

Rufus Reid

Still

EVOLVING

It was a singular event, even for New York City: 20 of the country's finest jazz musicians trying to squeeze onto the stage of The Jazz Standard, an area about the size of a Manhattan apartment's galley kitchen. A packed house had turned out on a stormy Wednesday night to hear this big band, enhanced with two French horns and a vocalist, perform an ambitious five-movement jazz suite entitled *Quiet Pride: The Elizabeth Catlett Project*, inspired by the work of the celebrated African-American sculptor.

The musicians filed in, spilling off the stage, their front row taking up some of the club's precious floor space. Veterans like Steve Allee, Vic Juris, Tim Hagans, Steve Wilson and Scott Robinson shared the stage with rising stars like Freddie Hendrix, Michael Dease and Erica von Kleist. Rufus Reid,

the suite's composer, took his place in the back row on upright bass, a benevolent *éminence grise* watching over the ensemble he had handpicked to perform this demanding work.

Drummer and composer Dennis Mackrel (Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, Count Basie Orchestra) conducted from the edge of the crowd. Mackrel may have been steering the ship, but "Rufus was like the ship's captain that night," said Jana Herzen, president of Motéma Music, who was watching from a central table.

Speaking by phone a few days later, Herzen said that the main reason she signed Reid in 2007 was for his composing. "I was blown away by his large ensemble work. He is so in love with composing—he's like a kid in a candy store." *Quiet Pride* is his fourth album for the label.



BY ALLEN MORRISON | PHOTO BY JIMMY KATZ



One of the most prolific jazz bassists of the last 50 years, Reid has toured and recorded with a long list of heavy hitters, including Eddie Harris, Nancy Wilson, Dexter Gordon, J.J. Johnson, Freddie Hubbard, Jack DeJohnette, Art Farmer, Stan Getz, Kenny Burrell, The Thad Jones–Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra, Kenny Barron, Benny Golson, Frank Wessex—the list goes on. He is also an influential jazz educator. In 1974 he wrote a best-selling bass book (and instructional video), *The Evolving Bassist*, that is still in wide use. Reid served as co-creator and director of the Jazz Studies & Performance Program at William Paterson University for 20 years. He organized his current Out Front Trio with pianist Allee and drummer Duduka Da Fonseca in 2008, releasing albums in 2010 and 2011.

Although he has issued more than a dozen recordings over the years as a leader or co-leader, including several in the duo Tana-Reid with drummer Akira Tana, Reid's emergence as a big band composer is a relatively recent development. After his retirement from WPU in 1999, Reid joined the BMI Jazz Composer's Workshop in New York and began winning prizes and grants, including the first Charlie Parker Jazz Composition Prize in 2000 for his piece *Skies Over Emilia*, a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Mellon Jazz Living Legacy Award.

His works for large ensembles have been praised by everyone from critic Dan Morgenstern to such jazz masters as Golson, Jimmy Heath and Slide Hampton. "Hampton was one of the judges for the Charlie Parker Prize," Reid recalls. "After listening to my work, he said, 'You're serious, aren't you?' That meant a lot to me."

Allee first saw Reid accompany saxophonist Dexter Gordon (with pianist George Cables and drummer Eddie Gladden) in the late '70s when they were passing through Indianapolis. Allee said, "Rufus has accompanied all the greats. He always makes other artists' boats float higher. Playing with Rufus is like having a red carpet unfurled at your feet: [His sound] is rich, buoyant and, above all, elegant. His harmonic knowledge is so advanced that he can get *inside* the chords that I'm playing, and every note he plays has a musical relevance that supports what I'm playing."

Quiet Pride has echoes of 20th century influences as diverse as Duke Ellington, Thad Jones, Leonard Bernstein and the big band compositions of Kenny Wheeler. As twisty as its melodies and challenging as its postbop harmonies may get, it is founded in a series of steady, swinging grooves that provide a superior platform for boundary-pushing solos by the ensemble, which, in addition to the aforementioned artists, includes Herlin Riley on drums; trumpeters Ingrid Jensen and Tanya Darby; reed players Tom Christensen and Carl Maraghi; trombonists Dave Taylor, Ryan Keberle and Jason Jackson; French horn players John Clark and Vincent Chancey; and singer Charenee Wade, who provides wordless vocals.

The enhanced CD of *Quiet Pride* includes a "making of" video as well as photos of the sculptures by Elizabeth Catlett (1915–2012) that inspired the nearly hourlong suite. Catlett's sculptures of the human form in clay, wood and stone illuminated the lives of African-Americans and

the civil rights struggle that defined her time.

The works that inspired Reid's suite are titled *Recognition*, *Mother and Child*, *Singing Head*, *Stargazer* and *Glory*. Introducing the *Glory* section at The Jazz Standard, Reid said he had admired this sculpture of a woman's head, that it looked noble and proud. "But I wondered, why was it called *Glory*? Well, when I eventually met Elizabeth I asked her. She said, 'It's not a *what*—it's a *who*.'" *Glory* was the name of a woman Catlett had met at a gallery exhibition; the artist admired her beauty so much that she asked her to pose for a bust of her head. "And, ladies and gentlemen," Reid said, "Glory is here tonight."

Glory Van Scott—a former principal dancer with Agnes de Mille and the American Ballet Theatre—acknowledged the applause from a table where she sat with her companion, 88-year-old impresario and NEA Jazz Master George Wein. "It's such a wonderful feeling to be honored in this way—twice," she told *DownBeat* after the performance. "Elizabeth was capturing the inside of me. I felt the same way when I heard Rufus' music; I felt spiritually renewed."

Wein shares her enthusiasm. "I had the privilege of working with Rufus in the Newport All-Stars in 2006," he said. "He's one of the greatest bass players I ever heard, but I didn't know he could write music like that!"

A couple of days after the show, over a leisurely lunch in Greenwich Village, Reid said, "The live show was a reaffirmation that the piece works."

How did Elizabeth Catlett's work become a springboard for you to compose?

In 2006, I got an email from the University of Connecticut about the Sackler Composition Prize [The Raymond and Beverly Sackler Prize in Composition]. It was the first time they had included jazz compositions, and it paid \$20,000. I said, "What the hell, I have nothing to lose." But you had to propose something. My friend Jane Ira Bloom had recorded an album with songs inspired by Jackson Pollack or Miró, and it was great. And then Jim McNeely [director of the BMI Jazz Composers Workshop] got an opportunity to write something for the Paul Klee Center in Bern, Switzerland. He wrote 10 pieces. I saw some of these paintings and heard the music, and I said, "Whoa!"

And that's what made you choose visual art as your inspiration?

Well, Jim and Jane were role models—they did it and were successful. And I thought, "Damn, I have this book [of Catlett's art] in my house—let me look at it." When I did, some of those images jumped out at me, and I said, "That's it!" I proposed a suite that would be an hour's worth of music. I had to fill out an application and get letters of reference. I didn't really think I was going to get it. A couple of months later I got a phone call—"You've been chosen"—and I almost dropped the phone. Then the guy says, "You know, it's very interesting. Mr. Sackler loves art, but he wasn't aware of Elizabeth Catlett." It intrigued them that they didn't know about her. [Later on I realized]

he's got a wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I hadn't made the connection. My wife and I had been there many times. Then one time we walked under the [Sackler Wing] sign, and all of a sudden, she says, "Oh, my God." This was after I had applied for [the prize].

[Reid composed Quiet Pride in 2006; it debuted at the University of Connecticut at Storrs, with the university's jazz ensemble, in 2007. He later met Elizabeth Catlett through her son, percussionist-composer Francisco Mora Catlett.]

How did you become friends with Ms. Catlett?

Elizabeth lived in Mexico, but visited New York. Some time after the premiere, she and Francisco came to hear me play at Sweet Rhythm with Kenny Barron and Victor Lewis. She was elderly and using a walker, but they came to the late show. A few days later, I called her and said, "I'd like to invite you to the house, and I'll cook for you." And her response was, "Can you cook?" I said, "Yes!"

So she came. It was thrilling to have her there, and she signed my book. She liked us, so she said, "I want you guys to come to my home in Cuernavaca." We said we'd love to—but we didn't really think she meant it. We didn't respond for a couple of weeks. Then she called us and said, "Well, are you coming or not?" She invited us for Thanksgiving. She was maybe 92 at that time, so it was not a time to dally. So we spent a week with her, and it was unbelievable.

You've played in small groups and big bands. As a composer, what made you want to write for such a large ensemble?

I had been writing for big bands with the BMI Jazz Composers' Workshop. And I'd been listening for years to [trumpeter] Kenny Wheeler's big band composing. The first time I heard him live with a big band at Birdland in New York, Luciana Souza sang wordless vocals with him. When I saw that, I said, "Wow, what an incredible sound." It was always in my head—I liked the sonorities of it. To use the voice is one thing, but to be able to put the voice together with bass clarinet, tenor, guitar or piano, then it becomes like a third instrument. I loved Charenee Wade's performance [on *Quiet Pride*]. This is a skill that not too many singers have.

This is the first commercial recording of my big band stuff. That's why I'm thrilled about the recording. A lot of people know me as a bass player, but they don't know that I'm writing this.

Early in your musical life, you were a trumpeter in the Air Force Band but taught yourself bass in your spare time. What made you want to switch to bass?

The bass offered a unique combination of things—I had to carry the rhythm, and then I had to deal with the harmony at the same time. If you slip in one, it affects the other. And I liked the way

it felt. I liked playing a note and feeling the resonance against my body when I held it. The trumpet was cold and hard.

I went to Japan in 1964 with the Air Force for two years. That's when I began to really dig deep with the bass. I was still playing trumpet in the Air Force Band, but the band wasn't playing that much. I had a car and drove into Tokyo almost every night, either hearing jazz or playing it—playing bass; I never played jazz on trumpet. Tokyo was full of jazz. I saw the Modern Jazz Quartet and Horace Parlan. I saw Duke Ellington's band live and even got to hang out a bit with Cootie Williams and Cat Anderson. I saw Oscar Peterson's trio with Ray Brown. When I saw Ray play, well, that was it. I knew what I wanted to do—end of discussion.

You have been a mentor to a lot of players. Who were your mentors?

When I got out of the service and moved back to [my hometown of] Sacramento, in the summer of '67, I got a chance to play with Buddy Montgomery for two weeks. I sold my trumpet and bought a bass. He was very supportive. He said, "Keep it up, you got something, man."

[After two years in Seattle, during which he studied with the principal bass of the Seattle Symphony and went to jam sessions, Reid applied to Northwestern University in the Chicago suburb of Evanston, Ill., where he would ultimately graduate with a degree in music performance.]

The bass was in my hand at least 17 hours a day—whether I was in school, playing in the Civic Orchestra, playing in clubs until 2 a.m., then back in class. Chicago was vibrant. I became the house bass player at Joe Segal's Jazz Showcase. That's where I met Kenny Burrell, played with Kenny Dorham, James Moody, Bobby Hutcherson.

And of course, that's when I first met and played with Eddie Harris. Eddie was my mentor, probably more so than any one person. When we traveled, he said, "You know, we're a family now, we're away from home, so we have to look out for each other. Memorize everybody's suitcases, so nobody steals them."

This was about 1972. He was about 15 years older than me, but he was like a father figure. He used to say, "All I need you to do is two things: be on time and be able to play." Eddie would pay me every Friday like clockwork. He was a great businessman; he had one company for his performing and another for his publishing. We'd make up songs on the road, then record them. And he'd put all our names on the copyright, and to this day I get a little check, 40 years later. He taught me how to handle business and how to be a bandleader.

Your current Out Front Trio with Steve Allee and Duduka Da Fonseca has great chemistry.

Yeah, both those guys are amazing. We do have chemistry. Steve Allee is so underrated; he's not as well known as he should be. We've become close and dear friends. He's a really good composer, too. We show each other our scores, and

I've learned a great deal from him. But to play with him—he seems to caress everything I play. And he's always consistent. But we literally have a thing together. It's special for me. I had that kind of chemistry with George Cables, too, when we played with Dexter Gordon; and with Akira Tana, and with Kenny Barron and Victor Lewis. But of all the great piano players I've played with over the years, there have only been a few like Steve, where we got to the point where we didn't have to think—it's just natural.

Are you surprised to be still growing as a musician after such a long career?

Composing has taken me to a whole other place. It's changed my bass playing, too. I don't think so much about what notes I'm going to play. I'm thinking more about "shapes" than data.

You have to think about shapes and transitions to be a good composer. The scenery changes, and you didn't even know it until it happened. Someone like Bartók, or Stravinsky or Ravel—it's done so slick, and suddenly you're in another room; you were transported somewhere else. What an incredible gift. To make you forget that you're listening; to take you away from your regular daily stuff and get you out of your head. That's what profound musicians do.

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