

Wallace Roney: The Man With the Golden Horn

UPDATED MARCH 31, 2020 – DAVID R. ADLER



Wallace Roney (photo: John Abbott)

“I’m gonna tape this too.” Wallace Roney wasn’t kidding: he placed his tape machine between us and hit “record,” determined to keep his own file of our conversation in the den of his Montclair, New Jersey home. The 44-year-old trumpeter is intensely wary of misrepresentation, and he is happy to provide specifics of journalists’ past wrongs. His distrust, though perhaps warranted, is unnerving.

But in time his surliness fades.

Get him going about his history in the music, and his current exploits as a bandleader, and one begins to sense the depth of his passion, insight and humor.

Roney established himself as a leader in the late 1980s with a series of solid dates for the Muse label. Following a troubled three-disc run on Warner Bros. in the mid-’90s, and a one-off for Chick Corea’s Stretch label in 2000 (*No Room for Argument*), Roney has reconnected with former Muse boss Joe Fields, now of Savant/High Note. *Prototype*, Roney’s new High Note release, takes its title from a neo-soul song by Andre 3000 of the hip-hop duo OutKast. Roney first encountered it while working on a live project with Mos Def, the underground rap icon.

On the new album, Roney transforms “Prototype” and Al Green’s “Let’s Stay Together” into searching, refulgent jazz ballads. Coproduced by Roney and Don Sickler, the disc presents the same sort of gritty acoustic/electric mix heard on *Argument* and Roney’s final Warner outing in 1997, *Village*. But *Prototype* is richer, more seamless. The layered triple-meter bounce and close harmonies of “Shadow Play,” for instance, successfully convey a mood that Roney has been working to harness for some time.

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Roney couldn’t be prouder of his band. His verdict on bassist Matthew Garrison, Jimmy’s son: “Playin’ his butt off, right? He’s the best bass player today.” On younger brother Antoine Roney, saxophones: “Playin’ his butt off. No one plays saxophone like that.” On Don Byron, bass clarinet: “Playin’ his butt off.” On drummer Eric Allen, a last-minute replacement for Ronnie Burrage: “Eric was in my band before [in the ’90s]. He’s grown so much—not just his ability but his creativity, his openness.” On trombonist Clifton Anderson, Sonny Rollins’ nephew and longtime band member: “I don’t know why nobody’s talking about him. He can play.” Miles Davis band alum Adam Holzman plays keyboards on the session. And Roney’s wife, Geri Allen, plays astonishing piano, as she did on *Argument*, *Village* and several other Roney discs.

More than his previous records, *Prototype* reveals Roney’s deep respect for the creative tendency in hip-hop. Val “Gelder” Jeanty broadened the sonic palette of *Argument* with her subtle sampling. On *Prototype* it is DJ Logic who supplies turntable flourishes, appearing on three tracks. “Another bad cat,” Roney says of Logic. “He called me to sit in with his band one night. And man, that stuff was killin’.” Guys like Logic and Mos Def, these are real lovers of the music. Those guys know every record, more than the people who claim they do. More than the people who just name names they see in a magazine. There’s some bad cats on that [DJ culture] end. I don’t mean everybody in that world is bad—they’re not. But the ones who are, people got to understand and open the door. They should be way bigger than they are, because they’re great in the popular arena, but they’re also great in the aesthetic arena.”

Roney began recording *Prototype* at Ornette Coleman’s studio in Harlem, but he had to abort the session. “I had wannabe producers in my band,” he huffs. “So they walked in and started judging Ornette’s studio. It was a bad vibe from the beginning. And at one point, Ornette’s board did break down. Then Ronnie Burrage just became a nuisance. He was trying to tell everybody what to do. He was doing everything except play the drums. He got on my nerves and I couldn’t concentrate anymore—so I canceled that date and wanted to cool my head out.” Teo Macero, riding shotgun as a co-producer (and another “disruptive” presence, in Roney’s view), abruptly quit. And Roney fired Burrage, who later tried to bring a lawsuit.

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Persevering, Roney took his band into Sony Studios and knocked out the tracks in a day. But he still staunchly defends Ornette’s underdog shop. “I’ve got to say, there’s nothing wrong with Ornette’s studio, nothing. And it’s a shame that people don’t work together to try to help such a creative artist like Ornette, another one of my idols, and his son Denardo, a great drummer. We should have said, ‘Hey, let’s make this work. This will be great for all of us.’”

Despite all the difficulties, Roney was pleased, at long last, to be able to make the album he wanted. That was not the case, he says, during his time at Warner Bros. *Misterios*, his debut for the label, is in many respects a marvelous piece of work—with jazz ensemble and strings interpreting works by Pat Metheny, Jaco Pastorius, Egberto Gismonti and, bizarrely enough, Dolly Parton. The label wanted a cover of a Grammy-winning song, and Roney averted a potential disaster, turning “I Will Always Love You,” the Parton-penned Whitney Houston hit, into a thing of enigmatic beauty, an unabashed valentine to his departed friend and mentor, Miles Davis. “That’s all me, I get all the credit,” Roney says with a laugh.

But the album is a mere shadow of what Roney had envisioned. “They wanted me to do a Clifford Brown with strings record,” he says. “I wanted Paul Buckmaster [veteran cellist, arranger and conductor known for his work in pop/rock circles] to be the arranger. They didn’t like that, so then I asked for Maria Schneider. They didn’t want Maria, either. Now it’s popular to talk about Maria, but I was strongly supporting Maria then. I thought if I could get her to write like she writes, add some synthesizers and stuff, but still play creative straightahead music—wool! The label didn’t want that.” The person who ultimately got the call was Gil Goldstein, certainly no slouch.

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The albums that followed—1995’s *The Wallace Roney Quintet* and the aforementioned *Village*—were more representative, but these, too, involved arguments and unsatisfying compromises. Calling the lure of major labels in the ’90s “a sham,” Roney notes that he had every reason to respond to the wooing of High Note’s Joe Fields. “All the big labels are starting to shift down,” Roney observes, “and the independents are starting to show that they had the commitment all along. Joe’s commitment to the music can’t be questioned, because he’s still here. I have no complaints—none, zilch. And if I say anything [different] two years from now, I’m wrong.”

It has become almost an unthinking reflex among critics to label Roney a Miles Davis imitator. Yet, as Roney will gladly admit, there is no mistaking the influence of Davis on his trumpet playing and overall musicianship. He is proud of what he learned at the feet of Miles, and he disdains those who would knock him for it. He has a point. It is fair to ask what modern trumpeter hasn’t been touched by Miles Davis. Critics can, and should, look beyond surface similarities and grapple with Roney’s advanced harmonic thinking, for instance, or his pursuit of new sonic dimensions for jazz ensembles.

“I see my music as an extension of *Nefertiti*, *A Love Supreme*, Tony Williams’ Lifetime, Herbie’s sextet and Miles’ last band,” Roney allows. “You could look at it as if Lifetime had a gig one night, and Miles sat in, and Wayne came and played, and Herbie played and wrote some arrangements, and Joe Zawinul came and sat in too, and Ron [Carter] and Me’shell Ndegeocello played bass, and Prince, Sly Stone, Bennie Maupin and Mos Def dropped by. That’s part of what I’m doing. The other part is updating it with stuff that I hear today, the new synthesizers and the new sounds that appeal to me. I bring all those elements together and still try to play what I consider straightahead, innovative music.”

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Roney is especially peeved by writers who knock him but laud Dave Douglas, whose newest quintet recordings are strongly Miles-influenced as well. That said, Roney is at pains not to disparage the work of Douglas or anyone else. “It’s not me putting them down,” he clarifies, “it’s me putting down the industry that’s putting me down. I’ve got to believe in whatever anyone else is doing in the same direction. We need all the help we can get. These people like Tim [Hagans] or Dave or Ingrid [Jensen] and Graham Haynes, they’re trying to reach too. [But] they were influenced by me, directly or indirectly. I think I was the first of the young trumpet players who really tried to embrace Miles’ complete style. And I did it based on my own quest for knowledge and my personal relationship with Miles. That’s what makes me different. I’m the only one who can say that.”

When I first ask Roney about that relationship, he begins with a forceful disclaimer. “You have to note that you asked me,” he insists. “I love talking about Miles—he’s my idol, I’m not ashamed of it. But y’all act like that’s all I have to say. You don’t mention that you ask me about him and I respond.”

Roney then throws caution to the wind and becomes radiant as he recounts the story.

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The two met in 1983 at a Radio City Music Hall tribute concert featuring Roney, Jon Faddis, Art Farmer and several other trumpeters. It was Roney’s first time playing with his future employer, Tony Williams. Miles, liking what he had heard, invited the nervous, starstruck Roney to his house the next day. “That was the beginning of a great chapter in my life,” says Roney, with an unforced smile and genuine warmth.

In 1981 Roney joined Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers. He returned to that fold in 1986, even though by then he was already a member of the Tony Williams Quintet, one of the most stunning (and stable) jazz bands of the late ’80s and early ’90s. (Roney’s recordings with Williams, beginning with *Foreign Intrigue* and ending with *Tokyo Live*, are out of print but well worth acquiring.) There came a point when Roney had to choose between Blakey and Williams, and Miles told Roney—in Blakey’s presence—that he ought to remain a Messenger.

Roney chose not to heed that advice, and he feared Miles’ disapproval. “Every time I’d see him,” says Roney, “he’d ask, ‘How’s Buhaina [Blakey] doing?’ And I’d say, ‘Oh, he’s doing good.’ Next time, ‘What’s up with Buhaina?’ I’d say [*raising voice an octave, frantically*], ‘He’s doing great!’ So one day I was getting ready to go to a club with Miles and the first thing he says is: ‘So. You left Buhaina.’ I’m thinking, oh man, he’s going to reprimand me! ‘You left Buhaina, and you’re playing with Tony.’ And I didn’t know how to take it. I was getting ready to explain. But then Miles said, ‘Oh, shit. I know you playin’ your ass off now. Because Tony don’t like no trumpet players but me.’”

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In the ensuing months and years, Roney had the once-in-a-lifetime experience of being coached by Miles Davis on how to play with Tony Williams. “Miles was always telling me to do stuff and see how Tony would react; he was giving me verbal and musical messages to send to me. He’d tell me to end my phrases a certain way, ending on the ‘and’ of the beat. I’d do it and Miles would ask, ‘How was that?’ I’d say, ‘That was bad.’ Then he’d ask, ‘What did Tony do?’ and he’d laugh.” Roney recalls other examples, then concludes: “People might have thought I was copying Miles, but nah, I wasn’t. Copying Miles. I had the license to do it. This was a three-way conversation between Tony, Miles and me.” Roney sounds amazed by this, even today. “Miles asked me to do it, then Tony asked me to do it, and I was willing to do it [*laughs*]! I had too much fun. I miss them days. I miss those guys.”

Born in 1960, Roney was raised in Philadelphia and attended the Duke Ellington High School for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. “I first came to New York and played with Philly Joe Jones in 1977, but I didn’t live here,” he recalls. “[The late pianist] Walter Davis Jr., in Philly’s band, he was one of the first guys who took me under, used to give me money when I didn’t have any. Walter was a really special guy.”

Roney soon amassed a daunting ledger of gigging experience. “I joined Dollar Brand’s group for a tour in 1979; he says. “But I actually moved to New York in 1981. I joined Art’s band, and then I played with every great artist there was. I played with McCoy, Cedar Walton, George Coleman, Clifford Jordan, Curtis Fuller, Jay McShann. I did some gigs with David Murray, Slide Hampton, Frank Foster’s big band, John Hicks, Johnny Cook, Charlie Rouse. It seemed like me, Kenny Washington and Mulgrew [Miller] at one point were playing with all the cats.” Then came the Tony Williams Quintet, which roughly coincided with Roney’s first stirrings as a leader, beginning with 1987’s *Verses*.

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Roney also became the logical choice for high-profile Miles Davis tributes. In 1991, at the request of Miles himself, Roney shared the stage at Montreux with his idol (as well as Quincy Jones and Gil Evans), appearing as a featured soloist on material from *Miles Ahead*, *Porgy & Bess* and *Sketches of Spain*. The resulting document, *Miles and Quincy Live at Montreux* (Warner Bros.), resurfaced in 2002 as disc 19 of the 20-disc behemoth *The Complete Miles Davis at Montreux*. Following Miles’ death later in 1991, Roney was invited to tour with every remaining member of Davis’ second great quintet: Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Ron Carter and Tony Williams. In 1994 that lineup, also known as V.S.O.P., released *A Tribute to Miles* (Qwest/Reprise). “The reason I was asked [to join] was simple,” says Roney. “I was the only trumpeter who had played with Miles on the bandstand professionally. Not even Freddie Hubbard [Roney’s predecessor in V.S.O.P.] could claim that.”

According to Roney, Miles had been “blown away” by revisiting his large-ensemble music at Montreux. He was therefore receptive when Gerry Mulligan, who had performed on and written arrangements for *Birth of the Cool* in 1949, invited him to participate in *Re-birth of the Cool*, a GRP nonet project featuring Phil Woods, John Lewis and others. Miles did not live to play on the session, and Roney, once again, filled his shoes. What could have been a decent rehash was in fact beautifully executed, a rousing set.

These projects, whatever their merits, added fuel to the fire of the Miles-clone controversy. But as Roney sensibly argues, no musician in his right mind would have turned down such opportunities. Indeed, critical backlash seems a relatively small price to pay. Yet Roney also remembers a time when Miles’ tributes were the only calls he was getting. “I was offered \$10,000 just to play ‘Round Midnight,’ and I said no;” he recalls. “The industry wasn’t giving me the opportunity to play my own music.” There were instances when Roney had little choice but to participate in his own typecasting. But he has begun to turn this situation around, giving audiences a much clearer sense of his artistic priorities.

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“I don’t appreciate journalism that trivializes when musicians are trying to push the envelope,” Roney declares, before launching into a lucid aside on the sheer difficulty of playing modern jazz. “Man, it takes a lot of knowledge to know how to open that door, to get that type of freedom within the form, to be able to take a chord and make that chord go anywhere you want. The reason John Coltrane played the way he played was because forms were nothing anymore. But they were everything. He could take ‘Body and Soul’ and manipulate the bass notes and play ‘Giant Steps’ anyway. Then he got past that, where he could reduce it down to one chord and get the whole cycle in. Then he got to a point where you didn’t know whether he was playing ‘Resolution’ or ‘Bye Bye Blackbird,’ because what he was trying to say was the most important thing. But he could’ve been playing ‘Bye Bye Blackbird’ on ‘Resolution.’ He knew how to make it do what he wanted it to do. That’s what people need to respect, not the licks.”

Getting beyond licks, to the essence of music, is what Roney did so well on “I Will Always Love You.” He describes his arrangement as an example of “how you can use those harmonies, the changing each harmony, so influenced by Wayne and Miles, the open-endedness of taking it and circling, and changing each harmony, so you’ve got all these chords that don’t sound like chords, but they are chords, or movements.” Developing those kinds of skills, he says, “was like opening the door to the universe. It didn’t spell out an ‘era.’ It spelled out the connection from this world to that world. There’s probably a whole lot more out there.”

Before I leave his house, Roney shows me three of Miles Davis’ trumpets. Sitting in a plush case are two lustrous red horns (a trumpet and a flugelhorn) familiar to anyone who saw Miles perform in his final years. I ask Roney about the other trumpet, one engraved with Miles’ name, which he had placed in my hands.

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He says, “That’s *Bitches Brew*.”

I freeze.

Then comes the Nigel Tufnel moment: “Put that back.”

Just before he shuts the case, Roney removes the Harmon mute, holds it up and smiles.

Originally Published September 1, 2004