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Brian  
Blade

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from His First 25  
Years on Record

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## Bright Moments: Brian Blade



The acclaimed (and frequently recorded) drummer takes stock of his career on disc so far.

By David R. Adler





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**D**rummer, composer, bandleader: the words seem inadequate. Brian Blade is an experience. Leaving his creative imprint on a wide swath of jazz and pop over the last 25 years, the Shreveport, La., native surrenders bodily to everything he plays, moving freely and joyfully in and around the beat, whether taking part in the stratospheric invention of the Wayne Shorter Quartet or offering exquisitely restrained accompaniment with the likes of Emmylou Harris, Beth Orton, or Rebecca Martin. As leader of the Fellowship Band, he has made music of folk-like beauty and great cathartic power—qualities that also inform his sometime work as a singer/songwriter (on 2009's *Mama Rosa*).

It's hard to pick highlights from the embarrassment of riches that make up Blade's discography, but he graciously indulged us, speaking to *JazzTimes* from his home in Shreveport. "It's funny to look back and think of a list that spans so many years," he said. "It's comforting, and it puts my reflective hat on. I start reeling at the good things that have happened—such a blessing!" It is, indeed, for him and all of us. The words that follow are Blade's own, edited as necessary for clarity and flow.

**Kenny Garrett**  
*Pursuance: The Music of John Coltrane* (Warner Bros., 1996)  
Garrett, alto saxophone; Pat Metheny, guitar; Rodney Whitaker, bass; Blade, drums

The first time I recorded with Kenny was *Black Hole* (Warner Bros., 1992). You walk into the room and there's Joe Henderson! Kenny Kirkland! Oh my God. Ricky Wellman also played drums on some tracks—he came in on the ses-

sion and played my little drums! I think I saw my drums go down into the earth a little bit [laughs]. Wow, the power and groove that guy plays with.

Then came *Triology* (Warner Bros., 1995) and *Pursuance*. With *Pursuance* we did quite a bit of touring, with Nat Reeves on bass, and that was truly deep. I'd been such a fan of Pat's for so long, and to have it be a tribute to Coltrane on top of it all made it that much deeper. Kenny's thing can be so ecstatic and elevating—when he's playing, walls start moving. He's one of those people who changes frequencies and moves things when he plays.

**Yaya3** (Loma, 2002)  
Joshua Redman, tenor and soprano saxophones; Sam Yahel, organ; Blade, drums

I've been a part of Joshua Redman's life for so long and he's involved me in so many of his projects, it's hard to cite just one. But this was a very fertile period with Sam Yahel, who's such a great organist and pianist, and out of that, the Elastic Band became what it became. I even contributed a couple of songs to *Yaya3*, including the last one, "Confronting Our Fears." And they both wrote beautiful songs. The album sums up a little window and connects those relationships that happened underground. We'd play at Smalls back in the day, before it closed and reopened again. And later the trio did another record (*Truth and Beauty*, Origin, 2007). Of course, *Moodswing* (Warner Bros., 1994), that was really my first one with Joshua, with Christian McBride and Brad Mehldau, and later [pianist] Kevin Hays on tour. There are so many periods with Joshua, and now too with

*Still Dreaming* (Nonesuch, 2018), so I'm spoiled for choices here. Joshua's still reaching as well.

**David Binney & Edward Simon**  
*Afinidad* (Red, 2001)  
David Binney, alto saxophone; Edward Simon, piano; Adam Rogers, guitar; Scott Colley, bass; Blade, drums; Adam Cruz, percussion; Lucia Cruz, voice

Again there was this fertile period: I was living in New York, playing often with David Binney at the 55 Bar. We had this annual September residency and man, it was special. It went on for about six or seven years with Scott Colley and Craig Taborn. Adam Rogers, Chris Potter. Dave is so prolific and I love his writing and his saxophone expression, his vibe, the dreamy, imaginative, powerful way he writes. And Ed Simon as well.

*Afinidad* represents a special period for me being in New York, having left New Orleans. I wasn't leaving to conquer anything. I just had this desire to move. There's a certain risk you have to take to leave your comfort zone and then you find what you can bring to something else. If you don't leave, you won't discover these other layers. And Binney's music speaks to that.

I've also loved playing trio with Ed, and he just did a record called *Sorrows and Triumphs* (Sunnyside, 2018), which is masterful. It's the *Afinidad* quartet with Dave Binney and Scott Colley along with the Imani Winds. So we're still together, even if it manifests itself differently.

**Wayne Shorter**  
*Footprints Live!*

(Verve, 2002)  
Shorter, saxophones; Danilo Pérez, piano; John Patitucci, bass; Blade, drums

The session for *Alegria* (Verve, 2003) actually happened before *Footprints Live!* was recorded [in July 2001], and *Alegria* was when the quartet was all in the room together for the first time playing. And I think Wayne felt like, "Okay. I'm going to run with these guys for a while." So we started touring.

*Footprints Live!* is a great representation of our initial time together on the road. It was thrilling to play "Juju" or "Masqualero" or any of these masterpieces, and try to find our own voice within them. Whatever he wanted to play, or "play from nothing" as he called

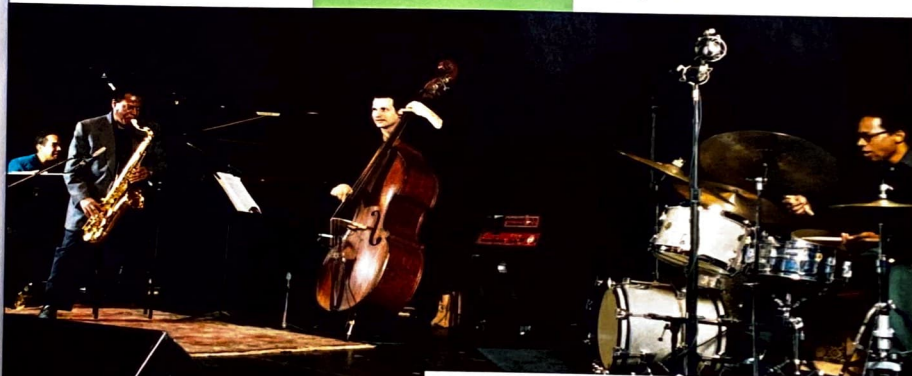
a lineage, a spiritual line, that you step into and become a part of.

That record ties together so much of Wayne's history but also points a flashlight into the future. He's still looking for another door. I hope we have some juice in us that can carry us into our eighties like that.

**Joni Mitchell**  
*Travelogue* (Nonesuch, 2002)  
Mitchell, vocals; Herbie Hancock, piano; Billy Preston, organ; Wayne Shorter, soprano sax; Plas Johnson, tenor sax; Kenny Wheeler, flugelhorn; Chuck Berghofer, Larry Klein, bass; Blade, drums; Paulinho da Costa,

life. *Taming the Tiger* was essentially born out of duo playing, me and her. I was watching her come up with the storyline right in front of me. It was just beyond my dreams really.

Then we made *Travelogue*. She'd already made one grand orchestral album, *Both Sides Now*, of songs she loved [recorded in 1999, with Peter Erskine on drums—Ed]. almost like songbook recordings. Then she applied that to her own music with *Travelogue*. It was just beautiful to be in London, her at the microphone, a great group of musicians, and to hear her render these songs that she recorded 40 years before, to hear her tone now, with a little more story around those lines—it just gets deeper as time goes on.



► The Wayne Shorter Quartet (left to right: Danilo Pérez, Shorter, John Patitucci, and Blade) at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, N.J., March 8, 2002

**percussion; plus orchestra**  
(Vince Mendoza, arranger/conductor)

*Taming the Tiger* (Reprise, 1998) was supremely important to me because it was my first meeting with the heroine. I started listening to her at 16 and it changed my whole view. The beautiful destiny of somehow coming into the sphere of your heroes in this way—you just don't know what's coming in your

We all recorded together—Chuck Berghofer, great bassist. I can see him right now to my right. But I was looking to Joni: How do I dot the i's and cross the t's? Yes, we're going to play with brass and strings, but I want that rhythmic underpinning to be all about what she's doing. With Vince Mendoza, of course, it was all written so beautifully, so I knew I could step into that palette and hopefully give what was needed for



her to feel like she was standing on solid ground.

**Daniel Lanois**  
*Belladonna* (ANTI-, 2005)  
Lanois, pedal steel guitar;  
Brad Mehldau, piano; Daryl  
Johnston, bass; Blade, drums;  
others

I met Daniel in New Orleans around '92. We became fast friends and went on the road for three months, like almost immediately. We felt a kinship, an ability to make music without having to think, "Oh, what's my role in this play?" *Belladonna* was just a chapter in his constant rolling pursuit to capture the spark. That's his gift—he imparts his passion to everyone in the room. He's looking for that unknown thing to reveal itself. And his songwriting, the personal aspects of it, whether it be instrumental or lyrical, it speaks to his virtuosity but also his heart, his trip as a Canadian son, making his way down the Mississippi River.

A lot of *Belladonna* happened when he was holed up in a studio in Oxnard, Calif., a former movie theater called the Teatro [now vacant—Ed.], where the first Fellowship record was made, which he produced. So we were doing sessions there but not with the thought of it being

one recording. Maybe it would be a soundtrack idea, or a suite, or "check out this steel melody I'm working on." He was always recording for the sake of recording. Some of those things became *Belladonna*. I think it happened within six months to a year, whenever people were free we'd get together.

Daniel doesn't like to work behind the glass. He does it all right there in the same bowl, in the room. And he knows how to direct that air traffic. He's always sculpting the sound as an artist. We're not waiting for, "Oh yeah,

let's put it down and we'll fix it later in the mix." No, no, no. Daniel wants to hear it right now. And maybe later we'll do something else. But that "right now" that existed very well might be the one. So get it in the moment.

**Bob Dylan**  
*Time Out of Mind*  
(Columbia, 1997)  
Dylan, guitar, harmonica,  
piano, vocals; Cindy Cash-  
dollar, slide guitar; Jim  
Dickinson, keyboards; Tony  
Garnier, bass; Blade, Jim  
Keltner, drums; others



► The Fellowship Band (left to right): Chris Thomas, Myron Walden, Blade, Melvin Butler, Jon Cowherd

Daniel told me he might be doing a session with Bob and asked if maybe I'd be into coming to play. Are you kidding?

Jim Keltner and I played together the whole time, he was 10 feet away from me. He's brilliant: You turn around and he's got maracas strapped to a mallet, hitting a tambourine. You listen back, you feel that groove, the genius of his vibe and what he brings to records. So I just had to find my knit in that blanket. It was quite thick.

Bob is looking for the mystery to

reveal itself too. He's so open—"Let's go to this key, try it this way"—he didn't have his fingers tightly gripping this precious thing, it was more like let's get it out in the air and see where it floats. And he'd ask our opinion. It's Bob Dylan. "I think it's great!" [Laughs]

I wouldn't say I changed my approach playing with Bob, but something different happens when you have words being sung. I make that adjustment to make sure that nothing is being eclipsed. Everybody wants to feel it and you want the music to be powerful, but at what expense? If you can't hear what Dylan's saying, something's not right [laughs].

**Wolfgang Muthspiel & Brian Blade**  
*Friendly Travelers*  
(Material, 2006)  
Muthspiel, guitars, voice;  
Blade, drums, guitar, voice

Wolfgang and I made several trio recordings with [bassist] Marc Johnson, and we were in New York around the same time, but we first met at a school in Denmark and became fast friends playing Beatles songs at night. We felt kindred. The duo playing was his idea, and it's great that he can employ all of these in-the-moment loop concepts. There's a space that comes into

that intimacy. It's really a blast. We just finished a little trip together with Scott Colley's trio and everything he wrote was just — he keeps digging deeper.

The title track "Friendly Travelers" is mine—he told me to bring in a song and I said, "Okay, I've got this little song," and I brought in my acoustic guitar. He just wrapped it in a bow, playing with me but then filling in all these moments with commentary in a perfect way. Because he has a high regard for songs.

I was hesitant having *Friendly*

*Travelers* be the title of the record, but I acquiesced because I think it honors why I wrote that song: There's a group in New Orleans, a gospel band called the Friendly Travelers, and I wrote that song thinking about them. It's a tip of the hat, hopefully.

**Brian Blade & the Fellowship Band**  
*Season of Changes*  
(Verve, 2008)  
Blade, drums; Jon Cowherd, piano, keyboards; Kurt Rosenwinkel, guitar; Myron Walden, alto saxophone, bass clarinet; Melvin Butler, tenor saxophone; Chris Thomas, bass

Jon Cowherd's songs for this record, "Season of Changes" and "Return of the Prodigal Son," we're still playing that music and still digging into it. It still has so much fruit and nourishment in it. And we still play my songs "Alpha and Omega" and "Stoner Hill." Jon is so important a friend to me, and really the birth of the Fellowship Band came with our meeting back in 1988 when I went to Loyola in New Orleans, where he already was.

There was an eight-year gap between *Perceptual* [Blue Note, 2000] and *Season of Changes*. We did a lot of playing during that time but we just didn't document it. So we're sort of in catchup mode right now. There's a lot of compositions that we never recorded. We're hoping to step up the frequency of output. I've realized that certain things take a moment to come to light.

**Chick Corea**  
*Trilogy*  
(Concord/Stretch, 2013)  
Corea, piano; Christian McBride, bass; Blade, drums

This trio came out of an opportunity I had to bus for Vinnie Colaiuta in the Five Peace Band, again with Kenny Garrett. Chick thought we should do some trio playing after that experience. We're hopefully going to make another record of that trio.

Chick is one of my all-time heroes. I remember my brother—it's not quite like he gave it to me, I took it from him—in his collection of Bob Marley and the Isley Brothers was Chick Corea's

*Friends*, with the Smurfs on the cover. That opened the door to Chick for me. He's just such a champion.

He's a great drummer too. He's got a laser rhythmic sense and he was always watching me, he's literally looking for that contact with the cymbal and the drum. He always wants that conversation to happen. He's watching every move.

I was so glad to have the challenge of playing standards. It can be humbling, like, "Ooh, I didn't quite grab that one." But by playing that body of work, whether it's Scriabin or whatever Chick wants to step into, it challenges him. To say, "Okay, what do I have to say on 'Everything Happens to Me'?" And to make it beautiful and brilliant as if he wrote it himself.

**Ron Miles**  
*Circuit Rider*  
(Yellowbird, 2014)  
Miles, cornet; Bill Frisell, guitar; Blade, drums

I'd been such a great fan of Bill Frisell through Paul Motian's trio with Joe Lovano. And Bill was so gracious to invite me to be on *The Sweetest Punch* [a collaboration between Frisell and Elvis Costello, released by Decca in 1999—Ed.]. Ron Miles was on that session, and I loved him and his expression immediately. Ron and Bill go way back, they share a history growing up in Denver.

You can't coast on Ron's music. You have to be present, and you really have to get inside of his melodic line, which is simultaneously horizontal and vertical. It's moving in all directions in a beautiful way.

Ron's *I Am a Man* [Yellowbird, 2017], which involved [bassist] Thomas Morgan and [pianist] Jason Moran, was an extension of that *Circuit Rider* too, also beautiful. It's deep that Ron keeps imagining and challenging himself to compose for these different groupings.

When we play trio without a bassist, there's never a sense that something's missing. It's the three of us, and it's whole. There's a great freedom in it. And it requires a lot of trust. We're each other's beacon out there in the sea of a song, which can be complex. Sometimes it's like, "Here we are, we're at the B section!" Or Bill saves me for

the hundredth time on this form that I can't get right. Or Ron plays that melody at just the right time that lets me know we're going to the top.

**Brian Blade**  
*Mama Rosa*  
(Verve Forecast, 2009)  
Blade, guitar, vocals, piano, drums; Daniel Lanois, guitar, pedal steel, bass; Greg Leisz, pedal steel, lap steel guitar; Geoffrey Moore, Kurt Rosenwinkel, guitar; Jon Cowherd, Aaron Embury, piano; Chris Thomas, bass; others

I had been recording these four-track diary entries by myself at home for quite a few years. Sometimes I write and suddenly I'm hearing words, and I just let it unfold. A lot of songs become more story, or memory-oriented, and I knew I needed to acknowledge this part of who I am too and put it down.

*Mama Rosa* is special because I'm thinking about my family a lot. I'm traveling a lot, I've been away from home for 20 years ... there's the annual visit at Christmas but it's different now, and you're missing people. That record, particularly "Mercy Angel," was the reason why I'm married right now. It's the reason why I found my first love again. Which connects to the first Fellowship Band record and the song called "If You See Lurah." Man, it's this thread that happens over decades. I wouldn't wish it on anybody because it requires you not knowing, and you being patient, and you leaning on the trust that God is working this out. I just need to stay in the process and don't fear.

So you can't keep this on your tape machine at home and not share it with other people. I mean, you can, but there's some completion, a fullness that has to come from you releasing it. That's what I learned by making *Mama Rosa*. And there's a lot of things I learned from Joni that manifest themselves on the record. There's more songs of that nature piled in the corner waiting for me to pay attention to them. I'm moving back to that focus in my life as soon as this next Fellowship Band record is completed. **JT**