzil Miller, Marcus Miller, and Barry Johnson were seasoned musicians when they joined the Lenny White Band (later dubbed Astral Pirates and, then, Twennynine). Along with the other Kats, they had earned their stripes backing Irvine at Manhattan clubs like Seventh Avenue South, the musical plays he staged at Brooklyn's Billie Holiday Theatre, and on recordings like 1976's *Sinbad*. Many would come to credit the late Irvine—who, tragically, took his own life in 2002—as the most influential force in their careers.

White: I met Weldon in a competition. Weldon was in a band, I was in [another], and George Cables and Billy Cobham were in another. We all got to mingle, and then played in each other's bands. Around that time, [Weldon] became musical director for Nina Simone and wrote "To Be Young, Gifted and Black" for her. Weldon became, like, my best friend. It wasn't just music we talked about; we talked about life. He gave me some very valuable lessons that stay with me today.

Blackman: I met Weldon Irvine when I was seventeen. He was playing on the jazz boat in Long Island City. They called it the Jazzmobile. He had a melodica, which I'd never seen before, so I introduced myself and told him I was a keyboard player. He said, "Hey, man, come to my house." I said, "Where do you live?" And he said 156th Street and 111th Avenue. I'm like, "Damn, that's right around the corner."

Miller: Weldon showed up at my door unannounced. "Yeah, man, I heard you were good. You got a piano in here?" He walked past me, sat down at the piano, and said, "Go get your bass, man." I was like, "Who is this crazy cat?" Weldon was one of those Renaissance men. *Young, Gifted and Broke* was one of the plays of his that he put on at the Billie Holiday Theatre in Brooklyn, and he had us all playing in the band pit. That's where I first met [guitarist] Bobby Broom and [drummer] Poojie Bell. They were from Manhattan, but kinda had official green cards as part of the Jamaica crew.

White: We all amalgamated into this band with nine different heads. We played with each other in different situations in Jamaica and then on these national and international tours. When I went out, people said, "Where'd you get these guys from?" I'd say, "Oh, that's just Marcus; he live in the project down the street."

Wright: We thought we were the best musicians in the world. We wouldn't allow each other to get away with nothing corny. There was no political correctness. It was like the hard-nosed, bebop-musician style of communication, particularly between Weldon and Donald. They sounded like the guys on *Dragnet* to

me, like they were talking about pulling off a bank robbery, but all they were talking about was playing a tune. Their attitude and communication was so serious. "Yeah" meant "Hell yeah," and "No" meant "Hell no."

Miller: Weldon used to record everything on a cassette, and he'd make us get in his car at 3:00 AM to play back the show and critique us. Like, "Man, what the hell are you thinking right here?" He made us analyze what we were doing. His car was like his classroom.

Wright: Weldon was a true mentor. He wasn't as technically advanced as some pianists, but he had the blueprint for mixing jazz with funk. He was a genius as a bandleader, a playwright, and a composer. He'll always be unsung, because of his social-activist tendencies. "Young, Gifted and Black" was a problem for the establishment. You can't hear the story of his music without hearing about him as a social activist. But he had everything to do with creating the direction we all ended up going in.

FUNKIN' FOR GRP

After playing with Sonny Fortune and Dr. Lonnie Smith, trumpeter Tom Browne became the first of the Queens Kats to record an album of his own. The primarily instrumental *Browne Sugar* was released on GRP, the fledgling Arista subsidiary started by Dave Grusin and Larry Rosen, in 1979. *Love Approach*, released that same year, followed a similar pop-jazz trajectory, with one glaring exception: "Funkin' for Jamaica." Bernard Wright, the fifteen-year-old prodigy, played the central bass line on a synthesizer. Sax player Alvin "Winky" Flythe led a chorus of shit-talking that included shout-outs to local landmarks like the 165th Street Mall and Club Fantasia and early appearances of future New York slang staples like "def" and "bozack." Save for occasional Weldon Irvine muse Toni Smith on lead vocals, Grusin on keys, and "honorary" Kat Bobby Broom on guitar, it was essentially an all-Queens affair.

Miller: All the Jamaica guys played with this fire. We were playing for audiences that weren't necessarily into jazz, but we were jazz musicians. We'd play aggressively to win people's ears, and still feel like we were saying what we wanted to say. And a style came out of that. Sometimes we'd go up to the [George Benson-owned] Breezin' Lounge in Harlem. When we played for those people, man, we had to hit 'em over the head! You couldn't play subtle. People ask me, "Why do you play so angry, Marcus?" You gotta come up the way I came up to understand. You were trying not to get the hook.

Browne: I was gearing towards an aviation career. Music was