

year, fusing rap and rock together on Run-DMC's "Rock Box" (with the aid of Don Blackman/Lenny White sideman Eddie Martinez on the track's blazing guitar lead.) He wasn't the only one of the Kats to move behind the scenes as hip-hop exploded around them: Denzil Miller arranged Kurtis Blow's "Christmas Rappin'"; Don Blackman played the piano lead on the Fat Boys' classic "Jail House Rap"; Bernard Wright worked on Doug E. Fresh and the Get Fresh Crew's *Ob, My God!* album.

As hip-hop exploded, the next generation of would-be Kats laid down their instruments and picked up mics. Meanwhile, the arrival of crack and the presence of violent kingpins like Lorenzo "Fat Cat" Nichols tainted the area's safe, middle-class feel. (It was with this backdrop that the next generation of Queens music stars like 50 Cent would negotiate the neighborhood.)

Yet intergenerational connections were made. St. Albans native Q-Tip sought out Weldon Irvine to teach Tip piano after sampling Irvine's "We Gettin' Down" for A Tribe Called Quest's "Award Tour" in 1993. When Tip wanted to add drums to his repertoire, Irvine referred him to Lenny White. Irvine would himself record several rap singles under the name Master Wel in the '90s before collaborating with Mos Def as the musical director on the rapper's 1999 album, *Black on Both Sides*. When it came time to tour behind that project, he pulled Don Blackman into Mos's band. "Being from Jamaica is kinda like going to an Ivy League college," explains Marcus Miller, who reunited with Lenny White and Bernard Wright for the short-lived late-'80s group project, the Jamaica Boys. "For the rest of your life, you're cool automatically."

Browne: "Jamaica Funk" was a bunch of guys having fun, being themselves. Then it was, "We gotta clone a hit." I hated every minute of it. It wasn't my style at all. It's hard to have a gold R&B record and then say, "We're gonna go back to playing bop jazz." That's where my heart is, but with a major label, that wasn't gonna happen.

Johnson: Tom Browne is known for a song that talks about the whole Jamaica thing, but he was a real straitlaced guy who wanted to be a pilot, and could play the hell out of some jazz. He wasn't in the nucleus of the Queens Kats. ["Funkin' for Jamaica"] happened to be on Tom Browne's record, but he really didn't have a clue as to what that was about. That sound was something we had from playing at Seventh Avenue South over a period of time. That nucleus broke up, and he started using other people. That's why he never re-created that vibe.

Browne: I never played with many of the Jamaica Kats after *Love Approach*. Winky had a line [on "Funkin' for Jamaica"]:

"Tom Browne, he's just an ordinary guy." What he's saying is, "This isn't even his music; what's he doing here?" It was kind of derogatory, and that feeling permeated through a lot of the Kats.

Wright: [*Nard*] sold 200,000 copies without any promotion. But [GRP] told me it wasn't marketable, because they needed a bin for it in the record store. You can't have a record with traditional jazz and funk and R&B on the same album, they were saying. But that's what Jamaica, Queens, was.

Miller: Right after Tom and Bernard did their albums, I talked to Dr. George Butler, who was the head of jazz at Columbia, and said, "I'm thinking about doing my own album. Would you be interested?" Dr. George said, "Man, I been hearing your name all over. I think you need to wait, because you're about to become one of the hottest musicians in the city. And you need to experience that before you start posing yourself off as an artist." I took his words to heart, and next thing you know, I was in Miles Davis's band, had a number one record [*Never Too Much*] with Luther Vandross, and we'd written Aretha Franklin's "Jump to It," all the same year. I was thankful to Dr. George that he suggested I chill for a minute.

Wright: On my second album [1983's *Funky Beat*], we did all this drum programming, because that was the new thing. I can't stand to listen to it now—it sounds so dated. My third album [1985's *Mr. Wright*] was even more diluted. But the first album I still listen to. It's the only real, honest record that I made. I was trying to do the formula thing, because that's what everybody was doing. But I found that formulas are stupid, anti-creative. That's why Donald Blackman didn't make another album, why Tom Browne stopped making 'em. The organic thing we did was not about trying to get on the radio.

Miller: When I think about Jamaica, I think about being in Ronnie Miller's Camaro, driving up to this club called Gerald's, 'cause we heard there's gonna be a session, but we don't know who's gonna be there. And being a block away and going, "Okay, Tom's there, Winky's there." You could tell just from the personality in their playing. There's good musicians coming up now, but they don't have their own sound. You can't tell who it is from a block away. When Tom Browne picked the horn up, he was Tom Browne, yo. I didn't realize how unique it was until I got out into the rest of the world and I'm hearing trumpeter after trumpeter, and none of them are better than Tom. When you start traveling, you think, "I can't wait to see what other cats are doing." Lots of times, the cats couldn't measure up to the guys in my own neighborhood. You realized you grew up with some of the best musicians in the world. ●

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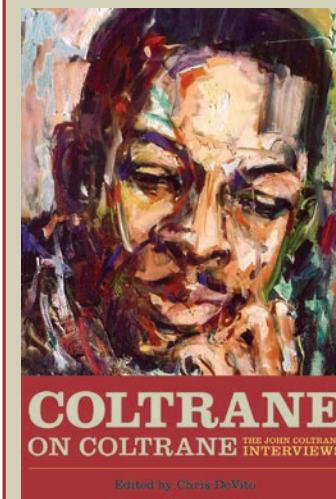
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